

Race in the Classroom: Examining the Academic Experiences of Students of Color Attending a Predominantly White Institution

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Introduction

- More students of color are attending predominantly White institutions.
- Research has shown that students of color tend to view the campus climate more negatively than white students.
- This perception has an impact on their academic experiences; and students of color who perceive their campus climate more negatively than their peers are more likely to have a negative academic experience.

Research Questions

- Will students with a positive and supportive peer group perform better academically than students without one?
- Will students who feel a sense of inclusion on the campus report a better academic experience than those who do not?
- Will students with an overall negative perception of the campus climate report more negative classroom experiences?

Methodology

The current project consisted of semi-structured face-to-face interviews, where all interviewees were students of color. The data was then analyzed using grounded theory and responses were analyzed for the following themes:

- Positive vs. Negative Interactions
- Inclusion vs. Exclusion
- Suggestions for Improvement

Results

The “Role” of Stereotypes

Stereotypes, whether implicit or explicit, do impact the academic experiences of students of color.

“The only time that I've been treated differently in class...was a situation where it was extremely...like [a] girl's comment on Black people tending to use improper English, so many people after class were like, "I don't believe that," or pulled me aside or said something to me and that was the only time I've been treated differently...than anyone else.”

The Student as the Expert

Students of color felt they had to take on the role as “representative” when in class due to the small enrollment numbers of minorities.

“I think, in some sense, probably the same thing ... being a representative because I feel like I am portraying a positive light for my own race. Like, they might expect something different than what they actually get. I present myself as a studious and intelligent person, which is not always the stereotypical thought process that is put on black people.”

Classroom Interactions

Students reported that they felt better in the academic setting when a more open environment was created by the professor.

“The most like educational positive experience I've had in the classroom is one of my teachers asked everyone what their prejudices were, and people were so hesitant, and then like little things finally started to come out. I think that's very reflective of the population I guess, people don't want to talk about that stuff.”

Discussion

- Many students reported negative experiences on campus. However, those students who possessed a positive support group seemed better adjusted to the campus. Additionally, students who felt a sense of inclusion reported better academic experiences.
- All students of color reported positive classroom experiences even though peer relations seemed to be negative in nature. This was balanced by positive interactions with professors.
- Suggestions for improving the campus climate and academic setting included diversity training being offered to everyone and publicizing multicultural events.

Implications

This area can be further examined and higher education policy can be constructed to lead to a more inclusive university campus.

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