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Exploring Campus Climate: Investigating Student Perceptions at Two Community Colleges—Panel Presentation

Marcia London Albert

University of California, Irvine

Sandra B. Moore

Crafton Hills College

This presentation focuses on student life and comfort, perceptions of faculty commitment to diversity, perceptions of campus climate, observation of racism on campus, experiences of racism on campus, and other related issues.

Exploring Campus Climate: Students' Perceptions of Student Life

The purpose of the campus climate survey was to determine the extent to which Oxnard College's campus provides a welcoming, receptive, inclusive, friendly, and non-hostile environment for students, for special groups including ethnic groups, age groups, men and women, disabled students, and a variety of other groups.

Five areas of study were related to a hospitable campus climate. The questions were designed to reflect these five areas: students' lives and comfort; students' perceptions of faculty commitment to diversity; students' perceptions of campus climate; students' observation of racism on campus; and students' experiences of racism on campus.

With respect to the campus climate items, the Hispanic students rated 12 of the 17 items the most favorable of the four ethnic groups, and Asian students rated all items the most negatively. At least two-thirds of all respondents reported that faculty frequently respond in a sensitive manner to students in general, and at least one-third of all respondents rated faculty as frequently sensitive to the needs of students from their own ethnic groups.

When students were asked to report the frequency of racism or other types of discrimination by students of their own ethnic group and by students of other ethnic groups, more than two-thirds of all respondents reported that they had never personally encountered these types of experiences.

The rather small percentage of respondents who reported faculty demonstrating sensitivity for the needs of students from their own ethnic group, as well as from an ethnic group different from their own, is puzzling. In spite of the earlier finding that a majority of students reported that they perceived faculty committed to infusing diversity in their curriculum and classroom, a smaller percentage of students reported faculty demonstrating sensitivity to their needs. These findings may reflect the need for faculty to continue meeting to discuss innovative teaching methodologies and specific instructional methods that infuse multicultural education into the curriculum and classroom.

Examining Campus Climate: Focus Group Versus Survey Data

Focus groups were used to develop questions for a survey of campus climate at a community college in Southern California. Although the use of focus groups did not result in quantitative data, the participation of staff, faculty, and students in these groups did have a significant impact on the questions used in the survey. Focus groups were audiotaped and the responses were grouped according to category of complaint. None of the participants in the focus groups was identified by name and they could stop the tape whenever they wanted.

The survey data indicated that a greater percentage of Black students felt less comfortable on campus than students from other ethnic groups. This was consistent with focus group comments about the specific treatment of Black students and the general treatment on campus. However, the majority of students from all groups indicated that they were satisfied with the campus climate on the questionnaire. The survey data provided specific information on how students felt treated by staff and faculty; however, the focus groups gave an opportunity for the entire campus to discuss diversity issues and feel they had some voice in the process. The examples of problems or incidents mentioned in the focus groups were vivid and more negative than responses on the survey questionnaire. The use of qualitative and quantitative methods to explore such a sensitive issue as diversity may be useful for programs that seek to retain students.

PANELISTS:

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