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## Creating a Learning Environment more Supportive of Diversity within a College of Architecture: A Work-in-Progress [Abstract]

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**Creating a Learning Environment more Supportive of Diversity within a College of Architecture: A Work-in-Progress** (paper)

Potter, James - University of Nebraska

Recent literature on diversity suggests that while changes have been made to improve the quality of learning environments for diverse groups on university campuses, there is still room for improvement, particularly in the area of minority and female recruitment and retention. Lack of diversity is a continuing problem in architectural education, a field dominated by white males. Although ACSA has long recommended a Code of Conduct for Diversity in Architectural Education, it has only been recently that architecture schools have begun to realize how the learning climate may impact the professional world of practice. As a consequence, we have begun to see a greater emphasis on issues of diversity. For example, during spring 1997, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UN-L), College of Architecture hosted a panel discussion to address diversity issues, such as gender, ethnic/racial, disability, etc. The panelists included current and former students of the College, professionals, the Offices of Affirmative Action and Multicultural Affairs, the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and representatives of other UN-L offices, which handle issues of diversity. It became apparent from the discussion that there were some marked perceptual differences regarding diversity within the College. In response, a research team representing the departments of Architecture and Community and Regional Planning proposed to work with the UN-L offices handling diversity issues on campus to assess the quality of the learning/teaching environments for diverse members in the College, and to develop a plan of action based on the findings. The project was implemented in three stages, starting in fall 1997. In the first stage, information was gathered through the use of a preliminary open-ended survey and focus group discussions. The intention was to identify perceptual differences among students and faculty, regarding a variety of issues including: (1) the teaching/learning climate; (2) people's sense of acceptance; (3) issues that negatively or positively impact the learning environment; (4) the College's commitment to diversity; (5) whether positive interactions between diverse groups were being encouraged; and (6) whether people felt they

were being treated equally. In the second stage, a revised closed-ended questionnaire was developed based on the information gained from the initial stage. This more detailed and comprehensive questionnaire was designed to deal with a broad range of diversity issues related to gender, racial/ethnic minorities, disabilities, nationality, lifestyle and disciplinary differences. The issues under investigation ranged from the educational climate in the College, to personal experience with preferential treatment, to the recruitment of under-represented groups, to feelings of being accepted. Questionnaires were distributed to students (at all levels and within all programs, excepting the freshman class) as well as faculty and staff in their mailboxes. There were 305 questionnaires distributed and 196 were returned - a response rate of 64%. In the third stage, results of the questionnaire were compiled, analyzed and presented to students, faculty and staff in a series of forums. The analysis focused on identifying major points of agreement and disagreement between three key groups: 1) males and females, 2) minority and non-minority, and 3) students and faculty/staff. In the forums, the major findings were reviewed and discussed and recommendations for the next stage of changing perceptions within the College were solicited. The presentation will discuss the process, results and actions taken to create a learning environment more supportive of diversity.