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# Differing Perceptions: How Students of Color and White Students Perceive Campus Climate for Underrepresented Groups

Susan R. Rankin    Robert D. Reason

*Using a campus climate assessment instrument developed by Rankin (1998), we surveyed students (n = 7,347) from 10 campuses to explore whether students from different racial groups experienced their campus climates differently. Students of color experienced harassment at higher rates than Caucasian students, although female White students reported higher incidence of gender harassment. Further, students of color perceived the climate as more racist and less accepting than did White students, even though White students recognized racial harassment at similar rates as students of color. Implications are offered for understanding campus climates, providing appropriate interventions, and overcoming White privilege and resistance.*

Over the last decade racial segregation in American high schools increased (Orfield, Bachmeier, James, & Eitle, 1997) at the same time that postsecondary education became more racially diverse (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002). Many college students, therefore, experience their first substantial interracial contact when they arrive on college campuses. The climate in which these interactions occur influence the learning and social outcomes students will derive (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), which makes campus climate an important area of understanding for higher education administrators, policy makers, and researchers.

The purpose of our study was to explore how students in different racial groups experienced their campus climates. Our findings indicate that students of color experienced harassment, defined as any offensive, hostile, or intimidating behavior that interferes with learning, at higher rates than White students, although female White students reported higher incidence of gender harassment. Further, students of color perceived the climate as more racist and less accepting than did White students, even though White students recognized racial harassment at similar rates as students of color.

The importance of understanding how students, particularly students of color, experience college environments is reinforced in two broad areas of the literature. First, demographic research indicates that the racial and ethnic diversity of the college-going population increased over the last several years; population trends portend a continued diversification (NCES, 2002). Research indicates further that racial diversification without intentional education about issues of race may result in negative interactions and consequences (Gurin, 1999). On the other hand, positive learning and social outcomes result when higher education administrators design focused, intentional multicultural experiences for students (Milem, 2003). Intentional institutional policies and programs that encourage high quality interactions,

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coupled with a diverse student population, improve educational experiences for all students (Chang, 2001).

### Increases in Student Diversity and its Implications

The NCES has predicted a steady increase in the number of college-bound students over the next decade (2002). Based upon the changing racial and ethnic composition of the United States (Keller, 2001; NCES), the growth in the number of college students will be predominantly from traditionally under-represented groups, including students of color (NCES), enhancing a shift in undergraduate racial composition that has been occurring for two decades (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). The number of students of color on college campuses increased by 61% between 1984 and 1994, compared to a 5% increase for White students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998).

Students of color comprised 16% of all undergraduate students in 1976, 25% in 1994, and 29% in 2000 (NCES, 2000). The Educational Testing Service reported that “by 2015 . . . 80 percent of the anticipated 2.6 million new college students will be African American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, or American Indian” (Carnvale & Fry, 2000, p. 1). The report further indicated:

Nationwide, the number of undergraduate minority students enrolled in colleges and universities will increase from 29.4 percent to 37.2 percent. The number of minority students in the District of Columbia, California, Hawaii, and New Mexico will exceed the number of White students. In Texas, the campus populations of minorities will be nearly 50 percent, and in New York, Maryland, Florida, New Jersey, Louisiana, and Mississippi, minority student enrollment is expected to exceed 40 percent of the total undergraduate population. (p. 1)

*Increasing Segregation.* According to a 1997 report by Smith and others the issue is not simply that the cities and suburbs, where two thirds of Americans reside, are becoming increasingly non-White, but also this shift is “occurring in the context of an increase, not a decrease, in the nation’s racial and economic residential segregation” (pp. xiv-xv). Similar racial segregation is occurring in secondary education (Orfield et al., 1997). These trends toward racial balkanization within our expanding metropolitan areas and high schools have direct implications for colleges and universities, where, as Smith suggests, many students have their first encounter with an actual diverse community.

*Environmental Implications of Increased Diversity.* With 40% of high school graduates projected to be non-White by 2010 and the corresponding increase in non-White college students, it is incumbent upon decision-makers and stakeholders within higher education institutions to create campus environments where all students can learn. Environments are both influenced by and exert influence on the people who comprise them, an interactionist theoretical perspective Strange and Banning (2001) referred to as the human aggregate. If we accept that campus environments are human aggregates, then substantial changes in the racial characteristics of the students in an environment likely will change the climate of the environment, specifically the psychological and behavioral dimensions of the climate (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998). Intentional, educational interventions related to the changing racial composition of college students would likely influence how the climate of an environment changes (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Strange & Banning).

Growth in structural diversity without

intentional planning for the increased interracial contact can be detrimental to students and institutional climate (Chang, 1996; Hurtado et.al., 1998). Chang (1996) found that students of color reported less satisfaction with their college experiences when multicultural educational programming did not accompany increasing student diversification. Both Chang (1996) and Hurtado et al. highlighted the importance of intentional educational planning coupled with the increasing diversity in order to improve campus climate.

### **Diversity and Students' Experiences and Outcomes**

The connection between a diverse undergraduate student body and positive educational outcomes is well established (Gurin, 1999; Milem, 2003; Umbach & Kuh, in press) however, structural diversity is a necessary, but not sufficient, component of student learning (Gurin; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). Although increased student diversity leads to a greater chance that students will interact with diverse others (Gurin), higher education professionals cannot leave the important business of learning to chance (Chang, 1996; Lee, 2000). The literature suggests that positive learning outcomes, including increased GPA and likelihood of persistence, are related to the quality of interactions a student has with diverse others, as well as the institutional support for diversity that a student perceives.

*Quality of Interactions.* Several researchers have connected the quality of interactions between diverse others directly to student learning outcomes and satisfaction with the collegiate experience (Milem, 2003). Quality interactions, those that intentionally maximize cross-racial interactions and encourage ongoing discussion contact, can be encouraged

both inside and outside the classroom.

Completion of an academic course that addresses issues of diversity was related to decreases in racial bias (Milem, 2003). Chang (2001) also found that completion of an academic course on diversity encouraged students' evaluation of moral and ethical values through reflection on evidence, a higher order cognitive skill (Baxter Magolda, 1992; King & Kitchner, 1994). Nelson Laird, Engberg, and Hurtado (2002) linked the completion of a diversity course to increased "quality of students' experiences with diverse peers [and] commitment to social action" (p. 21). Classroom experiences that encourage students to explore issues of race and to interact with diverse others are essential to positive educational outcomes related to race.

Out-of-class experiences also influence learning outcomes directly for both students of color and White students. In large, multi-institution studies, Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Terenzini, and Nora (2001) and Villalpando (2002) found strong positive relationships between participation in diversity workshops and openness to diversity (Whitt et al.), as well as satisfaction with college (Villalpando). In another study of over 2,800 White students at 17 institutions, attendance at a racial or cultural awareness workshop was the strongest predictor of students' attitudes toward race after their sophomore year (Springer, Palmer, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996).

Intentional educational programming within a multicultural living environment also appears to result in learning. Pike (2000) found that simply living in a diverse environment on a college campus was related to students' openness to diversity, although the quality of the interaction between diverse others was related to the degree of change in the dependent variable. In a study of 250 first-year students at one Midwestern institution,

Pike found that participation in a freshman interest group added to the students' change in openness to diversity. He posited that the intentional programming and increased contact between freshman interest group students resulted in greater change.

Pike's (2000) findings may be understood using Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis. Allport suggested that several critical conditions were necessary before interracial interaction would result in positive outcomes (Levin, 2003). Allport believed that members of different groups must possess equal status in the interaction, they must work together toward a common goal, the contact must be intimate enough to lead to the perception of common interests and shared humanity, and the contact must be sanctioned by the institution. Allport's hypothesis further explains Pike's (2000) findings related to the extra benefit associated with freshman interest groups, as these groups may have shared a common goal and superordinate group identity (an identity shared across races) that allowed for the quality of contact Allport envisioned.

*Institutional Support and Campus Environments.* Institutional support is a critical condition of Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis. Several contemporary studies reinforce the relationship between students' perceptions of institutional support for a nondiscriminatory learning environment and several student learning outcomes (Aguirre & Messineo, 1997; Flowers & Pascarella, 1999; Whitt et al., 2001). Other studies have identified the detrimental effects to student learning of a perceived lack of institutional support for diversity and racial equality (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Watson, Terrell, Wright, & Associates, 2002).

Whitt et al. (2001), in a longitudinal

study of 1,054 students over their first 3 years of college, found that students' perception of a nondiscriminatory environment was one of seven statistically significant predictors of openness to diversity and challenge for each year. Flowers and Pascarella (1999) reinforced these findings examining the responses for African American respondents from the same dataset. African American respondents' perception of a nondiscriminatory environment was also significantly related to their openness to diversity.

Qualitative research into the experiences of students of color at predominately White institutions (PWIs) reinforces the importance of campus climate. Feagin et al. (1996) concluded, "the majority of White college faculty are not supportive of substantial and expanded multicultural policies and programs" (p. 172). Watson et al. (2002) heard similar perceptions from students of color at seven PWIs. Students in both studies articulated how this lack of institutional support for diversity and multiculturalism influenced their experiences on their campuses by creating negative learning environments for students of color.

Institutional support for diversity is conveyed in a number of ways, including organizational rhetoric like mission and diversity statements. Rowley, Hurtado, and Panjuan (2002), in an examination of the relationship between stated organizational goals and structural diversity outcomes, concluded:

To achieve a strong institutional commitment to diversity, [an institution] must go beyond mission statements to include articulation of diversity as a priority, activities that evaluate and reward progress, core leadership support, and the development of a diverse student body. (n.p.)

*Differential Perceptions Based Upon Race/Ethnicity of Student.* The importance of the role of students' perceptions of institutional environment is well established. Perceptions of supportive environments reinforce positive learning and social outcomes for students, especially for issues of racial understanding (Flowers & Pascarella, 1999; Whitt et al., 2001). Empirically supported student development and environmental theories, however, indicate that students from different racial groups perceive campus environments differently (Chang, 2003; Evans et al., 1998; Strange & Banning, 2001).

Miller, Anderson, Cannon, Perez, and Moore (1998), in a survey of 433 undergraduate students at one institution, found statistically significant differences in perceptions of campus policies by racial identity. White students described their campus racial climate as positive. African American students rated their campus racial climate as more negative. White students also rated highly instructors' efforts to include multiple viewpoints in the curriculum and institutional policies related to recruitment and retention of minorities. African Americans and other students of color described interracial interactions on campus as less friendly and reported being the targets of racism. These findings appear to support the differential perceptions and beliefs reported by Watson et al. (2001).

Chang (2003) reported statistically significant racial differences in several political beliefs, including beliefs about racial policies and practices. In a study that included over 5,000 first-year students at 93 institutions, White students were more likely to agree with the statement "racial discrimination is no longer a problem" than were students of color. African American and Asian American students were more likely to agree that racist speech should be prohibited on college

campuses.

## Summary

The literature reviewed above leads to several important conclusions. First, the college-going population continues to diversify (NCES, 2002). Further, a positive campus racial climate that encourages ongoing, cross-racial interactions, when coupled with a diverse student population, improves educational experiences for all students (Chang, 2001). Perceptions of campus racial climates are likely to differ for different racial groups on campus (Miller et al. 1998). To maximize positive learning outcomes, student affair professionals must understand these different perceptions and their implications for our programs.

## METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this project, *diversity* is defined as the

variety created in any society (and within any individual) by the presence of different points of view and ways of making meaning which generally flow from the influence of different cultural, ethnic, and religious heritages, from the differences in how we socialize women and men, and from the differences that emerge from class, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability and other socially constructed characteristics. (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 1995, p. 2)

Data were collected as part of an assessment of campus climate for underrepresented and underserved populations. The conceptual model used as the foundation for this assessment of campus climate was developed by Rankin (2002) based on Smith et al.'s (1997) meta-analysis. The survey data reported here are part of a comprehensive

strategy that included data collection from focus groups, individual interviews, and document analyses. The results of the internal assessment were used to identify specific strategies for addressing the challenges uncovered and to support positive initiatives through the development of a strategic plan for diversity.

### Participating Institutions

Ten campuses participated in the current study. The participating institutions were geographically diverse, with one institution from the Northeast, two from the mid-Atlantic states, one from the Southeast, two from the Great Lakes region, one from the Midwest, two from the Southwest, and one from the Northwest. The institutional sample included two private and eight public colleges and universities. Although the sample is large (a total of 15,356 surveys were returned) and offers some insight into the climate for underrepresented persons on campus, we caution attempting to generalize from the results due to the contextual differences inherent at each institution.

### Design of the Study

Once an institution agreed to participate in the investigation, the primary investigator met with the institutional coordinator to discuss the project. Among the discussion items were sampling procedures, incentive recommendations, and methods for administration of the survey instrument (i.e., paper and pencil, online, or both). The paper and pencil instrument or appropriate URL link was forwarded to the institutional coordinator between November 2001 and April 2002. A cover letter describing the purpose of the study, introducing the survey instrument, and assuring the respondents of anonymity was included with each survey. Return campus

mail envelopes were provided for respondents to return the surveys to the institutional coordinator or to the primary investigator. The completed surveys were then forwarded to the primary investigator for analysis.

### Survey Instrument

The survey questions were constructed utilizing primarily the work of Rankin (1994) and further informed by instruments reviewed in a meta-analysis of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender climate studies (Rankin, 1998). The final instrument contained 55 items and an additional space for respondents to provide commentary. The survey was designed to have respondents provide information about their personal campus experiences (reliability coefficient = .84), their perception of the campus climate ( $r = .81$ ), and their perceptions of institutional actions including administrative policies and academic initiatives regarding diversity issues and concerns on campus ( $r = .74$ ). For the purposes of this study, *climate* was defined as “the current perceptions and attitudes of faculty, staff, and students regarding issues of diversity on a campus.” This definition was shared with respondents on the survey instrument.

The survey was modified into a machine-readable format and also input into an online format. Institutions had the option to use a paper-and-pencil survey, an online survey, or both formats in their data collection.

### Sampling Procedure

Sampling techniques varied for participating institutions based on their respective contexts. Some campuses invited all students, faculty, and staff to participate in the study. Other institutions used purposeful sampling of underrepresented individuals, snowball sampling procedures for invisible minorities

(e.g., disabled persons, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender individuals, etc.), and random sampling of the majority.

Purposeful sampling and snowball sampling techniques are often used when attempting to sample statistical minorities. Given the low numbers of underrepresented persons on college campuses, if a simple random sampling technique were used, then the climate would be that experienced and/or perceived by the majority constituents. The purpose of this project was to examine the climate for underrepresented groups. Purposeful sampling thus allowed the voices of underrepresented constituents to be heard. Snowball sampling is a technique whereby those underrepresented individuals who were “known” on campus via constituent-specific electronic mailing lists or groups were initially contacted to participate in the study. They were asked to share the survey with other persons they knew who may not participate in any groups or electronic mailing lists or who chose not to disclose their identity.

### Sample Demographics

Undergraduate students ( $n = 7,347$ ) comprised the largest cohort responding to the survey, however, a substantial number of staff ( $n = 3,244$ ), faculty ( $n = 2,117$ ), and graduate students ( $n = 1,497$ ) also participated in the project. This article reviews only the data provided by those respondents who self-identified as an undergraduate student. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics for the undergraduate student sample. For the purposes of this study, individuals who identified as “African American/Black,” “Asian/Pacific Islander,” “Middle Eastern,” “American Indian/Alaska Native,” or “Chicano/Latino/Hispanic” were collapsed into “students of color,” unless otherwise indicated in the results. Those who identified with more than one of the above identities or

as “White/Caucasian” and one or more of the above identities were also considered people of color. Recognizing the vastly different experiences of people of various racial identities (e.g., Chicano(a) versus African American or Latino(a) versus Asian American), and of those within these identity categories (e.g., Hmong versus Chinese), due to the small numbers of respondents in these individual categories, it was necessary to collapse them for analysis.

Given the opportunity to mark multiple boxes in regard to their racial identity, the majority of students chose White ( $n = 5,308$ ) as part of their identity and 2,039 students chose a demographic other than White as part of their identity. Given the small number of students in each racial/ethnic category, many of the analyses and discussion will use the collapsed category of students of color and White students. Students were also given the opportunity to identify their international status. The numbers reflected here are those who identified as American citizens.

### Statistical Methods

The relevant data are the frequencies with which students in different social-identity groups rated their experiences and perceptions—all nominal-level data. When statistical comparisons are made, therefore, chi-square tests of significance were used. Chi-square tests are appropriate because we compared expected with observed frequencies within response categories.

### FINDINGS

The remainder of this article focuses on the differences in the responses based on the self-identified race of the student. As previously stated, the survey addressed three areas: personal campus experiences, perception of the



TABLE 1.  
Characteristics of Undergraduate  
Student Respondents ( $n = 7,347$ )

	%	<i>n</i>
<i>Gender</i> ( $n = 7,336$ )		
Female	68.6	5,030
Male	31.2	2,290
Transgender	0.2	16
<i>Race</i> ( $n = 7,516$ ; Duplicated Total)		
Caucasian/White	72.1	5,308
Asian/Pacific Islander	9.4	745
African American/Black	8.1	645
Chicano(a)/Latino(a)/ Hispanic	5.3	417
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	3.1	249
Middle Eastern	1.9	152
<i>Sexual Orientation</i> ( $n = 6,261$ )		
Heterosexual	93.6	5,858
LGB	4.4	277
Uncertain	2.0	126
<i>Age</i> ( $n = 7,345$ )		
Traditional (22 and under)	90.1	6,619
Returning Adult (23 and over)	9.9	726
<i>Residence</i> ( $n = 7,330$ )		
Residence Hall	53.8	3,956
Off Campus	33.8	2,480
Fraternity/Sorority Housing	8.1	598
Other Campus Housing	3.3	239
Family Student Housing	0.8	57

Note. Not all students responded to each demographic question. Sample *ns* are provided for each demographic category.

campus climate, and perceptions of institutional actions.

### Personal Experiences

*Harassment* was defined as “any offensive, hostile, or intimidating conduct that interferes unreasonably with one’s ability to work or learn on campus.” Twenty-five percent ( $n = 1,816$ ) of students responding to the survey indicated that they had personally experienced such behavior. When reviewing these results in terms of race, a significantly greater percentage of students of color (33%) reported experiencing harassment than did White students (22%; Table 2). When further reviewing the data by gender, women students of color and male students of color report experiencing harassment significantly more often than their White counterparts, indicating that race may be more salient than gender with regard to experienced harassment. Notably, 60% ( $n = 9$ ) of the transgender students indicate experiencing harassment, indicating that gender expression outside the “norm”—irrespective of race—elicits harassment (Table 3).

Students were also asked if they “observed any conduct on this campus that you feel has created an offensive, hostile, intimidating working or learning environment?” Over 40% of respondents had observed this type of conduct on campus. When reviewing these results in terms of race, a significantly higher percentage of students of color (49%) reported observing harassment than did White students (39%; Table 4). When further reviewing the data by gender, women students of color and male students of color reported observing harassment more often than their White counterparts (Table 5).

The majority of students harassed were subjected to derogatory remarks (84%). Other forms of harassment included written com-

TABLE 2.  
Personal Experiences of Harassment by Race

	Experienced Harassment				$\chi^2(1)$
	Yes %	(n)	No %	(n)	
Students of Color	32.5	(653)	67.5	(1,356)	83.63*
White Students	22.1	(1,163)	77.9	(4,905)	

\*  $p < .001$ .

ments (15%), receiving anonymous phone calls (10%), or unsolicited e-mail (7%). Seven percent had been threatened with physical violence and 110 students (6%) had been physically assaulted. Of these 110 who were physically assaulted, women were most often the victims (82%,  $n = 90$ ). The vast majority of respondents, 75%, identified other students as the source of the harassment they experienced. Notably, 20% identified faculty as the source. When reviewing these results by race, both White students and students of color

indicated that they most often experienced this harassment in the form of derogatory comments. Similarly, both students of color and White students identify other students as the primary source of the harassment (Table 6).

Respondents were also asked to indicate the focus of the harassment they had received. Table 7 shows the data disaggregated by race. White students suggested that the most prevalent focus of harassment was based on their gender, whereas students of color suggested that the harassment was most often

TABLE 3.  
Personal Experiences of Harassment by Race and Gender

	Experienced Harassment				$\chi^2(1)$
	Yes %	(n)	No %	(n)	
<i>Female</i>					
Students of Color	33.7	(455)	66.3	(897)	41.29*
White Students	24.6	(890)	75.4	(2,734)	
<i>Male</i>					
Students of Color	29.7	(193)	70.3	(457)	52.38*
White Students	16.2	(262)	83.8	(1,353)	
<i>Transgender</i>					
Students of Color	50.0	(2)	50.0	(2)	0.227
White Students	63.6	(7)	26.7	(4)	

\*  $p < .001$ .

TABLE 4.  
Observations of Harassment by Race

	Observed Harassment				$\chi^2(1)$
	Yes %	(n)	No %	(n)	
Students of Color	49.2	(971)	50.8	(1,003)	62.12*
White Students	38.9	(2,009)	61.1	(3,155)	

\*  $p < .001$ .

based on their race. Nontrivial numbers of students of color also reported experiencing harassment due to gender and ethnicity.

### Perceptions of Campus Climate

The campus climate is not only a function of what one has personally experienced, but also is influenced by perceptions of how members of the academy are regarded on campus. Chi-square analyses illustrate that a significantly greater proportion of students of color view the campus climate as “racist,” “hostile,” and “disrespectful” as compared to White students.

Conversely, a significantly greater proportion of White students view the campus climate as “nonracist,” “friendly,” and “respectful” as compared to students of color.

Additional questions addressed students’ perceptions of climate in the classroom and in the workplace for underrepresented groups. The results suggest that a significantly greater proportion of students of color than White students view the classroom climate as less welcoming for underrepresented students. Similar results were reported when reviewing the results for the workplace climate where a

TABLE 5.  
Observations of Harassment by Race and Gender

	Observed Harassment				$\chi^2(1)$
	Yes %	(n)	No %	(n)	
<i>Female</i>					59.26*
Students of Color	51.8	688	48.2	640	
White Students	39.6	1,414	60.4	2,160	
<i>Male</i>					8.29*
Students of Color	43.9	280	56.1	358	
White Students	37.3	586	62.7	985	
<i>Transgender</i>					1.67
Students of Color	20.0	1	80.0	4	
White Students	54.5	6	45.5	5	

\*  $p < .001$ .

TABLE 6.  
Form and Source of Experienced Harassment

	Students of Color (n = 653)		White Students (n = 1,163)	
	%	n	%	n
<i>Form of Harassment</i>				
Derogatory Remarks	85.8	560	83.1	967
Written Comments	13.4	88	15.6	179
Anonymous Phone Calls	9.0	59	10.4	121
Unsolicited E-Mails	6.1	40	6.9	81
Graffiti	8.6	56	7.5	87
Threats of Physical Violence	9.0	59	8.1	94
Actual Physical Violence	3.7	24	7.4	86
<i>Source of Harassment</i>				
Student	73.5	480	75.1	873
Faculty	20.1	136	20.1	244
Administrator	5.7	37	3.2	37
Staff	11.2	73	7.6	89

significantly greater proportion of White students viewed the workplace climate as welcoming for employees of underrepresented groups than did students of color. When asked whether they felt the campus climate was improving or worsening, a significantly greater

proportion of White students than students of color indicated that the climate was improving, whereas a significantly greater proportion of students of color than White students suggested that it was getting worse.

Perceptions of “campus acceptance” of

TABLE 7.  
Focus of Experienced Harassment

	Students of Color (n = 653)		White Students (n = 1,163)	
	%	n	%	n
Gender	45.8	299	62.6	728
Race	65.4	427	6.9	80
Religious Beliefs	13.6	89	17.7	206
Sexual Orientation	8.1	53	11.0	128
Age	16.7	109	17.7	206
Disability	2.1	14	5.2	60
Ethnicity	37.7	246	4.2	49

TABLE 8.  
Perceptions of Climate

	Students of Color		White Students		$\chi^2(2)$
	%	(n)	%	(n)	
Racism					183.1*
Nonracist	32.9	590	48.4	2,108	
Neutral	34.8	625	33.2	1,447	
Racist	32.3	581	18.3	797	
Friendliness					160.4*
Friendly	63.9	1,149	79.3	3,460	
Neutral	29.3	526	16.6	726	
Hostile	6.8	122	4.0	175	
Respectful					58.8*
Respectful	48.1	861	58.8	2,555	
Neutral	36.1	647	28.9	1,258	
Disrespectful	15.8	282	12.3	1,905	

\*  $p < .001$ .

TABLE 9.  
Perceptions of Climate

	Students of Color		White Students		$\chi^2(2)$
	%	(n)	%	(n)	
<i>Classroom Climate Welcoming for Students From Underrepresented Groups</i>					95.365*
Disagree	31.2	631	21.2	1,119	
Uncertain	19.2	388	17.7	933	
Agree	49.6	1,002	61.0	3,214	
<i>Workplace Climate Welcoming for Employees From Underrepresented Groups</i>					19.114*
Disagree	16.3	326	13.8	718	
Uncertain	38.5	769	35.4	1,839	
Agree	45.2	902	50.8	2,635	
<i>Current Climate</i>					67.790*
Improving	48.2	866	59.2	2,570	
Neutral	41.5	745	34.1	1,482	
Worsening	10.3	184	6.6	288	

\*  $p < .001$ .

TABLE 10.  
Campus Acceptance of Difference

	Students of Color		White Students		$\chi^2(2)$
	%	(n)	%	(n)	
<i>African American/Black</i>					261.620*
Accepting	63.4	1,269	79.5	4,159	
Uncertain	20.6	413	14.8	775	
Not Accepting	16.0	321	5.7	297	
<i>Asian American</i>					101.030*
Accepting	63.9	1,282	73.5	3,840	
Uncertain	25.1	503	21.8	1140	
Not Accepting	11.0	220	4.7	246	
<i>Chicano/Latino/Hispanic</i>					178.853*
Accepting	58.5	1,169	70.3	3,668	
Uncertain	26.8	535	24.0	1253	
Not Accepting	14.7	294	5.7	296	

\*  $p < .001$ .

different underrepresented groups were also requested. In each comparison, a significantly greater proportion of majority students viewed the climate as more accepting than those students who were members of underrepresented groups.

Students were also asked a series of questions about how the university and university administrators responded to the overall racial climate. Table 11 indicates that, in general, students of color perceived the university less favorably than White students. A significantly greater proportion of students of color disagreed that the university addressed racism as compared to White students. White students agreed that the university administration was fostering diversity, while students of color disagreed. Similar findings were discovered when asking if the “curriculum represented the contributions of people from underrepresented groups.”

The findings related to differential perceptions are notable. These different perceptions of campus climate may support the idea that White students are more able to overlook or avoid the negative behaviors, a concept called epistemic privilege (Johnson, 2000). Epistemic privilege, a form of White privilege (McIntosh, 1989), refers to the ability to remain unaware of benefits and barriers associated with race (Johnson). The concept of privilege as it relates to these findings is explored further later in this paper.

### Perceptions of Institutional Actions and Strategies

Respondents to the survey were asked a series of questions about possible institutional strategies to improve the racial climate on campus. In general, students believed that more attention, in class and out of class, on issues of race would improve the climate on

TABLE 11.  
Institutional Actions

	Students of Color		White Students		$\chi^2(2)$
	%	(n)	%	(n)	
<i>Institution Addresses Racism</i>					235.725*
Agree	45.9	923	59.2	3,101	
Uncertain	21.0	423	24.1	1,263	
Disagree	33.1	667	16.7	878	
<i>Institutional Leadership Visibly Fosters Diversity</i>					9.448*
Disagree	28.9	584	25.3	1,334	
Uncertain	29.7	601	31.0	1,631	
Agree	41.4	837	43.7	2,298	
<i>Curriculum Represents Contributions of Underrepresented Groups</i>					146.191*
Disagree	36.4	734	24.6	1,296	
Uncertain	26.3	529	23.1	1,215	
Agree	37.3	752	52.3	2,749	

\*  $p < .001$ .

campus. students of color, however, were more likely to believe that such intervention would significantly improve the climate than were White students. Although all students advocated more attention to racial issues on campus, students of color were significantly more likely to advocate workshops, required courses for students, and required training sessions for staff.

More than 64% of all respondents indicated that more workshops/programs on race would “improve slightly” (52.4%) or “improve considerably” (11.7%) the campus climate. Differences existed between racial groups, however, with a significantly greater proportion of students of color indicating that such workshops would improve climate at a greater rate than White students (Table 12). White students were less likely than expected to agree that such interventions would improve climate, but more likely to believe

there would be no change.

Similarly, the majority of respondents (64.7%) felt that requiring all students to take a course that focuses on racial minorities would improve campus climate. Again, however, differences existed by respondents’ race. Students of color agreed a required course on race would improve the campus climate at a statistically significantly higher rate than expected (Table 12), whereas White students were more likely than expected to believe a required course would make the climate worse.

Students of color indicated more educational interventions would improve the campus racial climate, which likely means that students of color are not satisfied with the current educational focus on race. Given the direct relationship between perceptions of institutional support and campus climate (Whitt et al., 2001) and the disconnect between institutional goals and outcomes

TABLE 12.  
Institutional Strategies

	Students of Color		White Students		$\chi^2(2)$
	%	(n)	%	(n)	
<i>Workshops/Programs on Race</i>					24.429*
Worsen climate	4.8	85	4.2	180	
No Change in Climate	27.0	481	33.4	1,447	
Improve Climate	68.2	1,216	62.4	2,700	
<i>Required Student Class on Race</i>					43.726*
Worsen climate	7.1	126	12.4	536	
No Change in Climate	23.4	417	25.0	1,084	
Improve Climate	69.6	1,241	62.6	273	
<i>Required Staff Class on Race</i>					42.431*
Worsen climate	3.3	59	4.0	171	
No Change in Climate	25.5	451	33.5	1,445	
Improve Climate	71.2	1,262	62.5	2,692	

\*  $p < .001$ .

(Rowley et al., 2002), the lack of satisfaction with current intervention practices is noteworthy. Increasing the number of sensitivity workshops, courses, and training sessions may improve campus climate and, at the same time, convey a supportive environment to students of color.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this large survey of undergraduate students support the understanding that students of color experience college campuses quite differently than White students do (Chang, 2003; Evans et al., 1998; Miller et al., 1998; Strange & Banning, 2001). Fully one third of students of color in our sample reported having experienced harassment, compared to 22% of White students. The vast majority of harassment felt by students of color was in the form of derogatory

comments about race and came from other students, although many also indicated harassment based upon gender. White students experienced harassment based on gender (female) most often, but rarely experienced harassment due to their race.

Students of color and White students also perceived the campus climate differently. Students of color were more apt to indicate the climate was racist, hostile, disrespectful, and less accepting of minority groups. White students, on the other hand, indicated that the campus climate was nonracist, friendly, and respectful. White students were more likely than students of color to rate institutional responses to the racial climate favorably and to believe the racial climate on campus was improving.

The majority of all students believed greater educational efforts focusing on race would improve the climate on campus. Racial



differences did exist, however, in the degree to which students of color and White students believed educational interventions would improve the climate. Students of color were more optimistic that required courses and workshops would improve the campus climate than were the White students in the sample.

### Implications for Higher Education

Our findings indicate that students of color experience and perceive the campus climate differently than White students do. Higher education administrators must understand that these differences exist and that everyone is injured by a negative racial climate on campus (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn et al., 1999). Although our respondents generally favor more educational interventions to address climate issues, other types of intervention are necessary to transform campus climates. We offer several suggestions below that are connected to both improving campus climates and increasing student success.

*Interventions.* In general, our respondents favored providing more educational interventions for students, faculty, and staff. Our findings suggest that educating students, who were the chief perpetrators of harassment, would be beneficial. Although faculty-on-student harassment was reported less often, educating faculty members about ways to support students of color may be equally important. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) concluded, based on their analysis of research related to student outcomes, that faculty are the greatest socializing agents on campus. That is, faculty set the intellectual and behavioral norms on most campuses and, thus, may have the greatest impact on campus climate.

Educational interventions through workshops, classes, and professional training are one of four types of interventions we recom-

mend. Other types of interventions include symbolic, fiscal, and administrative actions (Rankin, 2003). Symbolic actions could include strong institutional statements supporting diversity and multiculturalism (Rowley et al., 2002). These statements send strong messages about institutional climate. Fiscal and administrative actions may include policies that recruit and retain faculty and staff of color. Studies suggest that a visible presence of faculty from traditionally underrepresented groups impacts positively the student outcomes and perceptions of climate (cf., Milem, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

*White Privilege and Resistance to Interventions.* The different experiences and perceptions of White students reinforce the concept of White privilege on college campuses. *White privilege* is defined as “the unearned advantages and benefits that accrue to White folks by virtue of a system normed on the experiences, values, and perceptions of their group” (Sue, 2003, p. 137). McIntosh (1989) likened White privilege to a knapsack full of tools that is handed to White people at birth, but denied people of color. White privilege is particularly insidious because it is both invisible and systemic (Neville, Worthington, & Spanierman, 2001; Sue).

That White students experience harassment at lesser rates and are able to ignore it when they see it is a privilege not extended to students of color. From their reporting, White students observe harassment, but still perceive the campus climate as nonracist, friendly, and respectful. Students of color are less able to separate their experiences and perceptions from their feelings about the campus climate.

Higher education administrators can expect resistance to any intervention from some White students who have not recognized their privilege. White students have demon-

strated less support for and active resistance against policies intended to improve campus racial climate (Miller et al., 1998). White students who do not experience campus climates as racist or hostile may conclude that such interventions are unwarranted, unnecessary, and/or “anti-White” (Gallagher, 1997, p. 28). Higher education administrators must be prepared to address these issues.

## CONCLUSION

In this study we examined students’ experiences with and perceptions of race on campus. Stark differences between the experiences and perceptions of students of color and White students were uncovered. Students of color experienced more harassment and perceived the campus racial climate more negatively than did White students. Existing literature suggests campus climate directly influences educational and social outcomes for students; our findings regarding the stark differences in perception of campus climate should raise great concerns in higher educators and student affairs professionals.

The different perceptions of campus racial climate present a serious challenge to higher education. Given the empirical connection between perceptions of campus climate and educational and social outcomes, higher education professionals must recognize the importance of assessing campus climates for underrepresented students. The recognition that different groups of students experience the campus climate differently must lead to interventions targeted specifically for those individual student concerns. It is important

to note, however, that students’ reactions to intervention strategies will differ based on the students’ perceived need for climate change.

To successfully address the challenges facing underrepresented students on campus, there must be a shift of basic assumptions, premises, and beliefs in all areas of the institution. Only then can behavior and structures be changed. In the transformed institution, majority/privileged assumptions are replaced by assumptions of diverse cultures and relationships, and these new assumptions govern the design and implementation of any activity, program, or service of the institution. This sort of transformative change demands committed leadership in both policy and goal articulation. New approaches to learning, teaching, decision-making, and working in the institution are implemented. It will demand the formation of relationships between individuals who are radically different from each other. These transformed assumptions, premises, and beliefs will provide the environment with the catalyst for change. Higher education and student affairs professionals must not only be interested and involved in analysis regarding issues of difference, but in practice, the organizational activities and actions that challenge dominance, critique the status quo, and have social justice as a central core value, that inform the strategic approach that runs through the fabric of the institution.

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