

Diversity Experiences in the Classroom

KEY FINDINGS

Students' experiences in the classroom directly affect their ability to learn, their overall academic performance, as well as their feelings about themselves and others. To help determine how the classroom experience supports and exposes students to diversity, students were asked to respond to a series of questions about their comfort level in classes, their interaction with faculty, their level of class participation, the inclusiveness of class materials, and the exposure to diversity among their professors. Responses were analyzed based on students' race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

For students to be at ease in a class setting they need to feel welcomed, acknowledged, and respected. In a series of questions about the classroom environment, students were asked to rate their comfort level in classes.

- White, male, and heterosexual students reported the most positive scores when rating how welcome they feel in the classroom. African American students and GLB students were least likely to feel welcome in classes.
- GLB, African American, and Hispanic American/Latino students were significantly more likely than other groups to feel that their professors ignore their comments or questions. Men were significantly more likely to report that their comments or questions are ignored than women were.
- At least 70% of students in all groups (racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation) agreed that appropriate and inclusive language is used in their classes. African American and GLB students found the language to be least appropriate and inclusive of all the groups.
- Women, GLB, and African American students were significantly more likely to find the humor used in the classroom to be offensive than men, heterosexual students and students from other racial/ethnic groups respectively.

Important strategies for promoting diversity in the classroom include instructors modeling multicultural sensitivity and encouraging sharing of different views and perspectives. Students were asked to express their views on these aspects of their classroom experience.

- African American students were, by far, the least likely to agree that their instructors model multicultural sensitively with 24% disagreeing with the statement.
- Almost 78% of all respondents agreed that different views and perspectives are encouraged in class. When looking at responses by various student characteristics (raced/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation) more GLB students (16%) disagreed that different views and perspectives are encouraged in class than any other group.

As another component of the classroom experience, students responded to questions about whether students of various differences participate equally in the classroom.

- When presented the statement “in my experience students of different racial/ethnic background participate equally in classroom discussion and learning,” over 25% of all respondents disagreed. The greatest levels of disagreement with this statement existed among African American students (40%).
- Twenty-eight percent (28%) of GLB students disagreed that students of various sexual orientations participate equally in classroom discussions.
- Based on gender, women were more likely to disagree (17.6%) with the statement “men and women participate equally in classroom discussion and learning” than men (11.9%) were.

Related to students’ level of participation in the classroom is the level at which students are asked to represent the views of an entire group of people – assuming that all women, African American, or all GLB persons have the same needs or experiences without regard to differences.

- Various groups reported striking differences. African American students were significantly more likely to agree (72.2%) that they are expected to represent their race in discussions in class than were Caucasian students (11.3%), American Indian/Alaskan Native students (22.3%), Asian American students (41.6%) and Hispanic American/Latino student (39.2%).
- GLB students were significantly more likely to agree (39%) that they are expected to represent their sexual orientation than heterosexual students (9.7%) were. Women were significantly more likely to agree (37.1%) that they felt such an expectation than men (19.5%) were.

Students’ perceptions of professors’ sensitivity provides another aspect of the classroom experience.

- While generally students agreed that professors are sensitive to the needs of students, GLB students and African American students were least likely to agree when compared to heterosexual students and other racial/ethnic groups.
- Overall, students perceived that professors are most sensitive to the needs of students of their own racial/ethnic group.

Another area considered in the assessment of the classroom environment is the level of inclusiveness incorporated into class materials.

- Over 50% of African American respondents reported that professors either “rarely” or “almost never” incorporate contributions of people from a variety of racial/ethnic groups in their class materials. Hispanic American/Latino students also found the level of inclusiveness in class materials to be significantly less than Asian American and Caucasian students.

- When students were asked if professors incorporate into their classes materials that acknowledge the contributions of women, women and men responded similarly to the question with 46% of women and 41% of men indicating that professors either “frequently” or “almost always” incorporated contributions of women in their class materials
- By far, students reported the least level of inclusiveness in class materials when asked about acknowledging contributions of GLBT persons.

Students were asked if they have taken classes from professors of various races/ethnicities, from female and male professors, and from GLBT professors.

- A consistent finding across underrepresented groups is that students of particular groups were most likely to report having taken classes from professors who are similar to them compared to all other groups of students.
- Students’ exposure to racial/ethnic diversity among their professors varied greatly. Over 75% of all respondents reported that they have taken a class from an Asian/Pacific Islander professor. Approximately 55% of all respondents reported that they have taken a class from an African American professor. Thirty-four percent (34%) of all respondents have taken a class from a Latino/Hispanic professor. Only 12.1% of all respondents have taken a class from an American Indian/Alaskan Native professor. As expected, at least 99% of all respondents have had a White/Caucasian professor for class.
- Based on all students’ responses, 97.5% of students have taken a class from a female professor and 98.9% of students have had a class from a male professor.