

Social Justice & “Diversity Talk” at a Liberal Arts College

Janine K. G. Chi, Connie T. Wolfe, David Weiss, Rachel Leavitt,
Karly Rodriguez, Lindsay Grom & Thomas Prevete

Muhlenberg College
Allentown, PA

Poster Presented at: Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, June 2008

Contact: wolfe@muhlenberg.edu

INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1990s, diversity requirements have become a ubiquitous feature of undergraduate education in this country. In 2000, the American Association of Colleges and Universities reported that 63% of colleges and universities have either a diversity requirement in place or are in the process of developing one. Studies have suggested that diversity course requirements are useful in that they challenge students’ racial views and assumptions as well as provide for a better learning environment (e.g., Gurin, 1999; Humphreys, 2000). However, it is unclear how students come to a *holistic* understanding of diversity vis-à-vis other graduation requirements.

This paper investigates the ways in which the relatively homogenous population of students and faculty at a northeastern, small college understand diversity education within the context of their liberal arts education. We were especially interested in the extent to which the faculty and/or student goals addressed connections amongst diversity, privilege and oppression (c.f. Bell & Hartmann, 2007).

STUDY 1 FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS’ ATTITUDES

Participants

We conducted a paper & pencil survey of 313 student volunteers (53.87% of entire freshman class) during orientation weekend before the start of classes. See **Table 1** for demographic statistics. The sample was almost evenly split between males and females. Our sample captured the typical Muhlenberg student: White, heterosexual, and from middle to upper class neighborhoods.

Method & Results

Low Explicit Racism Scores.

We measured racism using six questions from the Modern Racism scale (e.g., “It is easy to understand the anger of racial/ethnic minorities in America;” $\alpha = .65$; McConahay, 1986). Scores on this 6-point scale were low ($M = 1.99$, $SD = .62$; $Md = 1.83$, $Mode = 1.67$). Males reported slightly higher levels of racism ($M = 2.12$, $SD = .74$) than did females ($M = 1.89$, $SD = .52$; $F(1, 309) = 10.55$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$).

Students Endorsed both a “Color-Blind” Ideology and Attention to Diversity.

We also created several single-item measures (6-point scales). For example, these new college students reported a moderately strong intention to participate in an “diversity-oriented student group” while on campus ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.24$).

It is interesting to note the relatively strong endorsement of statements that could be seen as contradicting one another: Students endorsed the notion that we must “overlook differences in gender, race and sexual orientation” to end prejudice ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.41$). And, students strongly agreed that “America needs to become a “color-blind” society ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.22$). However, students also strongly agreed that “it is important for college students to learn about diversity topics” ($M = 5.09$, $SD = .96$). Women endorsed this importance item more strongly ($M = 5.28$, $SD = .81$) than did men; $M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.10$; $F(1, 309) = 15.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Two additional items determined that they held this belief regardless of whether the student doing the learning is “White or straight” or “Black or gay” ($t(299) = -.97$, $n.s.$). Participants also agreed that one must “listen to the perspectives” of members of stereotyped groups to end prejudice ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.27$).

We ran a multiple regression with racism scores as the outcome variable and the color-blind ideology, importance of learning about diversity, and behavioral intention items described above as the three predictors; $R = .54$, $F(3, 290) = 39.97$, $p < .001$. The strongest predictor was the extent to which respondents felt it was important for college students to study diversity topics; $Beta = -.44$, $t = -8.02$, $p < .001$. The behavioral intention to participate in a diversity-oriented group was the next strongest predictor; $Beta = -.14$, $t = -2.55$, $p = .01$. Endorsement of a color-blind ideology was approaching significance; $Beta = -.10$, $t = -1.89$, $p = .06$. Note, these were all *negative* relationships. Lower levels of racism predicted stronger intentions to get involved with diversity groups. Most interestingly, although *lower* levels of racism were loosely associated with endorsement for a color-blind ideology (i.e., not seeing race), *higher* levels of racism were associated with resistance to learning about diversity (i.e., not studying race).

This study raised the interesting question of what “diversity” and “learning about diversity” really mean to these young men and women.

STUDY 2

WHAT IS DIVERSITY? WHY SHOULD IT BE STUDIED?

Participants

A total of 77 students participated in a web survey, in exchange for a chance to win a cash prize. See **Table 1** for demographic statistics.

Method & Results

Definition of Diversity.

Students were asked to write a brief response to “*What is your definition of diversity?*” Using a manifest content coding strategy, we examined the data for concept words. Results can be seen in **Table 2** (note that each response could contain more than one concept word). The

most frequent definitions of diversity referred to personal characteristics, ideas, opinions, or customs and lifestyles, and no students mentioned concepts of oppression or privilege.

Race was the social identity most commonly mentioned. It is unsurprising that religion was also frequently mentioned; Muhlenberg College regularly notes the religious diversity (within the Judeo-Christian tradition) present in the student body. Several students also mentioned sex, class, and sexual orientation, while a few mentioned age and ability.

Why Study Diversity?

Students were also asked “*Is it important to study diversity issues? Why or why not?*” Using latent coding, three research assistants coded each response looking for common themes (98% inter-rater agreement). All but 3 participants agreed we should study diversity. Those who said “no” suggested that focusing on differences makes things worse, that people shouldn’t be forced to care, and that it is better to experience diversity than study it.

Results for those who agreed we should study diversity can be seen in **Table 3** (note, responses could be coded into more than one category). Students advocated studying diversity for one of two primary reasons: doing so would promote understanding or tolerance; and, we should study diversity simply because it exists (e.g., “everyone should be fully informed of diversity issues”). Of those students who specified what one would gain understanding or tolerance *about*, most mentioned individual difference variables such as values or experiences, personal growth, or “culture” generally. Consistent with the findings for the definition of diversity, few students mentioned issues of equality, oppression or conflict.

Students seemed to be open to learning about diversity on paper, but in both their definitions of diversity and in their reasoning about the value of studying diversity topics, the focus was on general individual differences and on the goals of gaining acceptance and understanding. We were interested to see if the instructors of the “D” (diversity requirement) courses had goals consistent with these general outcomes, or if instructors sought to focus on more specific aspects of diversity including oppression and privilege.

STUDY 3 INSTRUCTORS’ GOALS AND ATTITUDES

The “D” at Muhlenberg is a one-course “diversity” graduation requirement. The college defines a “D” class as one which studies groups “outside the geographic boundaries of Europe” or groups that are “marginalized” within the U.S. or Europe. According to the 2007-2008 college catalog, Muhlenberg offers 54 D courses about peoples in other countries and six about “marginalized” groups within the United States.

Participants

We sampled from professors who were teaching a D class during a single semester. We were able to conduct a 10-15 minute interview with 11 of the 15 we contacted. See **Table 4** for demographic characteristics.

Method & Results

The interviews were loosely structured, encouraging open-ended responses and elaboration. Students served as the interviewers, and two student raters coded each interview transcript for the faculty members’ perception of the college’s definition of a D, their own ideas about what the D course should teach, their goals for the course they are currently teaching, and their thoughts on how diversity education at the college needs to change. Preliminary results yield the following conclusions.

Most faculty perceived the institutional purpose of the D requirement as “exposure” to “other cultures.” When considering the goals of diversity education, faculty themselves endorsed such exposure or awareness goals, but also endorsed valuing and respecting diverse perspectives. Only three faculty specifically mentioned social justice (equality, human rights, oppression, privilege) when discussing why students should study diversity. One mentioned the importance of good citizenship in a multicultural society, which could be construed as a social justice goal.

When asked about their primary teaching strategy, two instructors utilized case studies/experiential learning in their courses, and the remainder indicated discussion, or a mixture of lecture and discussion. Class sizes were typically about 25 students.

Almost every faculty member indicated exposure and cultivating openness as goals for their own courses. Many mentioned the study of non-western populations, reflecting their course content, and several mentioned effective participation in a pluralistic society. Few instructors explicitly mentioned social justice when describing their course goals, but half did mention preparing students to live effectively in a multicultural environment.

Most faculty members agreed that the way diversity is taught at the college needs to be changed (raters gave each interviewee a rating on a 1-4 scale; $M = 3.05$; 99% inter-rater reliability) Instructors endorsed changing the number or type of diversity courses students should have to take, and integrating diversity throughout the curriculum. And, many felt these changes should be initiated by the institution in the form of overall curricular reform.

SUMMARY & DISCUSSION

Our students are explicitly denying prejudice, but these scores probably reflect a mixture of consciously held beliefs and socially desirable responses. It is possible that some of our students hold implicitly racist views (e.g., aversive racism; Dovidio, 2001).

Possibly echoing norms in American society, students held what could be interpreted as contradictory views about diversity education. They advocated for both a color-blind ideology and the study of issues like race. Most interestingly, although *lower* levels of racism were loosely associated with the belief that one should not “see” race (i.e., endorsement of color-blind ideology), *higher* levels of racism were associated with resistance to learning about diversity.

These contradictory opinions, in addition to reflecting socially desirable responding, may stem from vague and tentative ideas about what diversity is and why it is important to study it. Students in our predominantly white, heterosexual sample were most comfortable defining diversity in an abstract way – perhaps in a way that allows them to avoid uncomfortable topics and/or in a way that feels like it includes them. This is consistent with research that Americans are unlikely to address diversity at a group-level, and are unlikely to include ideas of oppression or disadvantage in their definitions (Bell & Hartmann, 2007).

When considering why studying diversity is important, some students were (seemingly) unable to answer the question – saying, essentially, one should study diversity because one should know about diversity. For those who gave more substantive answers, very few students mentioned issues of privilege or equality of treatment. This, along with the emphasis on a promotion focus versus a prevention focus, seem to echo the idea that our students may be most comfortable engaging in diversity “happy talk” (Bell & Hartmann, 2007).

Although instructors were more articulate in their discussions of the value of studying diversity, a preliminary examination of their descriptions of diversity education reveals a finding similar to that of the students – faculty most frequently endorsed the abstract goals of exposure to, and respect for, other cultures. One hypothesis is that the faculty’s modest goals reflect what they perceive students can reasonably achieve. Our student findings do suggest that faculty are accurately assessing students’ *expectations* for what it means to learn about diversity. One of our student researchers also pointed out that many of the offered D courses aren’t structurally designed to address “diversity” per se. Each course teaches about a specific topic, and our student researchers wondered how many courses could, given the focus on content, push students to compare and contrast with their own cultural experiences, or challenge students to reflect upon their own privilege and status. This focus in the D courses directly reflects the fact that the general curriculum currently addresses diversity education exclusively in terms of content areas rather than as part of a pedagogical approach or philosophy.

Properly challenging and educating students about diversity and issues of social justice might best be achieved via a *holistic* approach. Many of the faculty we interviewed mentioned the need to incorporate diversity education across the entire curriculum, and many suggested that such change needs to originate at the institutional level. Currently, as one of our faculty participants stated, “The way we require [diversity education], it becomes ghettoized – the way we present it removes it from the rest of the curriculum.” While diversity education can be partially achieved through the teaching of specific courses, we argue that effective diversity education must be well-integrated throughout the academic curriculum.

As we begin to revise our general curriculum, the role of diversity education is being actively discussed amongst faculty, students and administrators. These three small, descriptive projects raise many interesting questions as our institution moves forward. What, exactly, does being “color-blind” mean to our students? How can instructors overcome student expectations that diversity education teaches merely the acceptance of a happy collection of individual differences? Can any single course, if disengaged from the rest of the curriculum, adequately challenge students’ reluctance to engage with issues of social justice? How can the institution encourage and support appropriate faculty development?

REFERENCES

- Bell, J.M. & Hartmann, D. (2007). Diversity in everyday discourse: The cultural ambiguities and consequences of “Happy Talk.” *American Sociological Review*, 72, 895-914.
- Dovidio, J. (2001). On the nature of contemporary prejudice: The third wave. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(4), 829-849.
- Gurin, Patricia. "The Compelling Need for Diversity in Education," January 1999. Expert report prepared for the lawsuits *Gratz and Hamacher v Bollinger, Duderstadt, the University of Michigan, and the University of Michigan College of LS&A*, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Michigan, Civil Action No. 97-75231; and *Gutter v Bollinger, Lehman, Shields, the University of Michigan and the University of Michigan Law School*, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Michigan, Civil Action No. 97-75928. [On-line]. Available: <http://www.umich.edu/~urel/admissions/legal/expert/gurintoc.html>
- Reprinted in: *Michigan Journal of Race & Law*, 5(1), 1999, 363-425.
- Reprinted in: *The University of Massachusetts Schools of Education Journal*, 32(2), 1999, 36-62.

- Humphreys, D. (2000). National Survey Finds Diversity Requirements Common Around the Country. *Diversity Digest, Fall*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- McConahay, J. B. (1986). Modern racism, ambivalence, and the modern racism scale. In J. F. Dovidio & S. L. Gaertner (Eds.), *Prejudice, discrimination and racism* (pp. 91- 126). New York: Academic.

Table 1
Study 1 & 2: Demographic Characteristics

	Frequency	
	Study 1	Study 2
Total N	313	77
Sex		
Males	128	13
Females	182	61
Race/Ethnicity		
White	284	67
Latino/Hispanic ^a	12	1
Asian/Asian-American ^a	4	1
Black/African-American	2	1
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	299	62
Homosexual	5	4
Bisexual	3	3
Class Year		
First Year	313	14
Sophomore	0	22
Junior	0	12
Senior	0	25
Religion^b		
Jewish	--	25
Protestant	--	16
Catholic	--	16
Other (e.g., agnostic, atheist)	--	13
First Generation College Students	13	3
Ave. Hometown Median Income (SD)^c	73,181.50 (26,450.30)	73,293.70 (27,182.40)

^a More specific information is omitted to ensure confidentiality.

^b Religion was inadvertently not measured in Study 1

^c Medians: Study 1 - \$71,163.50; Study 2 - \$72,340.00.

Table 2
Study 2: Manifest Coding for “What is Diversity?”

Concept (synonyms)*	Frequency
individual differences (<i>personality, interests, opinions, ways of thinking</i>)	42 (54.6%)
culture (<i>customs, lifestyle, holidays, traditions</i>)	35 (45.5%)
race (<i>color</i>)	31 (40.3%)
background (<i>heritage, nationality</i>)	23 (29.9%)
religion (<i>spirituality</i>)	20 (26%)
ethnicity	15 (19.5%)
sex (<i>gender</i>)	15 (19.5%)
class (<i>SES, income, social class</i>)	14 (18.2%)
sexual identity (<i>sexual orientation, sexuality</i>)	12 (15.6%)
difference [no other concept mentioned]	9 (11.7%)
location (<i>places, regions</i>)	8 (10.4%)
political views (<i>politics</i>)	3 (3.9%)
values (<i>morals, ethics, beliefs</i>)	3 (3.9%)
experiences	3 (3.9%)
appearance (<i>height, style of dress, outer looks</i>)	3 (3.9%)
age (<i>generation</i>)	2 (2.6%)
ability (<i>disability, handicap</i>)	2 (2.6%)
vary from norms (<i>standard, comparison</i>)	2 (2.6%)

* The following words were not coded because of their high frequency and because they were typically qualified by one of the above concept categories: unique, variation, diverse.

Table 3
Study 2: Latent Coding for “Why is it Important to Study Diversity?”

Reasons	Frequency (percent; n = 74)
Because it <i>Exists</i> *	25 (33.8%)
Because it <i>Promotes</i> ...	
understanding, awareness	53 (71.6%)
acceptance, tolerance	26 (35.1%)
<u><i>Promotes understanding and acceptance of...</i></u>	
different values, perspectives, experiences	25 (33.8%)
personal growth, openness	16 (21.6%)
different customs, cultures	13 (17.6%)
others	8 (10.8%)
how the world “works”	7 (9.5%)
diversity issues	7 (9.5%)
connection, community	5 (6.8%)
empathy, fair treatment	4 (5.4%)
peace	3 (4.1%)
different religions	2 (2.7%)
Because it <i>Prevents</i> ...	
ignorance, misunderstandings, conflict	9 (12.2%)
prejudice, hate	6 (8.1%)
being “sheltered”	3 (4.1%)

* This category refers to tautological or “empty” responses. For example: “Yes it is [important to study] because everyone should be fully informed of diversity issues.”

Table 4
Study 3: Course Instructor Demographic Characteristics

	Frequency
Total N	11
Sex	
Male	6
Female	5
Nationality/Race^a	
American/White	10
International/Non-White	1
Rank^a	
Tenured	7
Untenured/Lecturer (FT)	4
Disciplinary Division^{a,b}	
Humanities & Arts	9
Social & Natural Sciences	2
Course Focus	
Non-western peoples/topics	7
Western society/topics outside of the U.S.	2
Peoples/topics within the U.S	2

^a More specific information is omitted to ensure confidentiality.

^b Many of the “D” classes at Muhlenberg are also offered within the Social Sciences. Our sample over-represents the Humanities & Arts.

Table 5
Study 3: Instructor Interview Responses

	Frequency
Goals for Diversity Education in General	
Exposure to “other” (cultures, peoples)	11
Value other perspectives	9
Social justice/Reducing prejudice	3
Study race/marginalized peoples within western world	4
Study non-western peoples/cultures	3
Participate in pluralistic/multicultural society	1
Goals for the Diversity Course Currently Teaching	
Exposure	10
Valuing other perspectives	10
Study non-western peoples/cultures	8
Participate in pluralistic/multicultural society	5
Social justice/Reducing prejudice	3
Study race/marginalized peoples within U.S.	2
Changes Needed	
Change “D” requirement (more or different courses)	7
Integrate diversity education throughout curriculum	7
Encourage more study abroad/service learning	3
Encourage more discussions of social justice	2
More multicultural students/faculty	3
Locus of Change	
Institutional/General Curriculum	10
Professor’s courses or attitudes	5
Departmental missions/offerings	5
Co-curricular experiences (e.g., service learning, clubs, activities)	5