

New Look at the Impact of Diversity
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December 19, 2008; *Inside Higher Ed*

Much of the rhetoric about diversity is based on ideas about what happens when students are exposed (or are hardly ever exposed) to people who are from different backgrounds than they are. A new study that tracked 2,000 students at the University of California at Los Angeles attempts to move beyond the rhetoric by documenting exactly what does happen when students interact with different kinds of fellow students. Some of the findings may cheer supporters of affirmative action. Notably, the research found a positive impact on racial attitudes from students who are exposed to those of other races and ethnicities. While many educators have long said that they believe in such an impact, the new study provides longitudinal research to back up what to many has been conventional wisdom more than scientific research. These findings may be crucial because court rulings upholding the legality of affirmative action have made the point that some broad societal gain is needed, not just the individual benefit that goes to an admitted minority students.

Other findings, however, may anger some diversity advocates (not to mention some fraternity and sorority leaders). The researchers examined the impact of membership in groups that are defined largely by race and ethnicity (such as black student unions) as well as membership in groups that do not have an explicit racial or ethnic mission, but have overwhelmingly white members (some fraternities and sororities). Generally, they found that a negative impact resulted from membership in these groups -- white or minority -- in which belonging to such a group led to an increase in feelings of victimization.

"The overall point of this study was to try to find out what effects the college experience has on intergroup attitudes of students," said Jim Sidanius, the lead author and a professor of psychology at Harvard University. The results are being released this month in [*The Diversity Challenge: Social Identity and Intergroup Relations on the College Campus*](#), a book being published by the Russell Sage Foundation. (The other authors are Shana Levin of Claremont McKenna College, Colette Van Laar of Leiden University and David O. Sears of UCLA.)

Sidanius said that the research was conducted from the perspective of being "neutral" on affirmative action -- with the scholars not seeking evidence to either bolster or hinder the practice. UCLA was selected both because of its racial and ethnic diversity (no group on campus is a majority) and because some of its policies lend themselves to work of this kind. For example, first-year roommates are assigned randomly, resulting in pools of students who live with someone of the same race and ethnicity and others who do not. One key finding was the generally positive impact on racial attitudes of living with someone of a different race. Students were surveyed on their attitudes before being assigned someone to live with, and after a year in which some lived with "outgroup roommates." Generally, and regardless of the attitudes with which students entered UCLA, those who lived with members of other ethnic groups showed statistically

significant gains in comfort levels with people of different groups, having circles of friends beyond one's own group, and a variety of other measures of tolerance toward different groups. The changes in attitudes were most striking for those living with either black or Latino roommates.

The one exception to this positive impact was with Asian students as roommates: White and black students who lived with Asians tended to show increased prejudice against Asians on some measures after living with them.

From the surveys, Sidanius said that it was clear that whatever positive impacts occurred by having people live with those from other groups were more as a result of informal interaction. It's not that minority students are explaining the history of racism; they are just interacting as roommates do. "It largely is about becoming friends, and developing emotional friendships, not just trading information," Sidanius said.

This finding has several implications, Sidanius said. First it suggests that colleges and society benefit when there are enough people from different backgrounds at a college that people can end up rooming with people from different groups. Second, it says that colleges should place a premium on mixing students up with room assignments. "The first thing colleges should do is to randomly assign students to roommates or deliberately mix race and ethnicity of roommates to make sure students don't end up rooming in ethnic enclaves," he said.

Impact of Students' Choices

Enclaves can of course exist in areas beyond housing. The research team for *The Diversity Challenge* also did extensive research on the impact of participation in student groups associated with racial or ethnic groups or that were predominantly populated by members of one group. The book notes that researchers using "a multicultural framework" have long argued that minority student organizations represent both a source of support for participants and "a bridge" to the rest of the campus.

That's only correct in part, the book concludes, based on surveys of students involved and not involved in such organizations. Many minority students in such groups report positive feelings of ethnic identity and political engagement, the book says. But involvement with such groups also -- in contrast to the more inclusive view of multiculturalism -- increased students' sense that they are victims and that all racial and ethnic groups are locked in "zero-sum competition."

These "conflict-inducing" impacts, the book stresses, are not unique to membership in minority student organizations. They are present in white students who are involved in predominantly white fraternities and sororities.

Sidanius said in an interview that he realizes that one conclusion of this part of the book might be that colleges should stop supporting Greek systems that are largely segregated, or minority student organizations. Such a move would probably be "too costly politically" for a college president today, Sidanius said. But at the same time, he added

that college leaders should focus more attention than they have on the fact that many Greek systems are more segregated than much of the rest of the campus. As for minority student organizations, he said he would "stop encouraging" their growth. Colleges might not eliminate them, but might not shower them with support and funds, he said.

As a scholar, Sidanius practices what he preaches. An African American, he is a member of several scholarly societies that have black caucuses -- and while he participates in the societies, he doesn't join the caucuses.

Commentary

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September 2010

Diversity as a theme has been hotly debated, and as numerous campus leading researchers suggest, it is one of the most significant issues facing higher education today (Dey & Hurtado, 2005; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Pedersen, O'Neill, & Musil, 2006; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). Scott Jaschik's article, *New Look at the Impact of Diversity*, invites the reader to explore the dynamics of racial diversity on the college environment, discussing the findings of a longitudinal study conducted at UCLA that provides empirical evidence that documents student's racial attitudes. The timing of this discussion is extremely appropriate, as it is predicted that by the year 2015, approximately 80 percent of all new students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States will be a member of a historically underrepresented group (American Association of State Colleges and Universities [AASCU] & National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant College [NASULGC], 2005).

In a longitudinal study at UCLA, Sidanius and associates found that exposure to other races and ethnicities has a positive impact on the racial attitudes of students (Sidanius, Levin, Van Laar, & Sears, 2008). Their research expands a growing body of literature (AASCU & NASULGC, 2005; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005) concerned with identifying educational benefits associated with a diverse college campus. On the other hand, findings of this study also revealed that membership in groups that are defined largely by race and ethnicity (e.g., Black student union, Latino student association, etc.), and in fraternities and sororities whose membership is dominated by one racial group, has a negative impact on intergroup racial attitudes. The following commentary explores the implications of these two findings.

First, UCLA currently assigns roommates randomly for first-year students, and Sidanius, Levin, Van Laar, and Sears (2008) found that at UCLA where no group is a majority when referring to racial and ethnic diversity, students who had a roommate from a different ethnic group showed statistically significant gains in racial attitudes. These students are more likely to have friends from different backgrounds. They showed increased tolerance towards racial differences and experienced higher comfort levels when interacting with people from different ethnicities. These findings highlight that having a diverse racial and ethnic campus can contribute to student interactions that enhance the racial climate of institutions of higher education. Unfortunately, racial and ethnic diversity are too often framed as the only priority when speaking about campus diversity (Milem et al., 2005). In the literature, the term "structural" diversity refers to the representation of racial and ethnic groups on campus, where increasing the number of students of color increases the likelihood of interactions among students from different backgrounds (Chang, 1999).

While structural diversity is seen as an important initial step toward improving the campus climate (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998), we ought to be concerned with the fact that diversity goals must move beyond exclusively developing a critical mass of historically underrepresented students (Harper & Quaye, 2007). Hurtado et al. (1998) affirm that to manage diversity, colleges and universities cannot afford to ignore the dynamics of institutional forces, dealing with the campus climate as a multidimensional phenomenon. In particular, we need to examine the college campus as a place where internal and external forces come together (i.e., historical legacy, structural diversity, behavioral interactions, and psychological dimension). This implies that we must take into account the history of discrimination in institutions of higher education, examine the quality of student interactions, and deconstruct the views of individuals in regards to inter-group relations and institutional commitment to diversity, all necessary steps to understand the complexity of diversity work in higher education (Hurtado et al., 1998).

The second relevant set of findings of the study conducted at UCLA established that a negative impact on racial attitudes is associated with Greek and minority organization affiliation (Sidanius et al., 2008). For instance, while a positive impact in identity development and political engagement was noted among students who participate in minority student organizations, findings revealed that an increased sense of victimization affecting the development of friendships with other racial groups characterized these students. However, research documenting the experiences of students that participate in minority organizations refutes this claim and confirms that membership in minority student organizations has not been identified as a barrier to develop "interracial friendships," in particular because "only a handful of students are so intensively involved in the organization's activities that the majority of their time is spent with the same core group" (Milem et al., 2005, p. 29).

When the time commitment rationale is applied to examine the impact of Greek system affiliation on student's racial attitudes, it is imperative to note that in contrast to minority organizations, participation in Greek organizations demands a larger portion of the student's time. Students who join the Greek system "almost immediately cut themselves off from frequent and sustained interaction with students outside the Greek system" (Milem et al., 2005, p. 28). Researchers suggests that institutions can diminish these negative effects by postponing the "rush" process until the sophomore year, allowing students to interact with others, and engage with important activities such as building friendships in the residence halls (Milem et al., 2005).

Overall, it is also relevant to note that positive educational outcomes are associated with membership in minority and Greek letter organizations (e.g., higher levels of volunteerism, civic responsibility, increased willingness to donate to charitable causes, persistence, and involvement), with these organizations allowing students to find their place on campus by building relationships with others (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Hayek, Carini, O'Day, & Kuh, 2002; Nelson, Halperin, Wasserman, Smith, & Graham, 2006; Museus, 2008). Likewise, colleges and universities that truly engage students should be committed to pluralism, which entails supporting the creation and "coexistence" of campus sub-communities that allow students to build friendships and

support networks with others that share similar characteristics (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Harper & Quayle, 2009). Of particular interest, it is noted that cultural enclaves on campus may have a positive impact on the experience of ethnic minority college students (Museus, 2008), and ethnic clubs and organization serve to introduce first year minority students to campus life, fostering a sense of mattering and belonging (Harper & Quayle, 2007).

In conclusion, UCLA's efforts set a good example, demonstrating that colleges and universities need to be proactive, making thoughtful, strategic, and deliberate decisions to promote positive cross-racial interactions that can enhance the campus climate (Williams & Clowney, 2007; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). To support a welcoming campus climate, institutional leaders can provide student organizations with opportunities and incentives for inter-organizational involvement (Milem et al., 2005), contributing to higher levels of engagement patterns already documented for these organizations, while reducing "normative social and racial parameters" that discourage cross racial interaction (Asel, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2009, p. 6). Developing educational environments where "truly multicultural assimilation and good old-fashioned integration can take place," is a priority, creating a campus that prepares students to live and work in a global community (Seaman, 2005, p. 167).

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Discussion Questions

For those that may wish to use this article for teaching and/or professional development related purposes, here are some guiding questions that may be helpful:

1. What are some of the current intentional strategies fostering cross-racial interaction on campus?
2. How can institutions benefit from strategic diversity management? How can this approach be implemented in your institution? Who needs to be involved with this implementation?
3. To what extent are diversity goals of programs and units aligned with institutional diversity initiatives?
4. As administrators or scholars, how can we create educational environments that allows us to benefit from the presence of diverse students?
5. How can our institutions incorporate diversity into the mission, values, and daily activities on campus?
6. What current programs are in place to encourage cross-organizational collaboration on campus?