

3. COLLEGE ENVIRONMENTS, DIVERSITY, AND STUDENT LEARNING

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The research literature on students in higher education is both rich and varied, even though the concerns addressed in this literature effectively resolve to three primary questions (Dey and Feldman, 1999): What sorts of people go to college, what experiences do they have at college, and what sorts of people do they become by the end of their college experience? To generate meaningful answers to these primary questions requires not only careful consideration of the attributes of students, but also of the educational environments that they encounter during their journey through the postsecondary education enterprise.

Among the important issues that encompass each of these three primary questions is the use of affirmative action in college admissions and the benefits for student learning that diversity produces as a result. What have we learned about the educational value of diversity in the college environment? This chapter reviews the empirical and theoretical literature on diversity to explore the interplay between individuals and their collegiate environments and how these relate to student learning and development. We present a summary of the existing research evidence related to the ways in which campus diversity — one important aspect of the college environment — shapes the people who emerge from college and universities at the end of their undergraduate experiences. To do so, we first consider a theory of social difference and discontinuity that was

advanced to test whether campus diversity influences student outcomes (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin, 2002), as well as the existing literature on different conceptions of the college environment.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The people who work and study within colleges and universities experience social difference and discontinuity as they move from one environment to another. For college students, some of the largest points of difference and discontinuity occur at the transitional boundaries implied by the three primary questions of college student research — entry into college, experiences during college, exit into their post-collegiate lives — whereas faculty are engaged in the process of finding and creating the kinds of settings and conditions — the environments — under which their students will change and develop in desired ways. Although many of the educational settings created by colleges and universities — programs of study, officially organized and sanctioned student activities, and the like — are structured and intentional in their goals for student development, this is not universally the case. The conditions created by a student's peer environment, for example, appear to be beyond the precise control of a college or university, and yet can have a strong impact on how students develop during the college years. Selective admissions officers, however, often speak of “shaping the class” with a clear intent on selecting an exciting and diverse peer environment of student backgrounds (based on race/ethnicity, geography, income, and nationality), skills, and talents that achieve the educational goals of the institution. While college admissions plays an important role in providing opportunities for interactions across social differences, many practices and traditions within higher education provide institutional support directed at helping to create settings to facilitate peer interactions (such as student residence hall programming and organized student activities). Many educators are intuitively aware of the fact that *who one is educated with* may be just as important as *where one is educated*. This review examines the empirical and theoretical basis of such a notion.

The question at issue is whether racial/ethnic diversity in the college environment is one of the key factors that contribute to student development. Some contend that students are educated in distinct racial contexts (Hurtado *et al.*, 1999) and that the nature of interracial contacts among peers is key in the education of students from various backgrounds (Bennett, 1984; Orfield and Whitley, 1999). Race remains an important issue

around which educational interactions occur on college campuses. This is in part due to the limited exposure to people of different races that many students experience prior to attending college, given the persistent patterns of racial segregation in American society.

Researchers have documented a deepening segregation in American schools, with increasingly segregated education for African American and Latino students (Orfield *et al.*, 1997). In addition, campus diversity, which is most commonly defined in terms of race and ethnicity, remains at the forefront of a number of public policy agendas. Legal and legislative initiatives continue to challenge the use of race as a factor in college admissions processes, which threatens not only how much diversity can and will exist on college campuses, but may also politicize campus race discussions. Although eliminating the use of race in admissions can have immediate, obvious consequences in terms of access and equity, what is not immediately apparent is the effect that these changes will have on the experiences and outcomes of enrolled students. Based on many research studies over the years, it is believed that as the nature of the peer environment changes, so do the experience and outcomes we would expect to see in individual students. Influences that reshape the nature of the students enrolled on any particular campus are also likely to strongly reshape the nature of student experiences.

It is imperative to understand how diversity plays a role in student learning for a number of reasons beside the important issues of access and equity. For example, corporate leaders have reinforced the learning mission surrounding diversity by confirming that the business community is looking to colleges and universities to produce highly valued cognitive and social skills in the educated workforce, including: Ability to work effectively in groups with colleagues of diverse backgrounds, openness to new ideas and perspectives, and empathy with other workers' perspectives (Bikson and Law, 1994). These are qualities that higher education institutions are best equipped to create and nurture, if they are diverse.

That colleges and universities have an obligation to choose carefully the kind of student body that will create the best learning environment for all their students is fundamental to achieving these goals. The vitality, stimulation, and educational potential of a college is, quite obviously, directly related to the makeup of its student body, and diversity is a critically important factor in creating the richly varied educational experience that helps students learn and prepares them for participation in a democracy that is characterized by diversity. Several studies show student interaction with racially diverse peers is associated with increases in cultural

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