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A Qualitative Investigation of White Students' Perceptions of Diversity

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Diversity is used in countless vision statements of institutions of higher learning. Yet, it is critical to examine how students understand the concept and conceptualize their personal involvement. Given that the current population of college students is predominantly White, it is important to examine this population. The current sample consisted of 151 self-identified White college students (61 men and 90 women) from a predominantly White, residential, liberal arts college. Responses to 2 open-ended questions—"In your own words, express how you would define the term *diversity*?" and "How do Whites fit into your definition of diversity?"—were analyzed in Atlas.ti 5.0 using an open coding method. *Race* was the most common definition of diversity (61%). A smaller number of students conceptualized diversity as involving interaction across differences (41.7%). The majority of the respondents (80%) felt Whites have a role in diversity, but the nature of that role varied. Findings suggest that it is helpful to have clear institutional definitions of diversity to provide multiple entry points and increase the likelihood that White students will engage in campus diversity initiatives.

Keywords: diversity, college students, campus climate, Whites, higher education

As the demographics of American society change, the make-up of students within institutions of higher learning is also shifting. For example, it is projected that the population of non-Hispanic White Americans will shift from 69% to approximately 50% by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004) and that currently in higher education nearly one third of the student body comprises students of color (Clayton-Pedersen, Parker, Smith, Moreno, & Teraguchi, 2007). However, currently White students remain the predominant group in higher education. Therefore, even as racial diversity increases and must be addressed by our institutions of higher learning, it is also important to grasp how White students understand and take part in this shift.

Diversity is a term used in countless vision statements of institutions of higher learning. Yet, considering that many students, White students in particular, come to college lacking the ability to analyze and evaluate multiple perspectives and hailing from homogeneous communities that provide limited opportunities for interacting with individuals from different backgrounds (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004), students entering college might lack the experience needed to engage in these diverse environments. The concept has come to the forefront of the academy partly because of the Supreme Court cases and affirmative action challenges since the turn of the 21st century (e.g., *Grutter v. Bollinger* and *Gratz v. Bollinger*). As a consequence, the need to document benefits and correlates of a diverse student body has become more urgent. As a part of this evaluative process, however, it has become increasingly clear that adopting a shared definition of diversity is essential, but comes with challenges.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (2005) defines diversity as the following:

> Individual differences (e.g., personality, learning styles, and life experiences) and group/social differences (e.g., race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, and ability as well as cultural, political, religious, or other affiliations) that can be engaged in the service of learning.

This definition incorporates multiple aspects of identity, which can have implications for the scope of campus efforts. Furthermore, the Association of American Colleges and Universi-

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ties initiated a series of publications outlining the process of making excellence inclusive, which involves fully embedding diversity and quality education into the core of an institution (Bauman, Bustillos, Bensimon, Brown, & Bartee, 2005; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005; Williams, Berger, & McClenden, 2005).

Inclusive excellence consists of these four elements: (a) access and equity, which involve the numbers and success of historically underrepresented students, faculty, and staff; (b) diversity in the formal and informal curriculum, which refers to diversity content across academic programs and in social dimensions of campus; (c) campus climate, which aims for a supportive environment for all students to develop; and (d) student learning and development, which include the acquisition of knowledge about diverse groups and the development of cognitive complexity (Williams et al., 2005). This framework involves recruiting and admissions efforts, and it also proposes organizational change with measurable outcomes beyond a "critical mass" or isolated programming. Inclusive excellence involves infusing diversity efforts into the core of an educational mission, and also applies to all members of a campus community rather than targeting only underrepresented groups.

Research demonstrates that a diverse educational environment has positive impacts on student learning, critical thinking, civic engagement, and attitudes toward racial issues (Antonio, 2001; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Gurin et al., 2004; Muthuswamy, Levine, & Gazel, 2006). In particular, White students' participation in diversity-related activities leads to greater openness to and appreciation of diversity and increased awareness of racial privilege (Hurtado, 2005; Lopez, 2004; Spanierman, Neville, Liao, Hammer, & Wang, 2008; Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, & Hart, 2008). Taken together, this research speaks to the direct and indirect ways in which diversity influences the lives of college students. Engagement in diversity can help White students to assess more accurately the dynamics on their campus. It can also have an impact on cognitive variables that reach beyond the student to benefit the whole campus.

A diverse campus is especially advantageous for White students at residential institutions who hail from homogeneous environments. The residential component increases the importance of shared meaning and the potential for intergroup interactions. Because White students often feel left out of diversity initiatives (Quaye, 2008), examining how they understand diversity may allow us to engage them more effectively in diversity-focused programs.

Method

Data collected were part of a larger study on White racial identity including demographic information, feminist identity, and racial socialization. Participants were recruited through the university's general psychology research experience program, and they received one research credit for their participation.

The residential liberal arts college is located in the Midwest, enrolls approximately 2,100 students, and has a population comprising 80% White students. The institution, recently conducted a strategic plan identifying diversity as a major component. The definition provided in the plan cites attaining a critical mass from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups and ensuring an inclusive campus climate as main goals.

Participants

The current sample consisted of 151 self-identified White college students (61 men and 90 women) with an average age of 19 years. The majority of respondents were underclass students (first years, 50%; sophomores, 33%). Most of the students were not looking for diversity in their college experience, had not taken courses that focused on race or racism, and had not attended campus events that addressed issues of race. Furthermore, most students' previous experiences were within predominantly White domains (e.g., high school, neighborhood, and social network).

Data Reduction

Of interest in this study were two open-ended questions: "In your own words, express how you would define the term *diversity*?" and "How do Whites fit into your definition of diversity?" Previous research has highlighted the importance of focusing on a small number of ques-

tions to allow for a focused analysis on a specific topic (Hammond & Mattis, 2005).

Qualitative responses to the questions were analyzed in Atlas.ti 5.0 using an open coding method, which begins with no a priori categories. Two research assistants, one White woman and one African American woman, aided in developing the coding scheme by extracting words and phrases as units of meaning. The scheme included both descriptive codes, which provided descriptive observations of response content, and pattern codes, which provided metalevel and conceptual understanding of responses. Subsequently, themes were refined and representative quotes were chosen. A group of three research assistants (one White woman, one African American woman, and one Asian American woman), only one of which was part of the initial group, then independently coded the responses in Atlas.ti 5.0 on the basis of the coding scheme. An acceptable level of agreement, 91%, was reached with the second round of coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A list and explanation of codes can be found in Table 1.

Results

Definitions of Diversity

Descriptive codes. Analyses revealed four descriptive codes for the definition of diversity. Participants' definitions included the explicit discussion of (a) race, (b) ethnicity, (c) culture, or (d) some type of difference beyond these three concepts. Defining diversity in terms of different races (e.g., Black, White, and Asian American) was represented by 61.6% of the respondents. Some students mentioned only race: "many different groups of races together," "people of different races in the same area"; others included race as a part of their definition: "Diversity applies to races, customs, cultures, viewpoints and many other things. It is not just about race, although race is a factor."

Ethnicity (e.g., Irish, German) was endorsed by 24.5% of the respondents. A small number of responses mentioned ethnicity only in the definition: "a mixture of different ethnic groups." Whereas the majority of responses either seemed to use ethnicity interchangeably with race (e.g., "Diversity is all types of people from different races/ethnic groups") or combined ethnicity with another aspect of diversity: "people from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds."

Forty-one percent of respondents defined diversity in terms of culture, belief systems, or traditions. A number of respondents used the term *culture* explicitly, for example, "interacting with other cultures." Other respondents spoke more broadly, making mention of beliefs, values, and traditions: "people from different backgrounds with different beliefs and traditions"; "groups of people with different values, beliefs, histories, cultures, and so forth"; and "people with different ideas, attitudes, upbringings, and views."

The fourth descriptive code for this question included responses that went beyond race, eth-

Table 1
Frequency of Endorsement of Categories for Diversity Meaning (N = 154)

Category	Definition	%	*n*
1. Race	References to race as part of definition	61.6	93
2. Ethnicity	References to ethnicity as part of definition	24.5	37
3. Culture	References to culture as part of definition	41.1	62
4. Beyond race, ethnicity, & culture	References to a construct outside of race, ethnicity, or culture as part of definition	47.0	71
5. Interacting	References to groups interacting, connecting, reaching across, understanding	41.7	63
6. Irritation	References to feelings of irritation toward an assumption that diversity is all about race	13.2	20
7. Whites have a role	References to Whites having any part in diversity	80.0	122
8. Whites play a part	References to Whites having some role in diversity that is participatory	59.6	90
9. Whites not a part	References to Whites having no role in diversity	13.2	20
10. Whites are majority	References to Whites playing a role in diversity as the majority	11.9	18
11. Diversity among Whites	References to there being diversity among Whites	33.1	50

Note. Words and phrases were considered units of meaning; therefore, participants could endorse more than one category.

nicity, and culture (47%). These responses are grouped together because specific references did not account for a large proportion of the data. Specific mentions of gender (9.3%), socioeconomic status (7.9%), religion (7.3%), and sexual orientation (4.6%) were overshadowed by the remainder of responses, which referenced "differences" or "backgrounds" more generally. Representative examples include, "Diversity not only encompasses color, but also cultural, geographical, and socioeconomic differences. It also includes differences in gender, upbringing, and sexual orientation. It is essentially people who are in some way different from you." Many responses included in this code mentioned differences in a vague sense: "a grouping of things that differ in some degree from one another."

Pattern codes. Analyses revealed two pattern codes for the definition of diversity. On a conceptual level, responses including a reference to interaction or connections across lines of difference were given a specific pattern code endorsed by 41.7% of respondents. The essence of these responses is captured in the following representative quotes: "having a lot of different races/ethnicities and even more if they interact," and "integrated races/cultures in everyday situations." One response specified understanding as an aspect of diversity: "Diversity means trying to understand people of different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds and being 'exposed' to them." Another participant specifically defined the quality of interaction: "people of various races including Whites interacting positively with each other."

Another pattern code, which seemed to span both questions, was a sense of irritation with the assumption that diversity be defined as solely race (13.2%). Respondents who endorsed this category asserted that "Diversity isn't just the color of your skin, it's anything different: gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background, religion, and so forth—it's everything!" Others were brief yet clear: "Race is not in my definition of diversity." A number of students sought to explain their perspective further: "Diversity isn't just or even mostly a matter of race. It's a matter of culture and individuality, what makes each person different, not just large groups of people."

Whites' Role in Diversity

Descriptive code. Descriptively, most participants stated that Whites fit into the definition of diversity in some way (80.0%). Although this code provides a basic level of description, the following pattern codes provide more conceptual understanding of the content within these responses.

Pattern codes. Further analysis revealed pattern codes describing the nature of the role of Whites as (a) a part (59.6%), (b) not a part (13.2%), or (c) the majority (11.9%). Most of respondents felt that Whites fit into diversity by being part of the process (59.6%). Some respondents simply stated that "They are one part; each culture has a part" or "Whites should be a part of diversity but not dominate it." One respondent seemed concerned that Whites might not be included in the concept: "They belong. Just because they are in the majority doesn't mean they should be excluded when talking diversity." Overall, the general consensus was that Whites "are part of humanity, so they should be part of diversity" and "are essential in a group that is 'diverse,' as are all other races/cultures." One particular student reflected, "We are just one part of many, but sometimes I feel we are the most reluctant to become part of a diverse group or society, which is unfortunate because we are hindering the future of upcoming generations."

A smaller number of respondents felt that either Whites do not fit into the definition (13.2%) or conversely play a major role (11.9%). One student felt that Whites "are excluded by society," and another felt that "They are not diverse, so they take away from it in a way." Another stated the following: "We don't create it. Minorities do. We're the majority, so we don't bring diversity." Other students simply stated that Whites are the "majority of the population" and "usually the race that dominates the other races." One student explicitly stated that Whites should play a major role in diversity: "They obviously make up a large majority of America and there is much that minorities can learn from us."

Another pattern code emerged that involved a sense of defensiveness, a need to address any assumption that Whites are homogeneous. One third of respondents expressed that there is diversity among Whites as well. Because this

theme emerged beyond the scope of any specific question and speaks to an overarching dynamic, it is included here as a pattern code. Some of the respondents were literal in explaining that although Whites can be seen as a group, they can also be heterogeneous: "They are one unit, but can be divided into smaller subunits just as any other race can." Others spoke of ancestry as a source of difference: "Whites have many of their own cultures, stemming from our ancestry in Europe" and "There are many different kinds of Whites, that is, Polish, Greek, Italian, and so forth. I think more people have to recognize that."

Discussion

The current study found that participants defined diversity mostly as race, which reflects the definition adopted by the institution. It should be noted that in practice the study institution attempts to enact a broad and inclusive definition, yet in its strategic plan, it has adopted the traditional diversity equals race conceptualization rather than the more current theory of inclusive excellence. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the majority of responses defined diversity as race, with only a handful of responses explicitly mentioning other types of diversity. It is also interesting to note the use of terminology within the responses. Some respondents used *culture* and *race* or *race* and *ethnicity* interchangeably as if they had the same meaning, whereas others made a clear distinction and mentioned only one term in their response. This overlap in terms is commonly seen in diversity efforts (Williams et al., 2005) and can confuse attempts to engage in dialogue and make progress.

The emergence of irritation with the assumption that diversity is solely equated with race and the defensiveness that Whites might be seen as monolithic speaks to an important contradiction. On the one hand, these students seem to desire a broader definition of diversity than what has been put forth by their institution; on the other hand, when given the option to freely define the term, they overwhelmingly provide a limited definition. This dynamic might speak to the influence of institutional definitions in guiding discussions and the importance of providing a broad and inclusive one. It could also speak to the larger developmental process of racial identity given that Whites often resist being grouped and prefer claiming their status as unique individuals (Tatum, 1994).

Another observation is the distinction between the mention of groups working together rather than merely coexisting in the same area. Given that cross-race interaction has been conceptualized as a key component of diversity (Gurin et al., 2002; Milem et al., 2005), it is promising that this theme emerged within the responses. However, it should be noted that fewer than half of the respondents explicitly mentioned interaction. This finding might be understood by the fact that the student population is 80% White, and the majority of students in the sample reported that previous schools and neighborhoods were also predominantly White. Therefore, students who do not have previous encounters with people from a variety of backgrounds might conceptualize diversity as simply representation or an increase in numerical diversity. That is one step and, in fact, the direction taken by the university in its diversity initiative. Therefore, the responses could be a function of lack of previous experience along with the influence of current institutional efforts.

Overall, the majority of respondents felt that Whites should play a part in diversity; it is interesting, however, that there were groups of respondents who felt that Whites played no part or dominate the process. Those who felt that Whites played no part seemed to come from the perspective that diversity strictly means people who are non-White. Because Whites do not fit into that description, they do not "bring" or contribute to diversity. This perspective seems indicative of students who have yet to develop a personal or historical understanding of race or who perhaps feel that race does not matter. Theory has suggested that early in the racial identity development process Whites have a naiveté about racial issues (Helms & Carter, 1990). In addition, qualitative accounts of White students who have yet to incorporate race into how they see themselves include their perception of themselves as the norm (Tatum, 1994). This mentality could contribute to a student feeling that Whites do not play a role in diversity.

These results speak to the importance of clarifying what is meant by *diversity* when an institution puts forth an initiative. As reflected by

these results, race is commonly understood to be part of diversity. The dynamics of race in American society are powerful and can, rightfully, dominate attention. Because race is a common focus, it is important to make other types of difference explicit. Creating a common language allows campus members to have productive conversations. Without this foundation, precious time might be spent discussing semantics that cloud shared understanding. Therefore, providing a clear definition of what constitutes diversity is necessary to effectively move forward. Furthermore, providing a broad definition, which conceptualizes multiple ways in which we might engage our differences, validates the experiences of individuals from various backgrounds and provides multiple entry points for involvement.

The concept of inclusive excellence suggests a multilayered process by which diversity can be infused into the institutional core. The Association of American Colleges and Universities has made information accessible that can serve as a foundation for campus work on an interactive Web site (http://www.diversityweb.org). For example, the use of an equity scorecard has been suggested as a method for keeping institutions accountable for equitable educational outcomes (Bauman et al., 2005; Williams et al., 2005). The process helps institutions to become aware of inequities on their campus and seek to interpret and act on the information in ways appropriate for their system. This tool is just one example of how to use resources that have proven effective for other institutions. The main goal is to have shared understanding for key stakeholders, thereby increasing their ability to convey the message to others and over time embed the initiative into all corners of the institution.

White students may not seek involvement in diversity efforts through their own initiative. In fact, previous research suggests that White students are unsure whether or how to enter the discussion (Quaye, 2008). Within the current study, the overlapping use of terms, a moderate mention of interaction, and evidence of defensiveness suggest that White students, on average, are not grasping the full meaning of diversity. Although limited in generalizability given the single site and the variability in open-ended responses, this study adds to our understanding of how White students conceptualize and see themselves in diversity. These results can inform college campuses seeking to foster interactions across lines of difference and developing a shared vision of diversity.

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