THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

African American Students' Attitudes and Beliefs about Ethnic and Racial Diversity at a Predominantly White Public University in the Mid-West

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Abstract:
Following an incident which involved gunshots and fighting at a private party in a Mid-Western city, where a predominantly white public university is located, several discussions were held at various fora on campus on the issue of race. During the discussions, many African American students complained that they were not being treated fairly at the university. The purpose of this study was to assess the cultural attitudes and climate at the Mid-Western University (abbreviated in this paper as MWU). The research question examined is: What are the attitudes and beliefs of African American students about racial and ethnic diversity at the Mid-Western University? the results of the study as reflected in the participants' answers is at best mixed, some students expressed a level of comfort with the climate, while others thought the university was not doing enough in terms of diversity. It's also clear from the responses that the campus climate is not compatible with the experiences of African American students and that in turn affected their perception. The study also offers opportunities for campus administrators to address the issues raised by the students as reflected in the recommendations of the authors.

Keywords: Campus climate, diversity, African American students, students of color

1.Introduction
Even though the number of diverse students has increased across universities/colleges in the United States, various studies have shown that historically underrepresented ethnic minorities continue to perceive the campus environment differently than their white counterparts (Ancis, Sedlacek & Mohr, 2000; Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Hurtado, 1994). Consequently, universities/colleges are increasingly involved in efforts to improve the campus climate and diversity on campus. Hence, the purpose of the current research is to extend previous studies that examined perceptions of campus climate by probing the attitudes and beliefs of African American students about racial and ethnic diversity at a MWU where no such study has been done previously.

2. Literature Review
Climate on a university campus is a term that is used to discuss how individuals and groups experience membership in the campus community. The term also encompasses the inclusivity dynamics of the institution and the degree to which various stake holders feel included or excluded in the environment. It also covers real and perceived realities of different groups, an idea which is ingrained in broader socio-historical context of differences defined in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability and a wide range of social identities (Pieterse, Carter, Evans & Walter 2010).

According to Hurtado, Carter & Kardia (1998), campus climate is shaped by four dimensions which is a result of educational programs and practices. The first of these dimensions is an institution's legacy of inclusion or exclusion of various racial/ethnic groups. Duster (1993) argues that, how a university or college reacted to the policy of desegregation in the past continues to influence the climate on a particular campus. For instance, where there was resistance to desegregation on a particular campus environment or community, policies, attitudes and behaviors that prevent interaction across racial and ethnic lines continue because of being ingrained in the culture of the segregated community. This is especially true in predominantly white institutions that had served a homogeneous population and would continue with the same policy of giving benefits to the same student group excluding and limiting access to non-white groups.

Additionally, diversity scholars have argued that historical legacy of exclusion can be changed if the university/college creates a supportive campus environment, by making diversity a central purpose of their educational commitment. They could do it by clearly explaining their past histories of exclusion and the insidious impact that it had on the institution and then articulating a vision for an inclusive future. This could be supplemented by a positive response to the admission of students of color through an enactment of policies that support the education of such students, commitment to affirmative action, promotion of minority specific programs and

paying attention to the psychological climate and inter-group relations on campus (Peterson, Blackburn & Gamson, 1978; Richardson & Skinner, 1991).

The second dimension which shapes campus climate is structural diversity or numerical and proportional representation of diverse groups. Increasing the racial/ethnic diversity of an institution is an important step in improving the campus climate, since campuses with high percentages of white students limit opportunities for interaction between and across cultural and ethnic groups. It also limits students learning experiences with diverse groups. Besides, an institutions' stance on increasing the representations of diverse racial/cultural groups communicates whether commitment to diversity is high on the institutions priority (Hurtado, 1990; Hurtado, Dey & Trevino, 1994). Nonetheless, increasing the number of racial/ethnic groups on campus is not without problems, since it can lead to resistance and conflict from the dominant group. And can also engender institutional changes that were not anticipated. One way in which campuses can reduce these tensions and conflicts is to create "student centered environments" whereby students feel that they are valued and that administrators and faculty are devoted to their development and success.

Another important way to increase diversity on campus is to increase the representation of people of color (the term is used in the paper to refer to students who are not white) by ensuring that access to college/university is available to everyone. This can be done by pursuing admissions and financial aid policies that do not discriminate against a particular group. For instance, some critics of college and graduate/professional admission policies and practices contend that it places too much emphasis on standardized test scores and yet the tests present significant problems for students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. They argue instead that emphasis should be placed on previous academic achievement at the high school or college level measured in terms of grade point averages ((Astin, 1985; Astin, Fuller & Green, 1978; Guanier, 1997).

It's worth noting that, although generally, state and federal financial aid policies have contributed immensely to the increment of diverse students enrollment in colleges/university, grants have facilitated more access for minority students while loans have promoted access for white applicants. It is thus essential that appropriate forms of financial aid be provided at the state, federal and institutional level if enrollment of diverse students is to increase. Research on financial aid and its influence on increasing diverse students on campus, found that student enrollment increased where campuses changed institutional aid policies by offering more grants, and working with state and federal policy makers for appropriate levels of funding which supports programs that are most helpful to students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds (Astin, 1982; Orfield, 1992; St. John, 1991b). In addition, in order for structural diversity as discussed to succeed, it should be supplemented by more "student centered" approaches to teaching and learning which values students and is committed to their development and success as well as the promotion of opportunities for them to communicate and interact across racial lines.

The third dimension is psychological, and it involves individual views of group relations, institutional responses to diversity, perceptions of discrimination or racial conflict and attitudes towards those that are from other racial/ethnic backgrounds than our own. According to Collins (1986), ethnically and racially diverse administrators, students and faculty tend to view the campus climate differently. In other words, who you are and where you are situated in the institution affects your experience and opinion of the institution. For instance, students of color are sensitive to different forms of prejudice and discrimination, while white students were less likely to perceive color and shades of differences. Perceptual differences in college/university climate is also telling because it can potentially determine the future interaction and academic outcomes of different groups. Case in point, Smedley, Meyrs & Harrell (1993) found that student's perceptions of discrimination had a significant negative effect on African American students, since they felt that they were being treated differently and singled out in classrooms leading to a high sense of alienation and poor academic performance.

Campus leaders can strengthen the psychological climate on campus by enacting programs designed to help the campus community to identify and confront stereotypes and myths they have about people who are different than them. Included in such programs should be formal processes of resolving conflicts or disputes involving members of the campus community. Universities should also ensure that minority student organizations and other student support services have enough staff and funds to serve students. Research also shows that students of color who are poorly socialized into the culture of academic departments due to faculty indifference, tend to have a negative perception of the institution which in turn affects their academic experiences (Nealy, 1996; Turner & Thompson, 1993). Institutions can resolve the problems by providing mentoring programs where students are matched with faculty who will support their academic work.

The fourth dimension is behavioural, and consists of actual reports of social interactions; interactions between and among individuals from different racial/ethnic backgrounds and the nature of intergroup relations on campus. Various studies have shown that the absence of interracial contact clearly influences student's views towards others, support for campus initiatives and educational outcomes. According to Globetti, Globetti, Brown & Smith (1993), white students who had very little social interaction with someone of a different background were less likely to hold positive attitudes towards multiculturalism on campus. On the other hand, white students who had socialized with someone from another race, and had discussed racial and ethnic issues with other students or attended a cultural activity were more likely to value the goal of promoting racial understanding. Universities should thus support ethnic identities and affiliations as well as encourage multi-racial contacts.

As discussed above, institutions can improve the behavioural dimensions of campus climate by articulating clearly to all members of the campus community, that inter-racial dialogue and interactions are valued. It should also avail students with opportunities for such interactions and contacts both within and outside the classrooms. Such contacts should occur in environments marked by cooperation and not competition (Allport, 1954).

Faculty can also contribute to positive inter racial interaction by including diversity as part of their course content and by encouraging cooperative learning. Institutions should also provide opportunities for faculty to interact with students outside classroom settings, for

instance faculty, can visit students in residential halls or even share meals with students in the dining halls on campus while they get to know more about each other. Cross racial interactions can also be enhanced through programs and activities organized by multicultural centers. It is therefore imperative that such centers are supported.

In doing all that is discussed above, universities ought to realize that increasing diversity within any organization is usually accompanied by increased levels of conflict. Nonetheless, conflicts should not be seen as a destabilizing force, Palmer (1987) argued that conflict is an essential component of meaningful communities which he calls "a capacity for relatedness within individuals, relatedness not only to people but to events in history, to nature, to world of ideas and yes, to things of the spirit "(p.24). Much as conflicts may be viewed as a threat to be avoided, it can also become a stimulus for creativity and community building if structures are provided to understand and resolve it. Such structures should also include processes that include opportunities to break down barriers that portrays diversity negatively on campus.

3. Methodology

The study used a survey which is a quantitative methodological approach. It was conducted during a two-month period in 2015. And it examined the attitudes and beliefs of African American students about racial and ethnic diversity at a MWU. Using a Likert-type scale, students reported their level of agreement with statements regarding the campus climate. The survey consisted of both closed and 5 open ended questions and it assessed students' perceptions and experiences both in and outside the classroom with faculty, staff, and other students. Questions were selected for inclusion in the present study from prior research that examined campus climate. It covered such areas as: racial and ethnic climate, general experiences, academic experiences, diversity on campus and community relations. The survey was administered anonymously on-line. Consent to participate was sought prior to participation through a consent form that was available as soon as the participant accessed the site to begin the survey. Once a participant agreed with the terms of the consent, s/he then proceeded to take the survey.Data from the quantitative closed ended questions were analyzed using frequencies and those from the 5 open ended questions were put into themes and then coded and then categorized. The quotes that were selected for inclusion in this study are representative of a particular category

3.1. Participants

Participants were selected from three sessions of a cultural studies class (the three sections consisted of n= 122 students) based on information provided by various African American student's organizations and the office of minority affairs. Emails were sent to participants informing them about the study with a request to participate. Participants who responded to the survey questions were n= 104 out of n= 122 students (response rate was 94%). The sample was made of students in the following racial ethnic groups: African Americans (94), Caucasian (2), Hispanic or Latino (1), Multiracial (4), Native American/African American (1)and (1) whose ethnicity was not identified.

4. Results

4.1. Racial & Ethnic Climate

Measures of Diversity-related engagement (Total sample size n = 88) Participants answered "agree" or "strongly agree" to the following measures:	N	%
Experiences lead them to become understanding of racial/ethnic differences	40	45.0
Getting to know people with different racial/ethnic backgrounds had been easy	45	51.2
Do not feel pressure to minimize various characteristics of racial/ethnic culture	52	61.2
Experiences have strengthened their own sense of ethnic identity	49	56.9
Social interactions confined to students of their race/ethnicity	39	44.2
Felt expectations about academic performance because of race/ethnicity	41	47.8

Table 1

On racial and ethnic climate, n= 88 participants out of n= 104 responded, yielding an 85% response rate. The survey asked students about the racial and ethnic climate at the university, and presented situations assessing their level of comfort. Measures of diversity-related engagement asked about interactions with peers from different backgrounds or social identities, such as socializing together, expectations about academic performances based on race/ethnicity, pressure to participate in ethnic activities, the need to minimize various characteristics of race/ethnic culture and one's own sense of ethnic identity.

On measures of diversity related engagement, survey participants reported quite extensive engagement in diverse interactions of a positive nature, n= 40 participants either agreed or strongly agreed that their experiences since coming to the university had led them to become understanding of racial/ethnic differences. N= 45 participants, noted that getting to know people with different racial/ethnic backgrounds. N=52 did not feel the need to minimize various characteristics of their racial/ethnic culture. Indeed, n= 49 highlighted that their experiences since coming to the university strengthened their own sense of ethnic identity. However, it is also important to note that n= 39 participants stated that their social interactions were largely confined to students of their race/ethnicity. And n= 41 also stated that they felt there were expectations about their academic performance because of their race/ethnicity.

Measures of Comfort in Presented Situations	N	%
(Total sample size n = 88)		
Participants answered "comfortable" or "very comfortable" to the following measures:		
Going to see a faculty of their own race/ethnicity	59	67.0
Going to see a faculty of a different race/ethnicity	60	68.2
Participating in class	57	65.1
Being with people in social situations with same racial/ethnic background	65	73.6
Being with people in social situations with different racial/ethnic background	53	59.7
Speak with others about racial/ethnic backgrounds	57	64.4
Say what they think about racial/ethnic issues	53	59.8
Being the only person of their racial/ethnic group	40	45.9

Table 2

On measures of comfort, participants reported fairly high levels of comfort in presented situations. N= 59 felt "comfortable" or "very comfortable" going to see a faculty of their own race/ethnicity. While n= 60 participants felt the same about going to see a faculty member of a different race/ethnicity than their own. n= 57 were also "comfortable" or "very comfortable" participating in class. In social situations, n= 65 felt comfortable being with people whose racial/ethnic background were the same as their own, while n= 53 indicated they would be comfortable with those of a different racial/ethnic background. N=57 would speak with others about their racial/ethnic background, while n= 53 would say what they think about racial/ethnic issues. Nonetheless, n= 40 participants would feel comfortable being in a situation where they are the only person of their racial/ethnic group.

The result of this study compares with Globettis' (1993) study, which found that the absence of interracial contact influences students' attitudes towards each other. With those interacting with someone of a different background having a positive attitude towards multiculturalism while those that didn't having a negative attitude. It is thus imperative that institutions support ethnic identities and encourage multiracial contacts.

4.2. General Experiences

Measures of General Experiences	N	%
(Total sample size n = 76)		
Participants answered "agree" or "strongly agree" to the following measures:		
Felt the university provides an environment for free and open expression	33	43.4
Felt their educational experience has been rewarding	41	54.0
Felt they belonged in campus community	23	30.3
Felt the atmosphere in classes made them feel like they belonged	36	47.4
Would recommend the university to siblings or friends	32	42.5
Felt some racial tension	30	42.7
Felt racial/ethnic separation on campus	33	39.5
Felt the university was committed to the success of different racial/ethnic groups	27	35.6
Felt little or interracial tensions in residence halls	24	31.5
Felt little or no interracial tensions in the classroom	31	41.3

Table 3

N= 76 participants answered questions on general experiences at the university. N= 33 participants felt that the university provided an environment for the free and open expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs. The respondents were also very tepid in their assessment of the campus climate. N= 41 believed that their educational experience had been a rewarding one and n= 23 felt as though they belonged in the campus community. N= 36 indicated that the atmosphere in their classes made them feel like they belonged. N=32, indicated they would recommend the university to siblings or friends as a good place to go to college. N= 32, had neutral responses, they felt indifferent on the question of whether they felt like they belonged to the campus community.

N= 30 indicated that they felt some racial tension on campus, while n= 33 believed that there was a great deal of racial/ethnic separation on campus. Participants also overwhelmingly indicated a high level of respect by faculty and students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds. N= 27 respondents reported that they felt the university was committed to the success of students of different racial/ethnic groups. Whilst n= 24 indicated little or no interracial tensions in the residence halls, and n= 31reported little or no interracial tensions in the classroom.

The study results, compares with Collins (1986) study which found that campus climate is viewed differently by different people/stakeholders depending on who you are and where you are situated in the institution, and that in turn affects your experiences and opinion. His findings were also supported by Cabrera & Nora's (1994) research, which found that students of color were more sensitive to various forms of prejudices. And there were variations within groups depending on backgrounds and experiences; and sense of ethnic identity. However, the same could not be said of white students who were generally less likely to perceive differences in skin color.

4.3. Academic Experiences

Measures of Academic Experiences (Total sample size n = 66) Participants answered "agree" or "strongly agree" to the following measures:	N	%
Felt exposure to information about history, culture and//or social issues of non-white groups	26	39.4
Felt exposure in activities and programs in residence halls	13	19.7
Felt exposure in other university programs or activities	26	34.2
Felt exposure in information interactions and conversations with friends	15	22.3
Felt faculty were approachable outside the classroom	24	36.4
Felt faculty were fair to all students	26	39.0
Felt equal participation in classroom discussion and learning	32	48.5
Did not feel ignored by professors	26	39.4
Felt expectation to represent their race or ethnic group in discussions	33	50.0
Felt faculty use culturally-appropriate examples	23	34.8
Felt no exposure to racist environment created by faculty inside or outside classroom	40	56.5
Felt some exposure to racist environment outside the classroom	22	33.3

Table 4

On the issue of general academic experiences, n= 66 participants responded. With regard to the question about exposure to information about the history, culture and/or social issues of racial and ethnic groups other than whites, n= 26 felt this exposure in course-readings, lectures and discussions. N= 13 reported this exposure in activities and programs in residence halls, while n= 26 reported "quite a bit" or "a great deal" of exposure in other university programs or activities. N= 15 reported this same exposure in informal interactions and conversations with friends.

N= 24 respondents reported that most faculty were approachable outside of the classroom, while n= 26 noted that most faculty were fair to all students, regardless of their racial/ethnic backgrounds. N= 32 indicated that they felt students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds participated equally in classroom discussion and learning, and n= 26 reported that they did not feel that professors ignored their comments or questions. However, n= 33 participants "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that they are expected to represent their race or ethnic group in class discussions, whilst n= 23 thought that their faculty use culturally-relevant examples in their lectures. On the question of whether they had difficulty getting help from faculty, students and/or graduate assistants, n= 40 respondents reported never being exposed to a racist atmosphere created by faculty in the classroom or outside the classroom. N= 22 respondents indicated that they were exposed to such atmosphere outside the classroom.

4.4. Diversity Efforts

Measures of Diversity Efforts (Total sample size n = 60) Participants answered "agree" or "strongly agree" to the following measures:	N	%
Felt university was doing too little on diversity efforts	35	58.0
Felt university should have a graduation requirement on race and ethnicity	38	63.3
Felt university should make special efforts to recruit diverse students and faculty	48	80.0
Heard about the university's diversity initiatives	24	34.0
Attended or participated in some kind of diversity-related initiative	32	53.0
Participants answered "neutral" to the following measures:		
Felt university was doing a good job of providing programs and activities	22	36.6
Felt students are resentful of others whose race/ethnicity are different	29	48.3
Felt university does not promote respect for diversity	21	35

Table 5

N= 60 participants responded to the question on diversity efforts. When asked about what the university was doing to improve relations and understanding between people of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, n= 35 answered that they thought the university was doing too little. Furthermore, n= 22 strongly disagreed that diversity at the university was one of the reasons they chose to attend it. N= 38 agreed or strongly agreed that the university should have a requirement for graduation that students take at least one course on the role of ethnicity and race in society. N= 22 participants indicated a neutral stance that the university was doing a good job of providing programs and activities that promote multicultural understanding. Nonetheless, n= 29 participants indicated that some students were resentful of others whose race/ethnicity is different from their own and n=21 participants indicated that the university did not promote respect for diversity.

N= 48survey respondents overwhelmingly indicated that the university should make special efforts to recruit students and faculty from diverse racial/ethnic groups. With regard to diversity awareness on campus, only n=24 respondents indicated they heard about the university's diversity initiatives, although approximately n= 32 had attended or participated in some kind of diversity-related initiative on campus during the course of the year.

The open-ended question on what the university could do differently to improve campus climate had a particularly resounding theme, that of hiring more ethnic faculty.

"Hire more ethnic faculty members. It's not that difficult, according to a 2013 study, African-Americans are more likely to be in the education field than any other."[1]

"I think that [the university] should intentionally create mixed environments when it comes to the resident halls. It is not okay for major of [residence hall] to be filled with African Americans. In addition to creating diverse environments, the faculty breakdown should mirror the population of the student body."[2]

"Hire more African American faculty (professors)"[3]

4.5. Community Relations

Measures of Community Relations (Total sample size n = 54) Participants answered "agree" or "strongly agree" to the following measures:	N	%
Called names, insulted or verbally assaulted in the local community	29	52.8
Subjected to hostile stares	35	64.2
Followed or stopped by law enforcement	20	37.7
Followed or stopped by store personnel or store security	21	39.6
Racism is a problem in the local community	18	34.0

Table 6

N= 54 participants responded to the question on relations with the local community. Overall, the respondents did not report high levels of negative experiences, with the notable exception of insults and verbal assaults. On experiences students, have had, n= 29 reported being called names, insulted or verbally assaulted in the local community with n= 18 of these respondents being African American women. Additionally, n= 35 respondents reported being subjected to hostile stares, with n=24 also being African American women. And n=20 of all survey respondents indicated they had been followed or stopped by law enforcement while another n= 21 had been followed or stopped by store personnel or store security while shopping. Survey respondents were also asked about whether they had encountered offensive actions and objects directed at their race/ethnic background. N= 14 reported they had never encountered such behaviour. However, n= 18 strongly agreed that racism is a problem in the local community.

5. Discussion & Recommendations

The results of the study as reflected in the participants' answers are at best mixed, some students expressed a level of comfort with the climate, while others thought the university was not doing enough in terms of diversity. It is also clear from the responses that the campus climate is not compatible with the experiences of African American students and that in turn affected their perception. The study also offers opportunities for campus administrators to address the issues raised by the students as reflected in the recommendations of the authors.

From the survey results, we can see that survey respondents have learned to understand themselves better as a result of their college experiences and are more comfortable with their personal and racial identity, being able to connect with others to talk about ethnic/racial issues, regardless of background. However, it is disconcerting, to see that n= 39 respondents, restricted their social interactions to those of their own race/ethnicity. In addition, although survey respondents, reported havingfair interactions with faculty and to have obtained adequate support in the classroom, some reported having unpleasant experiences because of their race. For instance, n= 33 felt there were some kind of expectation about their academic experiences based on their race/ethnicity, in addition to feeling that they were expected to contribute to discussions about their race/ethnicity. And n= 25 respondents felt that their courses incorporated culturally relevant examples while n= 20 felt that the university provided culturally relevant programming and activities in general.

Survey respondents' perception of an inclusive environment and openness to issues of diversity at MWU, is minimal at best. Only n= 20 survey respondents considered their educational experience to be a rewarding one, and n= 60 indicated that they thought the university was doing too little in terms of addressing diversity. However, it is interesting to note that n= 20 of survey respondents had not heard of the campus' diversity initiatives, and yet n= 32 had attended some kind of diversity event within the last year. Meanwhile, the survey respondents strongly encouraged the recruitment and retention of more faculty of color. Finally, the results from the questions on community relations highlights a disturbing trend: that the survey respondents are more likely to perceive the local community as either hostile or alienating, and are as such, unwilling to interact.

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[1]Quotes from survey respondents.

2 Quote from survey respondent

3 Quote from survey respondent

In several questions throughout the survey, the authors noted a statistically large number of survey respondents that indicated neutrality on items. One must wonder whether this large neutral response is an indicator of true student feeling on the matter, which is: is the institution doing an unequivocally excellent job at providing a safe and inclusive environment? Or just enough to warrant a tepid response. Further research is recommended to understand the true intent.

Based on these survey results, the following are a list of recommendations for the university:

1. Increase efforts in recruiting and retaining faculty and staff of color and the university should provide personnel with diversity, equity, and access training and hold personnel accountable for applying the training to their work.

2. Highlight diversity initiatives and programming since there is an apparent disconnect between students and the university on diversity programming. In addition, the university must be seen as supportive of diversity and inclusion, and enthusiastically supportive of programs that celebrate culture and history throughout the academic year. Even more important is the need to evaluate the values of the institution, to ask candidly what the institution aspires to in terms of providing an inclusive environment.

3. Promote academic success for African Americans, Quaye, Tambascia & Talesh (2009) highlight several methods for promoting academic success, such as incorporating culturally relevant material and perspectives across the curriculum, and providing supportive mentors.

4. Interactions with the local community, the university must assess African American students' perceptions of the local community and levels of engagement. Delgado & Stefancic (2001) discuss the importance of marginalized groups' ability to share stories about micro aggressions that occur on and off campus. The university must be seen as responsive to the emotional toll these micro aggressions take on college students, and must play a significant role in building bridges with the local community.

5.

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