

Campus Climate and Its Impact on Student Satisfaction at a Minority-Serving University in the United States

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of college student perception of campus climate on educational satisfaction at a minority-serving institution in the United States. The research found that incidents of harassment and discrimination still happened at the target institution and such incidents hampered the quality of students' educational experiences. In short, student satisfaction was positively linked to feelings of well-being and a sense of welcoming, but it was negatively associated with feeling harassed, devalued and discriminated. Colleges and universities should create a warm, friendly and supportive learning environment for students to thrive in school and life.

KEYWORDS: Diversity, Asian American, Harassment, Discrimination

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1. Introduction. Colleges and universities are more diverse now than thirty years ago. Over 30% of college students are racial/ethnic minority students [1]. As a result, social interactions between students, faculty, and agents with different backgrounds happen on a daily basis. The mix of diverse perspectives on campus supposedly creates a richer learning environment. Moreover, when a campus becomes diverse, students are expected to become more accepting, tolerant, and thoughtful members of society. A university where individuals and groups can live, learn and work with members from different backgrounds and perspectives is said to have “a healthy campus climate” [2]. As today’s higher-education environment has become increasingly competitive, cultivating a learning environment that values diversity is viewed as an effective strategy to attract and retain students, scholars, educators, and employees [3]. Despite ongoing university campaigns designed to promote a warm and healthy campus climate, incidents of harassment and discrimination on college campuses create an intimidating, hostile, or offensive educational environment, which tarnishes the college experiences of students [4]. Previous research has found that negative campus climates, those in which students experience harassment and/or discrimination, hampered educational development and achievement [5]. Students in such campus climate were likely to be unsatisfied with their college experience [5]. As a result, understanding how students from different social backgrounds perceive the learning environment is pivotal to university administrators in designing an optimal environment that supports learning for all students in a diverse society.

The central purpose of this study was to examine the effects of student experiences on harassment and discrimination and their impact on student satisfaction. This research differed from previous research in a way that it assessed student perceptions of campus climate at an Asian American and Native American Pacific Island Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), a type of minority-serving institutions in the United States. Unlike predominantly White institutions where Caucasian students make up more than half of the student body, at least 10 percent of students attending AANAPISIs are Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders [6]. However, this research only focused on the college experience of Asian American because they have increasingly faced discrimination and the threat of violent hate crimes on campus in the U.S. The past year’s rise in anti-Asian hate crimes and discrimination made this research a topic of great interest after China was blamed for causing the Covid-19 pandemic. Examining the college experiences of Asian American students may provide useful information for addressing the current issues related to the challenges faced by Asian American college students who were previously excluded from conversations on campus climate in higher education. The following was the research question guiding this study:

- How did students’ experiences with harassment and discrimination affect their educational satisfaction?

2. Literature Review .In the U.S., many people perceive Asian Americans as the “model minority,” which means they excel at academics and put greater effort in everything they do [7]. What many do not know is that a variety of ethnic subgroups exists within the Asian American population. Some do well in school and at work, but many do not. Therefore, they should not be labeled as a singular group. Asian Americans also

face negative stereotypes, racism and discrimination like other racial minorities. Violent cases against them have been on a rise since the coronavirus epidemic broke out in Wuhan, China [8]. What about college campuses, a supposedly “safe and welcoming space” for all students? Did Asian Americans face harassment and discrimination?

Campus climate includes the quality and extent of the interaction between students, greater academic effort faculty and other college agents on a campus that influences whether an individual feels personally safe, valued, and treated fairly, and with respect [9]. Campus climate has a profound effect on the academic community’s ability in research and scholarship [9]. When a chilly campus climate exists, acts of discrimination usually take place [10]. Although college campuses are becoming more diverse than before, gender and racial discrimination are still prevalent on campuses. For example, faculty members often treat female students differently in the classroom. Male students’ aggressiveness especially takes place in female professors’ classes [11]. Similarly, in the classroom women (50%) rather than men (30%) experienced sex discrimination to the disadvantage of women [9]. Student-institutional fit models and transactional models distinguish discriminatory behavior from the maladaptive manners of minority students to college [12]. Campus climate affects students in many different ways. For example, discrimination hindered the social and academic environments of college students, while a deprived racial climate on campus had a negative impact on a sense of belonging of Caucasian students [13]. Perceptions of discrimination of freshman minority students harmed their persistence in college [13]. Harassment and discrimination may create an unfriendly educational environment [13]. Consequently, such an unwelcoming campus climate may lead to student dissatisfaction. This research hypothesized that students attending AANAPISIs who witnessed or experienced some form of harassment and/or discrimination on campus were likely to be unsatisfied with their college experience.

3. Methodology. This research was a cross-sectional study about college student satisfaction at an AANAPISI in the U.S. It provided a snapshot of college students’ experiences, which were useful in determining the effects of environmental variables (e.g., acts of discrimination and harassment on campus) on student satisfaction.

3.1 Sample & Instrument

The data were collected at the target AANAPISI, which was located on the West Coast of America. The survey asked students about their experiences on harassment and discrimination on college campuses. The participants were undergraduate students who were Caucasian (N=45) and Asian American (N=120). This yielded a total of 165 students with 92 females and 73 males.

3.2 Variables

The dependent variable was student satisfaction that was measured on a four-point Likert scale (Good = 4, Poor = 1). Six main independent variables were 1) whether or not students ever witnessed an

incident of gender harassment and/or discrimination (yes = 1, 0 = otherwise), 2) whether or not students themselves were harassed and/or discriminated based on their gender (yes = 1, 0 = otherwise), 3) whether or not students ever witnessed an incident of racial harassment and/or discrimination (yes = 1, 0 = otherwise), 4) whether or not students themselves were harassed and/or discriminated based on their race (yes = 1, 0 = otherwise), 5) student's perception of their safety on campus (Good = 4, Poor = 1) and 6) perceptions of feeling welcome to be part of a community (Good = 4, Poor = 1). Other independent variables were female (yes = 1, otherwise = 0) and Asian American (yes = 1, otherwise = 0).

3.3 Analysis

Statistical analysis included descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis. Ordinary least squares regression was used to examine this relationship and to identify significant predictors of educational satisfaction of students attending this institution. The standardized coefficients employ a 0.05 level of significance test.

4. Results. Although the target institution had a large number of American Asian and Pacific Islander students, descriptive statistics indicated that Caucasian students (Mean = 2.91) were more satisfied with campus climate than Asian American students (Mean = 2.84) (see Table 1). Perhaps, the target institution still had a small percentage of minority faculty. If Asian American students had more teachers/instructors of the same race, they would have been more satisfied with college experiences than they were. Men (Mean = 2.83) reported slightly lower levels of educational satisfaction than did women (Mean = 2.80) (see Table 1).

Overall, descriptive statistics showed that both Asian American and Caucasian students had observed/experienced incidents related to discrimination and harassment on campus. More specifically, about half of Asian American students had observed/experienced harassment, while about one-fourth of them had observed/experienced discrimination (see Table 2). Twenty-three out of 45 Caucasian students had observed/experienced discrimination, while 14 Caucasian students had observed/experienced discrimination.

Table 1. Means of Rating on Educational Experience by Ethnicity and Gender
 (1 = poor, 4 = excellent)

	Asian American (n=120)	Caucasian (n=45)	Women (n=45)	Men (n=45)
	M (S.D.)	M (S.D.)	M (S.D.)	M (S.D.)
How would you evaluate your educational experiences at the institution?	2.84 (.78)	2.91 (.76)	2.82 (.67)	2.80 (.75)

Table 2. Ratings of Satisfaction of Students Who Observed/Experienced Harassment and Discrimination, by Ethnicity and Gender

	Asian American		Caucasian	
	M (S.D.)	n	M (S.D.)	n
Have observed/experienced harassment	2.44 (.73)	61	2.54 (.66)	23
Have observed/experienced discrimination	2.35 (.56)	32	2.39 (.67)	14

Table 3: Effects of Harassment and Discrimination on Student Satisfaction

	Model 1 β (S.E.)	Model 2 β (S.E.)
Asian American	.025 (3.89)	.045 (1.79)
Female	.072 (3.35)	.057 (1.87)
Witnessed gender harassment and/or discrimination		-.138** (3.45)
Being harassed and/or discriminated based on gender		-.107* (3.86)
Witnessed racial harassment and/or discrimination		-.079 (2.86)

Being harassed and/or discriminated based on race		-.162** (1.61)
Perception of their safety on campus		.140 ** (4.43)
Perceptions of feeling welcome		.165** (2.53)
R-squared	0.049	.375

Notes: Caucasian and Male were reference groups. ** < .01, * < .05

In the first step of the regression analysis, gender and race were included in Model 1 (see Table 3). However, these two student background variables did not predict the level of student satisfaction. That is, they explained only 4.9% of the variance in student satisfaction, which was not statistically significant. Consequently, six additional variables related to campus climate were added to Model 1. The results in Model 2 indicated that the campus climate variables were highly predictive of student satisfaction. The entire model accounted for 37.5% of the variance in student satisfaction. The most significant variables in explaining student satisfaction were student's perception of their safety on campus ($\beta = .140$, $p < .01$) and perceptions of feeling welcome to be part of a community ($\beta = .165$, $p < .01$). The other predictors of student satisfaction were whether or not they had witnessed an incident of harassment and/or discrimination based on gender ($\beta = -.138$, $p < .01$), whether or not they themselves were harassed and/or discriminated based on gender ($\beta = -.107$, $p < .05$), and whether or not they themselves were harassed and/or discrimination based on their race ($\beta = -.162$, $p < .01$). To put it in words, student satisfaction was positively linked to their feelings of well-being and a sense of welcoming, but it was negatively associated with feeling harassed, devalued, and discriminated.

5. Conclusion. The empirical analyses revealed that incidents of harassment and discrimination still happened at the target AANAPISI and such incidents hampered the quality of students' educational experiences. Regardless of their race and gender, students who experienced and/or observed incidents of harassment/discrimination had a lower level of satisfaction than those who did not. Enhancing campus climate by abating discrimination and harassment is critical in consideration of the fact that student satisfaction is negatively affected by harassment and discrimination acts and incidents on campus. The findings give importance to value and encourage university administrators to create a learning environment that is free from gender/racial discrimination and harassment to reflect the ideals of tolerance and civil rights advocated throughout our democracy.

6. Limitations and Future Research. This research had a few limitations. First, the data used in this study were collected at one institution, so the results and conclusions cannot be generalized to other institutions. Second, the dependent variable used in this study was student satisfaction, which was just one of many student's subjective outcomes and experiences associated with education. Future research should look at how students' experiences with harassment and discrimination affect other student outcomes such as sense of belonging, self-concept, college GPAs, social integration, persistence and graduation.

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