

Chapter 4

Diversity and Inclusion in the Academy: A Classroom Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes how graduate students of color and lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) students define diversity and inclusion and describe their classroom experiences with diversity and inclusion. In semi-structured interviews with graduate students of color and students who self-identified as LGB, differing views of diversity and inclusion emerged—diversity was described numerically, while inclusion was discussed in terms of action. Further, graduate students of color described diversity based on visible signs of representation while LGB graduate students emphasized inclusion and the need for voice. This chapter concludes with recommendations that faculty members can enact to create more inclusive classroom environments in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The chapter is an outgrowth of 30 years of combined post-secondary teaching by the two chapter authors. In their teaching experiences, the authors perceived varying experiences for students of color and lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) students in their graduate classrooms. On the whole, students of color and LGB students participated less fully in discussions of course material and research when it related to race and sexual orientation. As classroom discussions are the foundation for exchange of ideas and deeper development of scholarly arguments, uncomfortable classroom discussions place students of color and LGB students at risk of achieving different outcomes from their classroom experiences when compared with their majority peers. The authors conducted a qualitative inquiry to examine this phenomenon from the students' perspective. One of the primary goals of this chapter was to discern whether and how the

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7438-5.ch004

definitions of diversity and inclusion vary between two underrepresented groups of graduate students. A second goal was to describe student perceptions of the classroom environment when topics of diversity and inclusion were discussed. At the end of the chapter, the authors provide recommendations for faculty members who strive to create inclusive classroom environments that encourage a deep exchange of ideas among diverse individuals.

BACKGROUND

Diverse campuses create opportunities, both inside and outside of the classroom, for experiences with students of different racial backgrounds, sexual orientations, and points of view. In this chapter, the authors focus on the experiences of two underrepresented groups—students of color and LGB students—in classroom learning environments. This qualitative inquiry describes how underrepresented students conceptualize diversity and inclusion and navigate their classroom experiences. Post-secondary institutions have committed to diversity and inclusion efforts including recruitment strategies for students and faculty members from diverse backgrounds, retention plans to keep students enrolled and moving toward graduation, and multicultural perspectives within the academic curriculum (Hu & Kuh, 2003). Student benefits of diverse learning environments are well documented in the literature with diverse learning environments leading to positive academic outcomes for students, including increased cognitive sophistication, critical thinking skills, academic development, and problem solving abilities (Antonio, 2001; Bowman, 2010; Cannaday & Swayze, 2017; Denson, 2009; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Hu & Kuh, 2003; Pascarella, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2014; Swayze, 2017; Terenzini, Cabrera, Colbeck, Bjorklund, & Parente, 2001). Additional positive outcomes for students include an increased level of cultural awareness and racial understanding, feelings of empowerment toward social change, discussions of racial and ethnic issues, and a willingness to utilize multiple perspectives (ACE/AAUP, 2000; Chang, 2002; Gurin et al., 2002; Mayhew et al., 2016). The studies have “overwhelmingly concluded that when diversity is actively attended to, a diverse campus will lead to increased educational and social outcomes for all students” (Pitt & Packard, 2012, p. 295).

Curricula that includes multicultural perspectives, or diversity, contributes to students’ racial and cultural awareness and positive perceptions of classroom climate (Chang, 2002; Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Hogan & Mallott, 2005; Nelson Laird, 2011; Pitt & Packard, 2012; Tienda, 2013). As Pitt and Packard (2012) state, “The college classroom offers an ideal setting to activate this diversity, that is, to make these differences salient in meaningful and observable ways. Understanding if and, ultimately, how diversity manifests itself in the classroom becomes a necessary step in fully making sense of the link between diversity and learning on college campuses” (p. 296). Pitt and Packard (2012) found that contributions to course discussions significantly differed between White and African American students, with White students contributing more to classroom discussions than their African American peers. Hogan and Mallott (2005) examined students’ attitudes toward sexual orientation and race after taking a diversity course and found that students who participated in the diversity course had lower levels of prejudice as compared to those who did not participate in the course.

Self-disclosure of racial or sexual orientation identities influences how students engage in classroom diversity discussions (Berila, 2016; Helms & Cook, 2011; Vaccaro, August, & Kennedy, 2012). While some students may choose to disclose their identity after “carefully assessing their environment, checking in with themselves about their own sense of safety, and determining their actions accordingly” (Berila,

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