

Bemidji State University
Student Campus Climate Study
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

We conceptualized this study during the 2011-2012 academic year based on anecdotal information shared by students about their experiences of campus climate at Bemidji State University. As scholars who examine human sexuality, gender, and racial/ethnic topics, we are aware of the various ways in which diversity presents itself on a college campus, how faculty, staff, and students encounter and engage each other, the extent to which diversity is incorporated into the curriculum, and the extent to which affirmative action and 1B.1 policies are part of university procedures. Yet the collective understandings and experiences of students on campus as they relate to diversity are not as easily discernible. In order to better understand student experiences of university support, civility, respect, discrimination, and communication we engaged in a year-long study using focus groups and a survey instrument to collect information on these elements. During fall 2012 eight focus groups were conducted with 30 students from organizations across campus, and during spring 2013 a survey was distributed to 607 students at Bemidji State University. The report presents the findings from this research and provides some suggestions for change that will help to enhance the campus climate at Bemidji State University. In this executive summary we have identified some of the key findings from our research.

Methods

The study consisted of two phases. Focus groups were used in phase one of this study to develop a better sense of how students understand campus climate and to identify the conceptual parameters that would be used in a survey of all students. Because we were interested in the climate for minority populations at Bemidji State University, purposive sampling was used. During fall semester 2012 student organizations were encouraged to participate, and students were recruited from selected classes. Eight focus group sessions were held with 30 total participants. A demographic questionnaire was distributed at each focus group session, and the facilitator provided a definition of campus climate. Students were asked eight open ended questions, and their responses were audio taped, transcribed and analyzed. The themes that emerged were used to help frame phase two survey questions.

In spring 2013, phase two of the study, the campus climate survey, was administered to students online via a campus-wide email. A total of 607 students (415 women, 184 men) completed the survey. Students reported on their perceptions and experiences by responding to 31 Likert-scale questions. The sample was predominantly White, non-GLBT, and Christian. Students in the sample reported to be largely from the middle class and many of them spend a significant amount of time working and volunteering outside of the classroom. Most of the students lived off-campus and considered themselves full-time students.

Findings –

Focus group participants frequently described the campus climate at Bemidji State University as a, “kind of mix” and “bi-polar” citing positive connections within groups and within particular locales and spaces, at the same time that negative interaction, attitudes, and structures present obstacles to creating an inclusive and welcoming social environment. Positive aspects of the climate included diversity in the curriculum and specific locations, students particularly noted the positive experiences associated with clubs, the AIRC, and athletic teams. In each case students expressed appreciation for the ability to establish connections, to find support systems, and to pull students together into community. The physical aspects of the university, the outdoor opportunities, as well as, “. . .having awesome teachers,” were cited by students across the focus group sessions as also helping to create a positive campus climate.

Students also described some of the key issues of concern within the university climate. These included the presence of intimidation/cliques; stereotypes, discrimination and tokenism; an informational vacuum; nonparticipation, justification, and disrespect; and physical environment.

- Intimidation/Cliques -There were numerous comments regarding the strong cliques that are present on campus among students at Bemidji State University and the difficulties of entering groups due to their boundaries and a sense of the closed nature of the group.
- Stereotypes, Discrimination, Tokenism - Smirks, innuendo, and direct racist comments, are frequently used and are not always directly addressed. Tokenism is also present as minority students are identified as the expert on a particular identified status.
- Informational Vacuum – Students noted that information is often not available, not accessible, or obtuse. Emblematic of these issues is the lack of directional guides on campus for informing students or visitors about how to locate buildings, offices, or information. In addition, there is not enough signage (web information, flyers, etc.) to inform about the significance of items – e.g., DARS, graduation requirements (overall), all performances/sports, activities, mascot, clubs/organizations.
- Nonparticipation, Justification, and Disrespect - Students noted a lack of engagement, at multiple levels, by students on campus (e.g., class attendance), and a sense that students are not enthusiastic about a BSU connection. Justifications for this lack of engagement involves the following descriptions, “If you come into class . . . and you just read through their stuff and they aren’t fun and entertaining and they aren’t involved with the class, people don’t really want to go to that.” Students also felt that disrespect permeated many aspects of the culture, between faculty and student, but also student to student, student to RA, etc. Examples include students not engaging in class, and an absence of normative behavior on sidewalks, in hallways, and at other campus locations.
- Physical Environment - While the overall physical environment is inviting, students spoke to the need to ensure better safety in specific campus locations. Tunnels are perceived to be dangerous, especially at particular times of the day. Respondents noted that some students hesitate to take the tunnels because they do not know who will be using them, or how to get assistance if there is a problem.

Survey responses tended to be in the direction of a positive climate – more welcoming than unwelcoming, more comfortable than uncomfortable, etc. However, on every question, responses ranged from the most positive (e.g., very welcoming, never experience stereotyping) to the most negative (e.g., very unwelcoming, experience stereotyping often). This suggests that while many students perceive a very positive, welcoming campus, a significant number of students perceive a negative, unwelcoming campus. When making comparisons between majority and minority groups, there were statistically significant differences on every question between students in the majority and those in the minority. There were differences based on sex, age, social class, religious affiliation, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation/gender identity. In each case, the difference consisted of students in the minority reporting a less welcoming campus and more negative experiences on campus.

Responses were most dependent on race/ethnicity and sexual orientation/gender identity, with students from the latter reporting the most negative perceptions and experiences. The average student seems to be aware of this, as the overall sample rated the campus as much less welcoming for GLBT students than students in other minority groups. However, GLBT students rated the campus as less welcoming for GLBT students than non-GLBT students did. Similarly, Students of Color rated the campus as less welcoming for Students of Color than White Students did. These findings indicate that in addition to a less welcoming campus perception by students in the minority, there is a lack of awareness of the potential struggles for some students by the students in the majority. Below is a summary of the differences found between groups:

- **Race/Ethnicity.** Students of Color reported feeling less welcome, less comfortable interacting with students outside of class, and experiencing more stereotyping, exclusion, discrimination in the classroom, and being singled out as an authority on their race/ethnicity.
- **Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity.** GLBT students reported feeling less welcome, respected, safe, comfortable, important and recognized. These students reported much more stereotyping, discrimination, negative/derogatory comments, and intimidating and hostile behavior. Negative experiences were reported both in the classroom and outside of the classroom, perpetrated by students, faculty and staff.
- **Sex.** There were fewer differences based on sex. These included women feeling less comfortable interacting with other students outside of the classroom and feeling their contributions are less recognized than men. On the other hand, men feel less safe expressing their gender and sexual orientation than women, and see other students at school as less helpful than women.
- **Social Class.** Students from both poor and wealthy backgrounds reported a less welcoming campus than those in the middle class.

The survey also asked students about access to people or information on campus. Students were neutral to slightly positive in their perceptions of the university providing information and communicating with the students. It is important to note that many students reported they did not know how to access services or information on campus (e.g., Information on internships,

scholarships, extended learning, student senate, student clubs and organizations, study abroad options). Results suggest students' preferred mode of communication for learning about campus services or events is email, followed by the myBSU Portal.

Overall Recommendations –

There is significant overlap between the survey findings associated with minority students and the comments of those students who participated in focus groups. In particular, concerns expressed suggest that BSU is perceived as less welcoming by Students of Color and GLBT students. In addition, women indicated that their contributions were not as recognized and that they felt less comfortable interacting in out-of-class environments. Finally, recommendations* from students point to particular areas where attention is needed.

- Resources – funding for programming, space (Diversity Center/Women's Center), and staff/administration
- Training for faculty, staff, administrators, students on diversity
- An enhancement of diversity on campus (e.g., curriculum)
- Better communication of all types on campus
- Assessment – ongoing assessment of campus climate/multicultural understanding
- Improving cultural experiences and performance opportunities on campus
- Enhancing the physical facilities and providing greater transportation options

The recommendations identified above encompass many aspects of university life, and suggest the need for a university wide approach to the remaining challenges associated with creating a positive campus climate for all members of the university community. We recommend that a task force be created to examine this data and to create action steps that reflect the recommendations contained in this report and in the Master Academic Plan's statements on diversity.

*For a complete list of recommendations please see recommendations from focus groups in the full report.