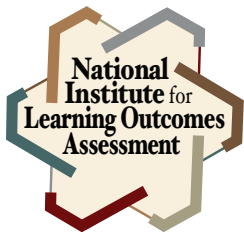


June 2020

Capital University: Campus Climate Assessment through Critical Race Theory

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[Capital University](#), founded in 1830 and chartered in 1850, is a private, liberal arts university located in Columbus, Ohio's capital. With over 3,300 undergraduate and graduate students, and offering 60 majors and 50 minors, Capital University operates through its [mission](#) of "transforming lives for a brighter world" and [vision](#) of "Purposeful People. Courageous Community. Hopeful Humanity."

In 2015, a broad group of faculty and staff began meeting to engage in discussions about diversity and inclusion at Capital University. A committee was formed and worked for over a year to build the framework for a Strategic Diversity and Inclusion plan. In the Fall of 2016, the plan was shared with the University and outlined six strategic goals or pillars: Climate, Recruitment and Retention, Educational Training, Community Building, Communication, and Education. Each pillar was defined with the goal of integrating diversity into the core operations of the institution. Key strategies were outlined to include action items, partners and measures.

As part of the plan, one of the recommendations was to assess the campus climate. For purposes of this assessment, we defined campus climate as "the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards of faculty, staff, administrators and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential" (Rankin & Reason, 2008, p. 264). As we did not have enough resources or personnel to undertake a full campus climate assessment, Mitsu Narui, in her role (at the time was Director of Assessment and Curricular Development), worked with two graduate students to pilot a campus climate study, and in particular one that focused on students of color, which we conducted in the Spring 2018 semester. We hosted semi-structured focus groups and individual interviews, and administered a survey via Qualtrics.

We approached the study with a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework. In utilizing this framework, we did not assume that the climate was already equitable for all students, but instead asked the following questions:

- What are the actual experiences of students of color?
- Do students of color have different experiences than White students?
- Are students' perceptions of diversity and inclusion different by race?

By reviewing the case study of a pilot campus climate study that we conducted, we hope that institutions will learn to use CRT to guide their work in creating more equitable assessment practices. We believe that this framework has implications, not only for any curricular but also co-curricular assessment.

Please Cite As:

Lynner, B., Ho, W., Narui, M., & Smith, J. (2020, July). *Capital University: Pilot campus climate assessment through critical race theory*. Urbana, IL: National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, and Campus Labs.

To note, CRT is comprised of the following five tenets: (1) permanence of racism, (2) counter-storytelling, (3) critique of liberalism, (4) interest conversion, and (5) Whiteness as property (Hiraldo, 2010). Each tenet was integral to the methodology of our campus climate study, and became apparent in our results. The following sections describe each tenet's connection to campus climate in more detail.

Methodology

The pilot campus climate study consisted of a mixed-method approach, utilizing a survey and interviews to assess students' perceptions of climate. This method of assessment allowed for us to gather both qualitative and quantitative data in determining student perceptions around issues of racial diversity and inclusion. We used CRT as a framework to create questions that centered the experiences of students of color in our methodology and overall assessment.

To recruit participants for our campus climate survey, we sent emails to campus partners as a form of convenience sampling. Campus partners disseminated the emails to their constituents. Thereafter, the 81 participants completed 35 survey questions, including open-ended responses, drop-down selection, and heat maps (where participants identified areas on campus where they felt included). Quantitative data was analyzed through one-way ANOVA tests.

Simultaneously, we conducted semi-structured focus groups and interviews. Overall, we completed three individual interviews and three focus groups, which totaled 20 participants in our qualitative data collection. To analyze the qualitative data, we utilized line-by-line codes to group the data into themes. We then utilized constant comparative method based on a categorical content approach to interpret the findings.

Permanence of Racism

What is it?

According to Bell (1992), "racism is a permanent component of American life" (p. 13). Within the CRT framework, "Permanence of Racism" suggests that racism governs our society politically, economically, and socially. For this reason, "Permanence of Racism" is at the root of our campus climate study. In our creation of the assessment, our assumption was that racism was present on campus; therefore, we asked questions from that standpoint. By centering "Permanence of Racism," we did not assume that the campus was free of racism. We also intended to validate narratives of students of color in their experiences with racism.

Moreover, "Permanence of Racism" pervaded our problem statement: "to understand how undergraduate students at Capital University perceive the campus climate, specifically related to racial diversity, inclusion, and equity." We understood that race relations are an inherent part of the collegiate experience, but also assumed that students' experiences would differ based on their collective social identities, to which their racial identity plays a significant part. We sought to investigate how undergraduate students at Capital University perceive racial diversity of the student body, interaction across difference, and both curricular and co-curricular environments.

Lastly, "Permanence of Racism" informed how we structured our questions to reflect the implications of racism on students of color. Some of the issues that we incorporated into questions surrounded safety, microaggressions, and inclusivity. As previously mentioned, we did not assume that the campus was

free from racism. Thus, instead of asking students of color, “Have you experienced microaggressions on campus?”, we asked, “How have you experienced microaggressions on campus?” Overall, such questions centered students’ experiences on campus and sought to acknowledge the existence of racism for students of color.

Results

In addition to influencing our approach to this assessment, “Permanence of Racism” was apparent in our survey results. Notably, participants of color highlighted the institutional context, emphasizing that Capital University is a predominantly White institution (PWI). The simple classification of Capital University as a PWI, and participants’ consistent mentioning of this classification, denotes the “Permanence of Racism” that has prevailed throughout history and continues to be pervasive today.

Furthermore, “Permanence of Racism” privileges White people over people of color, which we also found in our results. For example, White or Caucasian students rated questions related to the feeling of connectedness to the community higher than students of color, particularly Black students. Perhaps it is intuitive that White students feel more connected to the community at a PWI. Nevertheless, “Permanence of Racism” is embedded within students’ perceptions of the community.

One of the more notable results of “Permanence of Racism” relates to the campus physical environment. During a focus group with students of color, participants referenced feeling uncomfortable when White students stood outside the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, looking through the glass infrastructure to see the television instead of entering the space. Such imagery of White students staring into a confined space and looking at Black and Brown bodies is reminiscent of the historical “Permanence of Racism” relating to slavery.

Counter-Storytelling

What is it?

Counter-stories critique the dominant narrative and/or highlight narratives of people of color. Counter-stories also challenge the assumption that people of color are the only authority to speak about racialized experiences on college campuses. With “Counter-storytelling” in mind, we sought undergraduate students across varying racial identities to participate in our climate survey. Ultimately, we secured the participation of 55 White or Caucasian students, and 26 students of color. The sample size reflected the demographics of a PWI. Moreover, we wanted to challenge the assumption that students of color are the only participants who could speak about race on campus. At the same time, we wanted to give voice to students of color to tell their marginalized experiences.

“Counter-storytelling” was utilized in our semi-structured interviews and focus groups as a way for students of color to share their experiences with racism on campus as well as a space to express their feelings or frustrations. Our questions provided opportunities for students to create counter-narratives to preconceived notions around diversity, inclusion, and racism on campus. Guiding questions were used to steer the conversation, but a level of autonomy was provided to the students to allow for them to reflect and be candid regarding experiences.

Results

Overall, participants offered counter-stories through discussing their experiences with microaggressions and racism on campus, highlighting the narratives of students of color. For example, participants of color mentioned feeling uncomfortable connecting with different departments, such as financial aid, due to lack of representation and cultural sensitivity. Participants of color also referenced several racially-charged incidents of bias that occurred within residence halls and within the classroom.

Beyond qualitative data, as a result of our data collection via heat mapping, we learned that White students rated the Office of Diversity and Inclusion as more unwelcoming than students of color. Moreover, participants discussed their belief that White students do not enter the Office of Diversity and Inclusion because they think that space is for Black students and/or is a “minority club.” This perception affirms the tenet of “Counter-storytelling” in that White participants may not recognize themselves as racialized beings who can speak about racialized experiences and therefore be involved in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion.

Additionally, another way of thinking about “Counter-storytelling” relates to providing a narrative that is counter to the communication of the dominant group. In our focus groups and interviews, participants constructed a narrative that contradicts the University’s message, which in this case, serves as the dominant group. For instance, participants indicated that the University implicitly says they’re doing “enough” related to diversity and inclusion, which differs from the participants’ perception of “enough.” One such example is the existence of a Cultural Pluralism course that can be taken as a general education requirement. The University can state that it offers such a course, but the course is not mandated for all students. Participants also indicated issues with some instructors’ lack of cultural competence. In another example of “Counter-storytelling”, participants referenced marketing campaigns and the prevalence of students in color. In this instance, the University created a narrative where students of color were at the forefront of the University, whereas our participants emphasized the classification of the University as a PWI and the marketing campaign’s misalignment with actual campus demographics.

Importantly, in providing counter-stories, participants often infused ideas for how to make the University more inclusive. These ideas provided insight into what the University priorities should be from a student perspective. The ideas themselves tied back to notions of “Counter-storytelling.” For example, participants of color stated that admissions staff members should provide diversity resources to students across racial identities instead of only students of color. This would challenge the assumption that students of color are the only students who can find support through diversity and inclusion initiatives.

Critique of Liberalism

What is it?

“Critique of Liberalism” focuses on challenging colorblindness, neutrality of the law, and incremental change (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). CRT scholars critique such notions because colorblindness and neutrality do not consider the permanence of racism or address social inequity. Moreover, DeCuir and Dixson (2004) state, “Under the notion of incremental change, gains for marginalized groups must come at a slow pace that is palatable for those in power” (p. 29). Within a CRT framework, colorblindness, neutrality of the law, and incremental change are simply insufficient.

We utilized “Critique of Liberalism” in our methodology through examining inclusivity of different spaces and environments with the use of heat mapping. As noted by Strange and Banning (2015), the creation of space that is inclusive and safe is important in promoting student success. Limited consideration to racial difference and needs in community spaces can be detrimental to marginalized student communities. We were aware that infrastructures on campus were created without consideration of racial identity. Thus, the heat map allowed for participants to indicate areas that they felt were “welcoming” or “unwelcoming,” allowing us to gain insight into perceptions surrounding inclusivity.

Another aspect of our methodology that reflected “Critique of Liberalism” was the questions in the semi-structured interviews and the quantitative survey that specifically assessed the experiences of students of color. In the quantitative assessment, we asked students to rate diversity on campus and how the institution is performing in support of diverse populations. In the semi-structured interview, we asked participants to speak on their experience as students of color and to talk about their University experiences with diversity and inclusion. These experiences ranged from the classroom to peer-to-peer interactions. By centering the questions around the experiences of these students, the assessment acknowledged that the experience of students of color differs from the experience of White students, challenging the idea of colorblindness and neutrality in the campus experience.

Results

Ultimately, our results communicated the manners in which the University acknowledges or disregards difference, highlighting the “Critique of Liberalism.” The use of heat mapping and qualitative data collected through interviews offered insight into the lack of intentionality surrounding campus infrastructure, specifically related to creating supportive environments for students of color. As previously mentioned related to “Permanence of Racism,” the Office of Diversity and Inclusion is a fishbowl structure where all members of the community can look into the space. Evidently, this space was not developed with the safety and respect of students of color in mind, and the common nature of White students peering into the space has been detrimental to students of color.

Additionally, via heat mapping, students of color indicated fewer spaces within the student union to be welcoming compared to their White counterparts. Similarly, students of color found more spaces to be unwelcoming when compared to White students. Strange and Banning (2015) found that limited consideration to the needs of marginalized student populations resulted in a lower sense of belonging and student validation. This result demonstrated a lack of consideration for racial identity and the colorblind nature of common space for students.

Further, participants highlighted the lack of inclusivity in their curricular and cocurricular experiences, which supports the notion of colorblindness. In our focus groups and semi-structured interviews, participants discussed the potential gains associated with a cultural pluralism course for undergraduate students so long as the instructor is culturally competent.

Interest Conversion

What is it?

The idea of “Interest Conversion” stems from a belief that changes in policy, programming, or staffing that benefit marginalized communities are not entirely altruistic in nature; they also benefit White individuals as well. From a historical context, this includes initiatives such as affirmative action which

has helped students of color gain access to education, but has disproportionately helped White women. The effect of “Interest Conversion” can also be seen within higher education programming and policies. These approaches could end up retaining the intended positive effect or end up negatively impacting members of marginalized communities.

When creating the assessment, one of the goals was to demonstrate to the institution that diversity and inclusion initiatives not only benefit people of color but all staff, faculty, and students. This goal helped in centering CRT and, specifically, the tenet of “Interest Conversion,” in the framework of the assessment. Utilizing “Interest Conversion” within the framework provided an opportunity to examine the effect of diversity programs on the greater campus population and how issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity impact students.

One way that we centered “Interest Conversion” in both the quantitative and qualitative components of the assessment was through the use of questions that assessed diversity programming. These questions highlighted the experiences of students and interactions between different student populations. As noted by Hiraldo (2010), though many diversity initiatives support and uplift students of color, White students also benefit from their existence. By assessing the efficiency and impact of these, we are able to determine if these initiatives also influence White students and to what extent.

Another way we implemented “Interest Conversion” in the assessment was through questions that analyzed collaboration or interactions across differences. We utilized these questions in the semi-structured interviews and Qualtrics survey. The goal of including these questions was to assess the effect that an increasingly diverse campus has on not only students of color but on the student population as a whole. Hiraldo (2010) states that increases in diversity and diversity initiatives on campus can potentially impact both students of color and White students.

Results

“Interest Conversion” was prevalent in our results, although this notion was seemingly unknown to participants. Notably, we learned that with the increase in diversity on campus, there has also been an increase in programming around diversity, inclusion, and equity. These programs created to support students of color have also been seen to impact White students. From our assessment, we found that White students also benefited from these programs, be it for professional development, class, or personal and cognitive growth. In several of the semi-structured interviews, participants noted that White student attendance at diversity events was for their personal benefit. One participant of color said, “The White people come to events when it’s for a requirement for a class or for RA stuff. They have to show that they’re diverse and that’s about it.” A White participant noted that participating in these diversity events helped them to understand different cultures and in their work as a resident assistant.

Another result that highlighted the impact of “Interest Conversion” was how students from different racial identities rated diverse interactions. Specifically, when asked to consider their interactions with others, we found that White students had a stronger sense of community than students of color. Even though a diverse campus better supports the needs of students of color, the assessment data showed that White students potentially benefited from interactions with students of color.

Moreover, participants also referenced recruitment efforts, which can be viewed as a form of “Interest Conversion” at a PWI (Hiraldo, 2010). Notably, diversifying the student body is most often a priority

when determined to be in the best interest of those in power, ultimately serving a capitalist agenda that benefits the university's national rankings and White students as a whole, especially at a PWI. The use of students of color in marketing campaigns, and participants stating that such marketing does not reflect the campus demographics, further highlights this notion of "Interest Conversion" and the perhaps unintended impact on students of color.

Whiteness as Property

What is it?

The tenet of "Whiteness as Property" examines how the concept of Whiteness can be considered property interest that benefits its holders. Harris (1993) conducted an analysis on the concept of "Whiteness as Property" and produced four "rights" that Whiteness prescribes: the right to disposition, the right to use and enjoyment, the right to status and property, and the right to exclude. These rights help to frame how "Whiteness as Property" influences White students' decision-making and understanding of issues that may impact students of color.

The portrayal of "Whiteness as Property" within the methodology can be seen through questions that assess student satisfaction and needs related to diversity and inclusion. Assessing satisfaction with these initiatives can highlight how the needs of different student populations, specifically White students and students of color, are perceived differently on campus. Data that conveys different perceptions could implicitly demonstrate a lack of attention to the needs of students of color and/or the idea that White students' needs are more important. Hiraldo (2010) stated that institutional powers that prioritize the needs of White students can uphold notions of White superiority and reduce the effort of diversity and inclusion.

Results

"Whiteness as Property" was most evident in participants' classroom experiences, where professors are seen as owners of the curriculum. According to Patton et al. (2007), instructors' autonomy to design their courses can work against students of color, especially when the faculty community lacks diversity across social identities. As previously mentioned, participants highlighted the importance of culturally competent faculty. Participants also discussed experiencing microaggressions and tokenization within the classroom environment, most often from instructors. One student stated, "Any time they talk about something Black or Black-related, and I'm the only one, they always look at me to shed some light." When White instructors only seek the perspectives of students of color regarding their racial identities, this further demonstrates "Whiteness as Property." In this case, the instructor created a power dynamic, rooted in race, to seek a student of color's perspective when it is convenient for their classroom facilitation. Moreover, participants expressed a sense of fear when speaking in class, acknowledging the realities of stereotype threat, or fear that they may reinforce stereotypes regarding their intellectual abilities and/or social identities. "Whiteness of Property" propagates stereotype threat when professors are seen as owners of curriculum.

Another example of "Whiteness as Property" can be seen in the difference in answers between students of color and White students for questions regarding comfort with the campus and importance of diversity and inclusion. As Harris (1993) states, Whiteness provides White individuals the privilege to focus on their independent needs while ignoring the needs of marginalized communities. The

assessment results validate this, showing that there is a gap in perception between students of color and White students.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

In conducting our pilot, we found that implementing a campus climate study presented quite a few challenges. First, we unexpectedly found a challenge to get students, and in particular, students of color to participate in the study. Anecdotally, we often heard from students of color about the climate on campus and how it was not often welcoming to them. As a result, we thought that this study would be a great opportunity for them to share their voice and to provide a forum for them to have their concerns heard by administration. The students did not share in that excitement, and initial focus groups consisted of one to two people. Participation in the study only increased when Mitsu went to a Diversity and Inclusion student leadership meeting and asked students to share their thoughts about the climate. During that meeting, the students also wanted reassurance that Mitsu would personally make sure to share the results with them. While we never formally asked students why many did not participate, given what we know about campus climate and CRT, it would be safe to assume that students still feel some level of distrust with the majority White administration.

Secondly, it is important to remember that the tenets of CRT are often not easy for individuals to understand, especially for White people who have internalized many of their racial experiences. When these individuals are in positions of authority, it can be difficult to get broad-based institutional support, and can often result in subtle (or sometimes not so subtle) pushback. As a result, when looking at climate and campus climate assessment, it is important to understand that all campuses have some inherent bias that guides the approach and questions asked. It also means that in closing the loop, people need to be able to accept the results presented and be committed to creating change. This is important because equitable assessment comes with the understanding that we cannot truly approach any assessment from an unbiased lens. As human beings, we are all inherently biased. Approaching assessment with this understanding creates a more authentic assessment and leads to more meaningful results.

Future Directions

As mentioned in the introduction, the pilot study was initiated as a result of a Strategic Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) plan. The climate study offers several areas to consider applying what we have learned in the process and from the results in support of D&I initiatives. Most notably among that which was recommended by the Strategic D&I plan, we must initiate regular campus-wide assessment of the climate at Capital University. The plan supported on-going comprehensive training and orientations and the study results provide evidence of this need. To date there have been some trainings implemented, but the efforts across campus are not coordinated and are optional for faculty and staff. While key outcomes from the plan were the revision of the Human Dignity statement and the implementation of a recognized Diversity statement, these are only words unless we provide campus-wide training and education beyond the brief mention of these in New Faculty Orientation and Residence Hall Community meetings.

The University is in the process of hiring a new Director of the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. This study will help provide context for the new Director and ultimately presents an opportunity to revisit the Strategic D&I plan. Are the strategies still relevant? What have we accomplished and what are we still missing to improve the climate at Capital University? Particular attention must also be

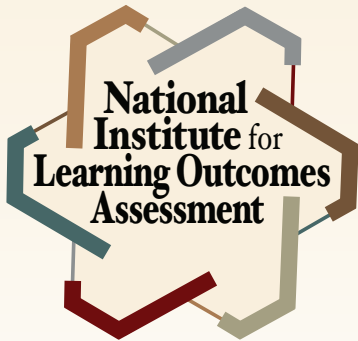
paid to the overall staffing and physical components regarding D&I work. The plan also called for the hiring of an Assistant Director and the development of a “Campus Diversity Advisory Board.” Serious consideration should be given to developing shared responsibility campus-wide for D&I initiatives.

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Equity Case Studies

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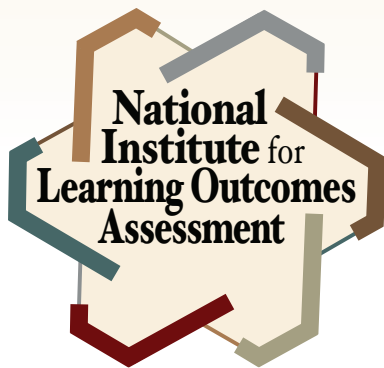
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