

Guests in Someone Else's House: Students of Color

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"It's scary to be here. A lot of minority students are afraid to go."

"It felt real cold, lonely, threatening . . . I am strong and independent, but it was so difficult."

No sense of belonging comes from these comments by students of color enrolled in a predominantly white research university. These and similar perceptions, which grow directly from the campus experiences of participants in this study, do not bode well for their academic success.

Much qualitative data suggest that finding a positive "level of comfort" on campus is a key factor in the academic success of students of color. Research consistently demonstrates that a student will remain in college when he or she feels connected, involved, and served (Tinto 1987);

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and that student retention and success rests on both the quality of the student/institution match and on the quality of that connection (Brewer 1990). The daily campus environment either creates or fails to create the "sense of belonging" (Hughes 1987, 535) or positive "comfort level" (Green 1989, 113) so important to student retention and success.

Yet many studies indicate that students of color do not find a positive "level of comfort" on university campuses. Ron Wakabayashi, National Director of the Japanese American Citizens League, expressed this sense of exclusion very well. He said, "We feel that we're a guest in someone else's house, that we can never relax and put our feet up on the table" (quoted by Lee Daniels 1991, 5). Daniels points out that guests are not family, whose foibles and mistakes are tolerated. On the contrary, guests must follow the family's wishes without question, keep out of certain rooms in the house, and always be on their best behavior.

The metaphor can be extended further. Like students of color in the university climate, guests have no history in the house they occupy. There are no photographs on the wall that reflect their image. Their paraphernalia, paintings, scents, and sounds do not appear in the house. There are many barriers for students who constantly occupy a guest status that keep them from doing their best work.

This paper describes how students of color at one major research university—the University of Minnesota—perceive the "campus climate" or what Madeline Green calls "the sum total of daily environment" (1989, 113). Campus climate is aptly defined as:

the ambient, affective character of a place—the conditions that evoke feelings, either positive or negative, from the people in the organization. Climate is to the affective aspect of human beings in an organization what air is to the physical aspect. Climate is an organization's emotional atmosphere. People breathe it. (Fryer and Lovas 1991, 14).

I hope that this study can inform educational policy makers and practitioners as they attempt to develop an inclusive campus community like that described in a report by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching: "A college or university is a just community, a place where the sacredness of each person is honored and where diversity is aggressively pursued" (1990, 25).

METHODS

To find out how people of color perceive the campus climate and its impact on them, I asked undergraduate students of color to describe their campus experiences. Additionally, I asked faculty and staff con-

nected with support programs for students of color to describe their perceptions of how students of color experienced the campus climate and asked both groups how the university could make the climate more welcoming.

This paper presents a qualitative study of campus climate from the perspective of staff, faculty, and undergraduate students of color (African American, Hispanic, Native American and Asian American) in the University of Minnesota, a major research university. The University of Minnesota is a 123-year-old land-grant institution, located in a large metropolitan area in the Upper Midwest. It has multiple campuses and research stations around the state. The main campus boasts one of the highest single campus enrollments in the United States (approximately 50,000) and attracts students from every state and from 900 countries.

The University of Minnesota has a large residential and commuter population, is coeducational, and predominantly white. It has increased the enrollment of students of color (7.4 percent in fall 1990 compared to 5.9 percent in fall 1986); however, graduation rates continue to be lower for students of color than for white students (33.2 percent of white students receive their bachelor's degree during the fifth year of study compared to 18.3 percent of students of color). As of October 1991, faculty of color made up 8.2 percent of the total number of tenured faculty employed at University, and minority academic executives made up 5.6 percent of the total (Minnesota Higher Education Coordinating Board 1992).

I selected the students in this sample purposively: students who had been on campus for at least a year and had participated in minority student support programs. Most were first-generation college students. The sample included administrators in student support services and faculty in ethnic studies programs. I then asked students, faculty, and staff to nominate others who might participate in the study. A research assistant and I interviewed thirty-two minority group members: seven Asian Americans, eight Hispanics, eight African Americans, and nine Native Americans. Faculty, administrators, and students were included in each minority group. We interviewed six faculty, nine staff, and seventeen students in 1989 through one- to two-hour interviews.¹

We followed an interview protocol to increase consistency of data collected, asking students to respond to questions about their decision to attend college, about peer and faculty-student relationships, and about their perceptions of campus life in general. We primarily asked faculty

¹For purposes of confidentiality, ethnic and program affiliation for study respondents are not designated here.

and staff about their perceptions of the major issues or concerns of students at the university. Each interviewee signed an interview consent form.

All interviews were conducted in person and face-to-face. To ensure accuracy, we reviewed and completed our notes immediately following each interview, first separately, and then together. Also immediately following each interview, the interviewers reviewed the narrative data, discussed the most salient findings and documented these initial observations.

Later, both of us reviewed all interview notes and coded them according to the categories listed earlier in the description of the interview protocol. Under each category, we identified themes across interviews in the narrative data. Findings discussed in the paper are those that both of us consistently found.

Finally, many of the respondents read early drafts of this article, and agreed that the findings accurately reflected their experiences.

The value of using in-depth interviews to collect data on the campus climate perceptions of students of color is supported by recent research studies. Karen Seashore Louis and Caroline Turner suggest that "qualitative approaches are particularly useful in studying minority student experiences where cultural differences and small numbers make the advantage of survey research less clear" (1991, 22). Louis Attinasi, Jr., suggests that data needed in order to understand minority student retention is "the student's own perception of the process" (1989, 250). David Fetterman states that "an individual's subjective perception of reality . . . has its own validity, and the individual will act according to that perception" (1991, 1).

We supplemented interview data by a review of institutional reports and other documents. (Staff, Longitudinal Data 1992; Staff, Special Committee 1987; Arthur Anderson and Company 1988; Johnson 1992; Minnesota Higher Education Coordinating Board 1992).

Unfortunately, this study cannot compare ethnic groups. Limited number of students, faculty, and staff of color make it difficult to draw comparative conclusions about perceptions of the university environment by different ethnic groups. Perhaps future research can address this question.

This study is also limited by the fact that it is conducted at only one site. Nevertheless, the most critical place for academic cultural transformation to occur is in the major research universities, because this model affects the campus environment, not only of four-year colleges, but also of two-year colleges as well. Administrators and faculty who teach in four-year colleges and community colleges traditionally come out of research university graduate degree programs and many have doctorates

from major research universities. Thus, the research university model may have some influence on the culture of other four-year colleges and the two-year college as well. As Daniel Alpert says, "In reconceiving measures of excellence, a special responsibility falls on the leaders of the most prestigious universities, who educate the faculties and set the cultural climate for the enterprise as a whole" (1985, 269). A major research university is also an important site because such universities, according to student perceptions, exhibit higher racial conflict than other four-year college settings (Hurtado 1992).

FINDINGS

Unwelcoming Climate

Study results indicate that, although the University of Minnesota provides supportive programs and implements policies intended to serve students of color,² the campus climate continues to be "unwelcoming" to students of color. Respondents described the climate as lonely, with professors who do not encourage them, with inaccessible instructors, with an inadequate number of tutors, with the expectation that students of color will not "make it," and a general lack of concern.

²The Office of Minority and Special Student Affairs (OMSSA) was established in 1977 with the mission of improving the recruitment, retention, and graduation rates of minority and disadvantaged students at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. The program seeks to coordinate minority and disadvantaged student support services, monitor and provide assistance related to recruitment, financial aid, personal counseling, research program development, cultural activities, academic activities (carried out in conjunction with collegiate units), and improving the responsiveness and sensitivity of the institution to the needs of these populations (Staff, Final Report, 1987).

OMSSA is structured with a central office (OMSSA Central) and four learning resource centers (LRC): Native American LRC, Asian LRC, Black LRC, and Hispanic LRC. In addition, OMSSA coordinates a summer institute (a pre-collegiate program for incoming freshmen in need of enrichment). The summer institute provides a college orientation, enrichment, and academic review for 130 entering minority freshmen. OMSSA Central employs full-time and part-time personnel. Each LRC has one full-time director, one or two counselors, and several work-study assistants. Summer Institute teachers are paid through the summer session program budget. The General College has been the traditional access system for those undergraduate students whose academic background did not qualify them for acceptance into other university colleges. General College is a separate college within the university, offering all academic and support services. General College prepares students for transfer to four-year degree programs.

Some examples of how students of color described their perceptions of the way in which the University of Minnesota responds to them and their resultant feelings include:

Hispanic student: CLA [College of Liberal Arts] was difficult, and I was an honors student, so I was more alone. I felt loneliness and [lack of encouragement from] professors.

African American student: Based on my experience here, I would tell the black students to go somewhere else. It's difficult here because you don't have credibility; there is an attitude, we, you're not going to make it. You have to prove yourself because of skin color as well as prove yourself academically.

Native American student: As a student, I felt [the University of Minnesota] was too big and I never received feedback from instructors or TAs. They were not accessible. I never got individual attention.

Asian American student: I went to a help session, but did not get my question asked, so I wasted an hour waiting to see a tutor. There were many students with questions. Get more tutors instead of saying, 'This is the real world. You have to compete.'

African American student: At the U, it was like nobody knows you. My advisor is too busy. He never welcomed me to sit down even if I had an appointment. As I was leaving, he'd be typing, he didn't really care.

Hispanic student: I couldn't go to a white professor and say that I want to change advisors when my advisor [also white] is racist."

Staff indicated that secondary and community college school personnel in communities of color do not refer students to the University of Minnesota because it is seen as detached from their communities and does not provide the level of support that is found in community colleges or historically black colleges. A minority staff member³ said: "One community college counselor told me that he wants students to go where there are similar or better services [for students of color] than they have at _____. He dissuades students from going to [the University of Minnesota]."

Other staff members echoed these negative perceptions of the university in communities of color:

[The U needs to] change community perceptions about whether access really exists.

The U doesn't have a good image [in the black community.] Word got out about the bad experiences students, staff and faculty have at the U, and this led to perceptions of racism at the U.

Two faculty of color said their children are very talented students who were heavily recruited by other universities; they received no attention or invitations from the University of Minnesota. The faculty members took this inattention as an indication of a lack of interest in recruiting talented students of color.

Finally, overt racism is a problem. A faculty member who is also an administrator identified "tremendous racism. It's the kind of thing where you've always gotta watch your back, because you don't know when the knife is going in. It's the kind of racism that is very subtle. . . . I see racism and sexism on an individual basis, but I see it much more institutionally. . . . Look at [the University of Minnesota's] administrative, faculty, and curricular structures. . . . People of color are not there."

Another minority staff member was concerned about a resurgence of racism on campus "in dormitories, threatening letters and phone calls to black students[.]. . . complaints about police brutality and discrimination in employment on campus."

While a higher drop-out rate and a lower graduation rate may be among the final outcomes of an unwelcoming campus climate for students of color, the daily damaging affect of such climates on students is at least equally important. Study respondents described their quality of life as intimidating, lonely, and exclusionary. Several researchers allude to the damaging psychological affects of such stressful environments on students of color (Fleming 1988; Grosson 1988; Allen 1988; McClelland and Auster 1990; Pierce 1989).

Isolated Support

Study participants, however, identified supportive organizational niches that played important welcoming roles for them, alleviating cultural isolation and helping them find a level of comfort within the university. They most often mentioned learning resource centers for specific ethnic groups, a university program that provides a developmental curriculum designed to prepare students to transfer and pursue baccalaureate degrees, a summer institute, and ethnic studies programs.

Students describe their experience within supportive niches in the following ways:

- A Native American student: I didn't need help for academics . . . but . . . I needed emotional support; an informal get-together place. A place you feel comfortable. You feel a sense of

³To protect the confidentiality of faculty and staff, their quotations are identified in only general terms.

community . . . Seeing another Indian face is real important—making that connection. This is something taken for granted by the white majority [who always see other white faces].⁴

Asian student: [The University of Minnesota] had a summer institute for minority students—to help students get to know the university better. . . . If it was not for that program, I would not be [here] today.

Native American student: _____ is a big part of a lot of people's success right here. She is like a mom. . . . someone you can really trust and stuff. Students need encouragement, guidance and advice. Sometimes, they need a kick in the butt and stuff. The office cuts a lot of red tape.

Hispanic student: Most students see this office as a home away from home, a place to visit, deal with personal problems, academic problems.

However, it was clear from the student interviews that the environment became unwelcoming when they moved into the larger university from the niches specifically created to be supportive. As an African American student said, "When you transfer out of [a special university program], there's nothing like the support and understanding available in [that program]." The specialized but isolated supportive programs are not enough. Though they are important, they are still just guest rooms that have been added to the house.

Climate Unwelcoming to Minority Support Staff

Another finding of this study was the burn-out, stress, and bitterness that exists among staff of color. Staff of support programs for students of color were often graduate students. As such, they experienced a double bind. In addition to operating in a generally unsupportive environment themselves, they experienced the burden of being teachers to their teachers and mentors to other students of color. In other words, the people who are most important to maintaining and supporting at-risk undergraduate students are at risk themselves. Even as they try to make the university climate welcoming to new students, they battle an unwelcoming climate for themselves. Although they were very dedicated to helping others of their group, the lack of support from the university left them less time for attending to academic tasks and subject to burnout. These graduate students do benefit by their appointments. Through the appointments they receive financial help and help in becoming part

⁴ Students who use the support centers certainly do not always need remedial academic help. In this case, for instance, the student had a 3.9 grade point average.

of the university community. Still, the cost in time, energy, and emotional resources is often overwhelming. A minority administrator said:

They encourage you to do your degree work, but they don't give you time to do it. . . . If you hold an administrative appointment, the expectation is that you function in the way that everybody else does. . . . the departments . . . say, "We want you to do your academic work, we want you to focus on this, we want you to get this done." And yet, there isn't any real support, and when I say real, I'm talking about financial.

Another administrator, a master's candidate who has been "inactive" for several years, remarked: "I think we [minority staff] are borderline abusing ourselves. We continue undergoing this stress because we are committed to the education of students of color. We are overused."

Another administrator said: "I have yet to finish my thesis for a Ph.D. in _____. I came to Minnesota from _____. I regret the move and want to leave . . . There is only lip service, not legitimate resources, given to the issue of recruitment of minority students, faculty and staff."

Not only do graduate students operate under severe time constraints when they must take such demanding employment to finance their graduate degrees, but minority support staff lack adequate support for their jobs. Two staff members of color said:

This office is crisis oriented. We are doing everything in this office with very little. We deal with all issues, even with questions and letters from the community.

Because I am short on staff, . . . I spend between 11 and 12 hours per day here.

While these administrators came originally for educational purposes, they needed financial assistance. The employment allows them to support themselves but does not allow timely progress toward graduate degrees. Thus, they may well watch newer students obtain promotions for which they themselves might have been eligible had their advanced degrees not been stalled in the service of the newer students and financing their education.⁵

Obviously this situation has ramifications for the undergraduate students as well. The service they receive must be affected when the staff providing it is stretched too thin.

⁵ For more discussion of this phenomenon, called the "price of talent," see Louis and Turner (1991).

Creating a Welcoming Environment

Participants were also asked to comment on ways in which the university could improve its climate for diversity and provide a more welcoming environment. They suggested curriculum that reflects students' cultures, integrating ethnic studies into the mainstream curriculum, more minority faculty and staff, training for staff who serve students of color, flexibility in meeting students' individual needs, and the establishment of formal advising structures. Examples of their comments are:

Native American student: Make students feel more wanted and comfortable in classrooms. The instructor sets the tone for class interactions. Students follow the instructor's lead and attitude.

Minority faculty member: The institution has been very negligent in collecting information [on student recruitment, retention and graduation] systematically . . . We need to document the complaints . . . We need studies on quality of life for minority students. Minority faculty member: It is motivating to see someone like yourself at some time in the educational process. All change should not be addressed to minority students trying to fit to what is here.

African American student: [There is] not enough faculty of color in any of the colleges . . . That sends a message whether they know it or not. Change curriculum, textbooks. [We] need positive images of minorities so it becomes multicultural. Teachers have to be trained culturally for everything they are teaching.

Minority administrator: Here at [a special university program], they are supportive; they recruit minorities. At [the rest of the university], there is no place to go for support . . . We have no control over the faculty teaching them in their classes and how supportive they are going to be.

Minority faculty member: The legislature just passed a law saying that, if ten students or more request it, an Indian advisory board must be formed at that institution, part of the Indian Education Act recently passed. If you don't know how to respond, how to create a welcoming environment, there is somebody there to tell you how to respond. . . . The structure should be flexible, one that adapts to individuals.

Minority administrator: A call from the university [would help]. . . . With a personal call there is someone they've talked to when they come to [an] open house.

Minority faculty member: We create an artificial environment. Here [in Ethnic Studies] Indian culture still exists, but it's still out there . . . the study of Indian art [should be] in the art history department.

DISCUSSION

Study respondents describe helpful, yet fragmented and unmonitored attempts by the University of Minnesota to assist students of color. However, if the University of Minnesota, or indeed, any of the major research universities, are to become truly welcoming and inclusive for students of color, their overall climates must undergo a transformation. If access is to truly take place, Lee Noel states that institutions "must go through a transformation, not just a transition" and quotes Daryl Smith as saying that "a transition is getting to where you want to be from where you are by adding to what you are doing." A transformation, on the other hand, "is a radical change. If you want to change what you are, you have to do things differently" (1990, 6-7). Academia cannot be content with adding a room here and a room there, but must rebuild the entire house to include all the diverse cultures.

This does not mean that the specialized programs should be eliminated. Many writers have attested to the importance of supportive programs for students of color. In summarizing research from the late 1960s through the 1980s on college effects on students, Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini observe:

It is clear that many of the most important effects of college occur through student's interpersonal experiences with faculty members and other students. It is equally clear that the academic, social, and psychological worlds inhabited by most nonwhite students on predominantly white campuses are substantially different in almost every respect from those of their white peers. On some (perhaps many) campuses, minority students feel a powerful need to band together for psychological and social support of one another, sometimes in defense against the tacit and not-so-tacit condescension and hostility some feel from white faculty, students and staff alike. (1991, 644)

The supportive niches created for students of color allow them to employ the adaptive strategies Attinasi (1989) described: mentoring by experienced guides/interpreters, peer knowledge sharing, and scaling down, in which students affiliate themselves with smaller, defined parts of the large universities. When they leave the supportive niches, these adaptive strategies may succeed in varying degrees, depending on the willingness of people in various campus locations to serve as guides and to share knowledge. One sometimes hears the criticism that students are not using the adaptive strategies they have learned. However, it does not matter how good a student's adaptive strategies are if the climate makes it impossible to use them. Some environments may be so toxic that, no matter how much scaling down takes place, students of color cannot

locate themselves within certain university geographies. Once again, it is important to note that transformation of the entire university climate is necessary.

The issue of the university's cultural transformation raises a thorny and ironic problem about ethnic studies departments. Curriculum reflecting the culture of students of color is an important source of support for them. Thus far, this curriculum has been introduced at the University of Minnesota, as on many campuses, as specialized ethnic studies departments. Students view these departments as supportive niches. Faculty, however, see them as understaffed and marginalized. One minority faculty member called them "the poor stepchild of education" and predicted that the university hierarchy was only "waiting until such time as it is politically acute to pull the plug." Another minority faculty member called ethnic studies departments "an artificial environment." A third said, "Success for minorities is not important as long as [the programs] are independent kingdoms and no one [examines what you are doing]."

These ethnic studies departments have served a valuable role and, like other supportive programs for students of color, offered them a transitional environment. Nevertheless, it is important now to make these studies part of the mainstream curriculum. How can the student of color be part of the family if his or her cultural milieu is confined to the guest room?

Another point that deserves discussion here is the special problems for students of color engendered by the sheer size of a bureaucratic institution as large as the University of Minnesota. The infrastructure of the university itself, the onerous red tape, is a problem for all students, majority and minority. Nevertheless, students of color may suffer more from it than majority students. First, the impact of the red tape accumulates on top of the already heavy burden of the unwelcoming climate.

Second, majority students may well arrive with more skills for coping with bureaucratic idiosyncrasies. Third, students of color may interpret the red tape as discriminatory and thus find it even more intimidating. Finally and most important, the core issue for students of color remains the exclusivity of the majority culture. For example, Katherine McClelland and Carol Auster conclude that the "subtle sense of exclusion" is "just as destructive" as taunts and slurs—but "it is a silent killer" (1990, 638). Sylvia Hurtado states that "minorities are more aware of racial tension . . . because they . . . must depend on constant inter-racial contact in social, learning, and work spheres on predominantly white campuses" (1990, 562).

Size should not be used to excuse the negative climate or be allowed to paralyze efforts to make the university welcoming to students of color.

In another set of interviews I conducted (Turner and Evans 1992), students said they experienced the same kind of unwelcoming climate in smaller, two-year institutions.

STEPS TOWARD TRANSFORMATION

It is clear that universities must go beyond supplying supportive niches for people of color to improving the overall climate and increasing the receptivity of the university as a whole to students of color. Universities must strive for change at the deepest level, at the level of missions and values. Universities must:

- emphasize cooperation, collaboration, and community.
- act decisively against racism on campus, certainly at the individual level, but especially at the institutional level.
- increase diversity of staff, faculty, and curriculum.
- integrate ethnic studies into mainstream curriculum.
- create positive classroom environments that promote mutual respect among students.
- increase multicultural sensitivity in all segments of the university, while maintaining forums where homogeneous student groups can offer each other support.
- perform a detailed audit of each college or department, followed by periodic reexamination, to allow institutionally specific solutions to be formulated.

Above all, the university must find ways to support change at an institutional level that addresses the entire educational community.⁶

CONCLUSION

The University of Minnesota, like many institutions of higher education across the United States, has yet to provide a welcoming environment for students of color. The special programs established to support students of color are essential, and some steps toward transformation are being implemented. (See, for example, Johnson 1992.) Still, change must take another step—or rather, leap—forward. Deeply embedded values, the very culture itself, must undergo transformation so that the

⁶For insights and information to help universities approach and implement fundamental change, the following sources will be helpful; it is not an exhaustive list: Bolman and Deal (1991), Brewer (1990), Chaffee and Tierney (1988), Clark (1983), Dill (1982), Green (1989), Smith (1989), Southern Regional Education Board (1990), Van Maanen and Schein (1979), Wilson (1992), and Turner (unpublished manuscript).

institution comes to belong as much to students of color as to the majority culture. A Native American student interviewed for this study said, "There is a desire here to be gainfully employed, to help others, to go on and become a professional. Surely if students are willing to take these risks [navigating an alien environment], higher education should be able to respond." As an African-American staff respondent said, "Too often what occurs is a mending of the exterior, rather than addressing the core issues." Major research universities must put their houses in order, not just patching holes and adding rooms, but renovating them from the inside out so that there is space and permission for all students to put their feet up on the table.

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Teaching Assistant Attitudes Toward College Teaching

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Teaching assistants (TAs) are currently responsible for a substantial percentage of undergraduate instruction in American colleges and universities. Although no firm data exist, it has been estimated that freshmen and sophomores spend from 30 to 50 percent of their undergraduate classroom hours in contact with TAs in some institutions (Smock and Menges 1985; Diamond and Gray 1987; Nyquist and Wulff 1987). Far from being unimportant appendages to academic life, these fledgling academics have a wide range of teaching duties and are taking on aspects of the instructor's role at more and more institutions, with complete responsibility for a course or course section, students' assignments, test selection and grading. In a recent survey, 66 percent of the teaching assistants at one large Midwestern university reported taking full responsibility for a course, a higher percentage than previously reported (Chism 1989). At the same time, such new trends as the use of computers in education, more diverse student bodies, and an emphasis on teaching problem-solving in the disciplines are making the job more demanding.

Higher education faces two major challenges in this decade that highlight issues surrounding the training and development of teaching assistants. First, public concerns about the cost and quality of undergraduate education have resulted in demands for better training of college teachers in the nation's graduate schools. The Association of American Colleges (AAC), for example, has sharply criticized graduate training

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