An Inclusive Climate Is Important

College graduates should reflect the diversity of our nation and diverse campuses expose students to a wide array of experiences and perspectives that can enhance their learning and prepare them to live in diverse societies. Yet, students’ success may be hindered by negative attitudes, perceptions, behaviors and expectations around issues of race, ethnicity, and diversity on campus. It is imperative, therefore, to understand and improve the policies, practices, and behaviors that shape the climate for diversity and inclusion on campus. To that end, all VCU students were invited to participate in the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) Diverse Learning Environments survey in April 2016, and 4,239 students responded.

VCU’s Diverse Campus Encourages Rich Interactions

VCU offers a diverse learning environment in which students have opportunities to interact with and learn from students from different backgrounds (Figure 1). Over three-quarters of respondents were satisfied with the diversity of VCU’s student body and students reported frequently interacting with students from different religions (78 percent), socioeconomic classes (72 percent), sexual orientations (64 percent) and countries (57 percent). Fewer students were satisfied with the racial/ethnic diversity of the faculty and staff (55 and 58 percent satisfied, respectively).

Students Report a Strong Institutional Commitment to Diversity

While compositional diversity is necessary to create a positive campus climate, a strong institutional commitment to diversity is also needed to promote inclusion. An overwhelming majority of students perceived a long-standing commitment to diversity at VCU and an appreciation of cultural differences and differences in sexual orientation. In fact, VCU students expressed more positive views than students at other participating public universities (Figure 2). Most students (77 percent) also felt a sense of belonging at VCU and saw themselves as part of the community (74 percent).
Many Students Still Experience Discrimination

Research has found that underrepresented minority students experience less frequent discrimination at more compositionally diverse institutions, and there is a positive correlation between campus diversity and students’ ability to exhibit interracial understanding and empathy.2 Compared to students at other public universities, VCU respondents reported that students were more willing to talk about equity and injustice, and they were more likely to recognize and feel frustrated by discrimination and inequalities faced by people of color. Nonetheless, students of color reported experiencing more negative interactions with students from different racial or ethnic groups. Furthermore, a majority of students (56 percent) reported experiencing various forms of discrimination or harassment at VCU (Figure 3), 18 percent experienced unwanted sexual contact, and nine percent experienced sexual assault or attempted assault.

Faculty Promote Multicultural Understanding

Faculty play a key role in creating inclusive curricula and classrooms to validate students, promote multicultural understanding, and harness the benefits of diversity to enrich learning. Most respondents felt their instructors encouraged them to engage across differences in meaningful ways (Figure 4). VCU faculty also reportedly incorporate a similar amount of materials and readings about diversity into their courses as faculty at other public universities. Nonetheless, among undergraduate students, at least a quarter of seniors had not taken any courses that incorporated materials or readings about certain aspects of diversity, such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic class differences, privilege, gender, and sexual orientation. Incorporating more of these materials into curricula could promote further understanding across differences.

Students of Color Perceive Less Supportive Classrooms

Students of color reported less positive perceptions of classroom climate and less academic validation than white students. They felt they had to work harder than other students to be perceived as good students (55 versus 34 percent) and they were less likely to feel most instructors create student centered classrooms (Figure 5). They were also less likely to feel their instructors accurately determined their level of understanding of course material or encouraged them to participate in class.

1 Aside from Figure 1, results in this summary are based on a subset of 3,179 responses from full-time students who reported their sex and class level on the survey (2,455 undergraduate and 724 graduate & first professional students).
2 Comparison institutions include participating public universities: U. of Delaware, Oakland U., Mississippi State U., Stony Brook U., Clemson U., and U. of California-Irvine.

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![Figure 3: Students Experience Many Forms of Discrimination](image)

![Figure 4: Students Felt Most or All Instructors Encouraged Them to Engage Across Differences](image)

![Figure 5: Fewer Students of Color Felt Most or All Instructors Created Student Centered Classrooms](image)