

# Designing Strategies to Promote Diversity and Equity with a Campus Climate Survey

Jung S. You<sup>1</sup>

Associate Professor

Department of Economics, California State University, East Bay

Mariana T. Guzzardo

Assistant Professor

Department of Human Development and Women's Studies, California State University, East Bay

## Abstract

Institutions of higher education are increasingly looking for strategies to assess diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). An alumni survey is a valuable tool for identifying actionable strategies to create a supportive environment for Black students, faculty, and staff, and increase Black student's success. As an example, our survey's findings underscored the need for improvements in 1) anti-bias training, 2) academic advising, 3) diversity education in the coursework, 4) hiring and retaining Black faculty, and 5) community organizations for BIPOC students. We recommend the use of an alumni survey to obtain an assessment of campus climate and best strategies for DEI.

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jung S. You at [jung.you@csueastbay.edu](mailto:jung.you@csueastbay.edu); +1-510-885-2198

## **Designing Strategies to Promote Diversity and Equity with a Campus Climate Survey**

Experiences in a hostile campus climate (e.g., exclusionary or discriminatory practices, prejudicial interactions, structural barriers) are known to have significant effects on the social integration and institutional commitment of students from all backgrounds, and specifically, they negatively influence the academic experiences and development of Black students and the goal commitments of White students (Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Cabrera et al., 1999). Given the empirical connection between perceptions of campus climate and educational and social outcomes, higher education professionals must recognize the importance of assessing campus climates regarding underrepresented students. To make evidence-based recommendations, we discuss a campus climate alumni survey performed at a public university on the Western Coast of the United States. The purpose of this survey was to better understand how alumni perceive their time as students at our institution with a focus on campus climate and issues of prejudice and discrimination. Examining disaggregated data and reflecting on the implications of the results of the alumni survey, we were able to identify specific strategies for addressing the challenges and supporting positive initiatives through the development of a strategic plan for improving diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The purpose of this brief is to serve as an illustration of how to conduct an alumni survey with the goal of assessing campus climate and promoting DEI.

Those engaged in climate assessment have not yet reached consensus on best practices nor on a conceptual or theoretical framework, and there appears to be little agreement on what constitutes campus climate (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008). Previous research found that most studies were conducted by internal investigators, most focused on faculty (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008), and there is a lack of studies contrasting minorities with non-minorities (Cabrera et al., 1999). Also,

alumnae and alumni can contribute information on campus climate, including the history of diversity and social justice issues at an institution (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008), especially given that current students might not feel comfortable revealing their experiences at the university. Therefore, it was evident that an alumni survey would be an effective tool for uncovering campus climate and problematic issues.

The interest in addressing antiblackness and racial discrimination at our campus parallels issues emerging at many universities. Our university is one of multiple campuses in the West, the largest four-year public university system in the United States. It has one of the highest proportions of African American students in the public university system: 70% are Black, Indigenous, and people of color, whereas 50% of the faculty are White. Additionally, the four-year graduation rates for underrepresented minorities at our university are two times lower than the system average, and the retention rates are also lower than those for White students. For these reasons, we found it necessary to study how alumni perceive the campus climate at our institution. The purpose of conducting and reporting campus climate research should be to produce a foundation for institutional change (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

### **Method: Conducting an Alumni Survey**

Our procedures serve as an example to others on how to conduct an alumni survey. We used Qualtrics as the platform to distribute the survey and obtained IRB approval from our university. The survey took about 10 to 15 minutes to fill out, and there were 35 questions: 32 closed-ended and three open-ended. We used snowball sampling procedures and engaged in a variety of distribution efforts with the intention of reaching diverse alumni. For example, we used the University Alumni Engagement Center, student affinity groups, faculty and staff affinity groups, and other support groups on campus to find diverse students. Alumni were sent a solicitation

email with an embedded link to the online survey and respondents' anonymity was ensured. Data was collected for a period of about three months. We received a total of 243 responses from the alumni, who were free to answer all or a subset of the questions.

The survey should include questions on demographic information to ascertain different experiences across various characteristics, such as race/ethnicity and sexual orientation. In our case, a large segment of the respondents was male (51.46%), 47.28% was female, and 1.36% were non-binary. White Americans represented 46.03% of the sample (110 responses), Asian Americans 18.41%, Latin/Hispanic 16.74%, African Americans 13.81% (33 responses), and others including Native Americans and Pacific Islanders at 5.01%. Many of them were older (49.37% over 45), and 62.55% (152) had last attended university five or more years previously. Given that we found differences in these groups, we recommend considering differences between recent graduates and those who graduated longer ago. Focusing on recent graduates, 70% were nonwhite, and the majority were female. Regarding nonwhite alumni, we received responses from 129 out of 239; in this subsample, 50% were under 35 years old; 54% were female; and 48% graduated within the last four years, so the demographics were more like those of the recent graduates.

### **Discussion: DEI Recommendations Based on an Alumni Survey**

Here we discuss recommendations that can be made based on the alumni survey findings, which lead to reducing harmful practices and encouraging DEI. One issue found in the survey that is collectively addressed through the recommendations listed below is challenges created by institutional structures. For example, one of the items on the survey asked the alumni about the challenges they faced during their time at our university, including the following categories: Academic difficulty, lack of money, own mental health, poor campus climate, housing, lack of

food, and racial fatigue. Academic difficulty and lack of money were primary challenges for all groups. However, racial fatigue was higher for African Americans or Black alumni, falling into third place. The alumni's own mental health was also a challenge, ranking third for all races other than African American/Black and fourth for African American/Black students. Notably, racial fatigue ranked third for African American/Black students, whereas it ranked seventh for White students. These results agree with the findings in the literature that Black students perceive more racial conflict and discrimination, and they more often report experiences with differential treatment than do White, Latino, and Asian students (Ancis et al., 2000; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Below we delineate specific recommendations that address these institutional barriers, as well as other issues and possible solutions based on survey findings.

### **1. Anti-bias Training Regarding Racism and Sexism**

One question on our survey asks whether alumni experienced racism, sexism, homophobia/queer-phobia, transphobia, or ableism/disability discrimination, followed with questions "how often" and "from whom?". Fifty-four percent ( $n=63$ ) of 117 respondents had personally experienced racism. Forty-nine percent ( $n=49$ ) of 101 respondents indicated that they had personally experienced sexism during their time at college. Notably, 80.65% ( $n=25$ ) of African American/Black students ( $n=31$ ) reported they had experienced racism, whereas 35.56% ( $n=16$ ) of White students ( $n=45$ ) reported they had experienced racism. Likewise, a greater percentage of students of color other than African American/Black (53.66%; 22 out of 41 responses) reported they had experienced racism than did White students. This supports the findings in the literature that students of color have more encounters with racism than their White peers and perceive their campuses as more hostile and discriminatory (Ancis et al., 2000;

D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Eimers & Pike, 1997; Pewewardy & Frey, 2002; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003; Whitmire, 2004).

Regarding the sources of discrimination that the respondents said they had experienced on campus, racism experiences mainly came from students ( $n=28$ , 44.4%) and faculty ( $n=18$ , 28.57%) among the 63 respondents. Notably, African American/Black alumni mentioned that the racism experiences came from interactions with faculty members (47.62%), whereas other racial groups reported that their racism experiences mainly came from other students. African American/Black alumni respondents experienced racism mostly from interactions with faculty, and they said that 14.29% ( $n=3$ ) of racism came from staff. In addition, 87.50% of African American/Black alumni respondents, 61.9% of nonwhite other than African American/Black alumni respondents, and 54.55% of White alumni respondents identified other students as the source of the sexism they experienced.

The importance of open-ended questions in an alumni survey cannot be understated. These provide rich detail with contextual information. For example, in the open-ended comments, the alumni said that diversity and antiracial education and mitigation policy for conflict should be provided. For example, one respondent wrote that providing “racial sensitivity training” was necessary. Considering findings on students facing racial fatigue and sexism as institutional challenges, combined with the findings on experiences and sources of racism and sexism, improving student and faculty attitudes is critical to improving the campus climate for student learning. Therefore, we can conclude that anti-bias training for students, faculty, and staff would be beneficial.

## **2. Systematical Support for Academic Advising**

We had a question on the most effective factors at our university in helping alumni have a positive experience, by providing ratings of the following: academic advising, diversity and ethnicity education in the coursework, research with faculty, student organizations, career counselling, and networking events with alumni and employers. Academic advising was the most important for all groups. This result aligns with the finding of Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) that faculty are the greatest socializing agents on campus. Faculty set the intellectual and behavioral norms on most campuses and can have the greatest impact on campus climate. Nettles et al. (1986) also reported that students' perceptions regarding the quality of their interactions with faculty were more predictive of academic performance for both Black and White students than the actual frequency of interactions between faculty and students. Based on this finding we can recommend that our institution support faculty to make more academic advising time available by providing faculty with course release, incentive compensations, and/or credits applicable for faculty retention, tenure, and promotion decisions.

### **3. Diversity and Ethnicity Education in the Coursework**

Among the effective items that helped the alumni have a positive experience at our university, diversity and ethnicity education in coursework were more effective for White and nonwhite in general than for African American/Black alumni. This result supports Milem et al. (2005) findings that completion of an academic course that addresses issues of diversity is related to decreases in racial bias and improvement of campus climate. Included in the responses to the open-ended questions, one student wrote: “when working in groups in class, make sure all students feel included in the group.”

### **4. Hiring and Retaining Black Faculty**

Specifically for African American/Black alumni, research with faculty was the most helpful for creating a positive experience. Additionally, we asked in one of the items on the survey, “How important was it for you to have a faculty member of your same race and your ethnicity for academic issues?” Among the African American/Black alumni, 58% marked this as very important or extremely important. In contrast, 86% of the White alumni marked it as not at all important. This result supports studies suggesting that a visible presence of faculty from traditionally underrepresented groups impacts positively on student outcomes and perceptions of climate (cf., Milem et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In fact, one respondent explicitly supported “having more Black professors” in the open-ended suggestions

### **5. Supporting Community Organizations for BIPOC Students**

For African American/Black alumni, student organizations are quite helpful for a positive experience on campus. Additionally, we asked, “How important was it for you to have a community of your same race and ethnicity on campus in shaping your experiences at the university?” and 66.66% ( $n=22$ ) of 33 African American/Black alumni respondents marked this as very important or extremely important. In contrast, 83.6% ( $n=95$ ) of 110 White alumni respondents marked it as not at all important. Furthermore, in the open-ended suggestions, alumni also mentioned interest in a community center for African American/Black students as well as community centers for students who identify as persons of color.

### **Conclusion**

This brief elaborates on the value of an alumni survey and how it can be used to make DEI recommendations at the institutional level. Our survey results show that alumni students of color experienced more racism and sexism and perceived the campus climate more negatively than did White students. The stark differences between the experiences and perceptions of alumni

students of color and White students should raise great concerns for higher educators and administrations. As our survey identified racial fatigue and mental health along with basic needs as areas of concern, we need to focus more resources and support for nonwhite students and especially African American/Black students. Comprehensive climate studies using alumni data should be conducted at appropriate intervals to assess the changing nature of institutions, due both to changing populations and improvement efforts. To obtain a copy of our survey please contact the first author.

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