

Uncovering Hidden Pre-dispositions about Race: A Critical Step toward Enriching Campus Culture

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Abstract

Beginning without prejudging plays a central role in creating quality learning environments. This principle also applies inside and outside the classroom in cultivating and maintaining a campus climate that values racial diversity and promotes positive identity. When hidden racial pre-dispositions are not carefully questioned, discriminating behaviors can persist despite a low level of inter-racial contact. Racial predispositions were queried in a survey about racial attitudes at a mid-western, four-year public university. Different perspectives about the presence or absence of racial discrimination are evident in responses by students of color compared to students who are white.

Introduction

“*Campus life and learning*”, “*Racism and prejudice*” do they go hand in hand? A survey was used that inquires about racism and prejudice on campus, both inside and outside the classroom. This study examines the responses of 200 undergraduate students. Half of the respondents are students of color and half are students who are white.

The undergraduate collegiate experience has been studied by many researchers over the years. However, much of this research has been centered on the Caucasian student’s experience and applied to all students, regardless of race (Kodama, Atkinson, Yang, and Lee, 2002). Research on Caucasian students can provide an understanding of the Caucasian student’s experience; however, it does not provide an accurate understanding of the experience of all students.

Students who feel safe and valued are much more likely to succeed in school than students who do not feel safe and valued (Milem, Chang, and Antonio, 2004). Thus, it is academically crucial that all students feel a sense of belonging and security. Often times, students of color do not feel this. The social and cognitive dimensions of all students’ lives are two closely linked parts of a whole.

Race affects all of us, regardless of the shade of our skin. It affects some of us in positive ways, some of us in negative ways, and in all the ways in between. Moreover, racism and prejudice are harmful to the learning and development of all college students, regardless of skin shade. It is damaging to the giver as well as the receiver. Racism and prejudice can stunt the growth of academic learning in the classroom, stunt the development of healthy emotions and relationships, stunt positive identity development, and stunt the integrity of an individual. Additionally, at the institutional level, racism and prejudice can substantially stunt the growth of diversity on college campuses.

The effects of racism can be lasting and generational. It is imperative that these beliefs and actions are examined so that they may be changed into more healthy beliefs and actions. In the survey, 57% of students of color indicated that they have experienced or seen racism on campus. Forty-four percent of white students indicated that they believe they have experienced or seen racism on campus. Racism and prejudice are often uncomfortable subjects, but ignoring the issues is not the answer. Looking the other way is often interpreted as acceptance and will likely perpetuate the problem. Informed, respectful discussion is an essential component in breaking down the untrue beliefs that hold up racism and prejudice.

Definition of Terms

Definitions were developed by the researcher in conjunction with Webster’s online dictionary.

Bias: prejudice.

Bigotry: the stubborn intolerance of any race, nationality, or creed that differs from one’s own.

Culture: the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group.

Discrimination: making a distinction in favor of or against a person or thing based on the group or class to which that person or thing belongs, rather than on individual merit.

Diversity: possessing differences; uniqueness.

Ethnicity: ethnic traits, background, or association.

Identity: the state of remaining the same under varying aspects or conditions.

Ideology: the myth, belief, etc. that guides an individual, social movement, institution, class, or large group.

Ignorance: lack of knowledge, learning, information, etc.

Nationality: the status of belonging to a particular nation, whether by birth or naturalization.

Minority: a group differing, especially in race, religion, or ethnic background, from the majority of a population.

Prejudice: an unfavorable opinion or feeling formed without knowledge, thought, or reason.

Race: an arbitrary classification of humans, based on any combination of various physical characteristics, such as skin color, facial form, or eye shape.

Racism: a belief that inherent differences among people determine value, and involving the idea that the white race is superior and has the right to rule others.

Stereotyping: a conception or image invested with specific meaning and held in common by members of a group.

Students of color: students whose racial background is anything but full Euro-American.

Tolerance: an objective and permissive attitude toward those whose opinions, practices, race, religion, nationality, and so forth, differ from one's own.

Literature Review

White privilege gives white people an unwarranted advantage everyday that people of color do not have. White privilege applies to all white people, whether or not it is recognized. McIntosh (2007) gives some examples of white privilege:

With regards to moving: If a white person decides to re-locate, it is a reasonable assumption that he/she will be able to find a nice area to live where he/she will not have to worry about safety. Neighbors will most likely be neutral or welcoming to a white person simply because of the shade of his or her skin.

When shopping, white people won't be followed or harassed. White people are represented all around us, and most often in a positive way, (newspapers, television, etc.).

White people can dress in second hand clothes or sweat pants/shirts without having people attribute this to bad morals or poverty.

White people can go to the bank for a loan or to start an account and do not have to worry about their race counting against them.

People are generally nice to white people even if they do not know the person.

The purpose of discussing white privilege is to create awareness that this privilege is real and that it affects everyone's life on a daily basis. There is no need or place for associating guilt with white privilege. People with integrity, when they understand white privilege, can make the effort to eliminate the behaviors and thoughts associated with white privilege.

Chickering and Reisser's (1993) empirical study of the collegiate student (white male) experience is a widely used framework for student development today. The framework alludes to a slight sense of discomfort with diversity. In this framework, there are seven developmental tasks or core issues that post-secondary institutions are culturally driven to accomplish. These tasks include: developing competency, managing emotions, moving through autonomy towards interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, developing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. The first four tasks provide a foundation for the fifth, which then leads to the last two items. Chickering and Reisser (1993) go on to describe what these tasks mean and how to achieve them. The issue lies in the difference between what the tasks mean and the amount of value placed on each task by students of color and by white, male students. This important difference is not addressed in the framework. For instance, with the task of emotions, much the traditional Asian culture teaches that is important to use restraint when interacting with others in order to maintain harmony. This may mean holding back expression of personal views to promote harmony (Chew and Ogi, 1987). For many Caucasian students, harmony is not a key concern when discussing emotions. Rather, expressing input freely and thoroughly is typically the goal. The implication with the task of managing emotions is that in the classroom, when professors ask students to speak up and challenge what is being discussed, or to talk about how they feel about a given subject, Asian American students are less likely to participate than Caucasian students. This could be interpreted negatively by the professor when the Asian American student is simply managing their emotions according to their own cultural norm.

Kim, Atkinson, and Yang (1999) describe the difference in the interpretation of identity development with Asian American students and Caucasian students. For the traditional Asian student, family and cultural values are a large part of a person's identity. Moreover, identity is closely linked to the purpose of the person. However, with the Caucasian student who possesses traditional Western values, well formed identity means self-actualization, and more value is placed on oneself than others. There is a subtle hesitation towards diversity from both races.

Garcia, Hoelscher, and Farmer (2005) discuss racism in terms of a “diversity flashpoint.” A diversity flashpoint is an incident that involves a difficult identity-based situation in a faculty/student interaction. They categorized their diversity flashpoints into eight areas that could trigger or diffuse an incident:

- Accommodating student needs. Faculty supporting and inquiring about student needs for successful learning, and making necessary adjustments to assist students.
- Using student tokens. Faculty treating an individual student as a representative of all people in that race.
- Student ability and English competency. Faculty minimizing student ability and motivation because of the student’s limited English.
- Comfort with difference. Faculty showing interest in and ability to interact with students that are not of their own race.
- Labels that marginalize groups. Faculty or students using labels that communicate that people from minority groups are less capable or less important than white people.
- Becoming an ally. Faculty not creating a safe and welcoming environment for all students.
- Invisibility. Faculty taking or not taking action that ignores the views of students of color.
- Intimidation. Faculty abusing power in faculty/student relationships.

The most prevalent diversity flashpoints were faculty using labels that marginalize others and missing an opportunity to become an ally. Using labels that marginalize others, such as saying “African Americans are unlikely to succeed,” or “Indian giver,” have a negative impact inside and outside the classroom. This sets the tone that it is okay to disrespect others and to de-value diversity. The second most common issue was choosing whether or not to become an ally. When faculty speak up for students of color, this creates a classroom, and ultimately a campus, environment where differences are respected and valued. In Garcia, Hoelscher, and Farmer’s (2005) work, there is a consistent undercurrent of unease with diversity unless effort is purposefully taken to learn more about and appreciate diversity.

Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) describe a way that white people talk about racial issues in public as *racetalk*. Racetalk is talking in a way that is racist but minimizing the racist part with seemingly politically correct jargon. A statement such as, “I’m not racist; I just don’t like them (Hispanic people) taking our jobs” is an example of racetalk. Sometimes people use rhetorical strategies such as these in order to not appear racist.

For many traditional Chicano, Native American, and Puerto Rican students, cultural identity is extremely important and strong, positive cultural identity is considered strength. When students of color were asked (Astin, 1982) what higher education institutions could do to serve them better, responses included: more diversity in the hiring and promoting of minority faculty and administrators; the encouragement of student participation in outreach and student services programs, and recruitment programs that inform students and parents about the benefits of college. Astin (1982) further found that the experience of students of color is greatly enhanced when institutions provide visible as well as financial support to maintain centers where students of color can get together for social and educational exchanges. These measures can potentially help all students get to know each other, thus easing the tension that comes along with the unknown.

The consistent connection in the literature with regards to diversity is a sense of uncertainty with people who are different from us. This uncertainty or doubtfulness appears to apply to numerous types of diversity, and can come from all races.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were students at a four-year, mid-sized, upper mid-west, predominately white, public university. The survey was distributed to one randomly chosen course in each of the following colleges: the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, the College of Business, the College of Science and Math, the College of Engineering and Architecture, and the College of Education. The response rate in the classroom was 100%. The survey was also disseminated at a booth in the Memorial Union for three days. As well, an e-mail was sent out via Multicultural Student Services to inform and invite all students to take part in the survey.

These participant selection methods were chosen to ensure that the participants would be representative of the entire campus and like institutions nationwide. Students were informed that their participation was voluntary and confidential.

The survey began in February of 2008 and ran through the middle of April 2008. This timing allowed for participants to experience the college life for at least one full semester. There were a total of 200 participants, 100 of whom were white and 100 of whom were students of color. All participants were undergraduate students.

University demographics during 2007 were as follows: 11,652 Caucasian students, 145 African American students, 124 Native American students, 120 Asian American students, 76 Hispanic students, and 338 International students, per the 2008 University web site, enrollment section.

Instrumentation

The survey was developed by the researcher (see Fig. 1) to measure how student race affects classroom treatment by faculty and to measure racism and prejudice on campus. With this instrument, students were asked what race(s) they considered themselves, their gender, and two candid questions regarding racism and prejudice. Students responded to the two candid questions regarding racism and prejudice with *yes, no, or sometimes*, and were asked to give examples if applicable.

Results

Survey responses were categorized under two main umbrellas and then coded into categories for each question. One umbrella contained responses from students of color and the other umbrella contained responses from white students. Within each umbrella, the responses from each question were written down and then coded into categories. The categories were then synthesized into fewer, more succinct categories.

Question three read: "Do you think your race affects the way you are treated by faculty?" Some students wrote more than one response for the question. Responses for question three from students of color were coded into the following eight categories (Figure 2).

Category 1: Yes. Verbal and non-verbal communication that express disdain for minority races. There were 16 written responses that indicated that students believe that faculty feel contempt for them due to their race. This disdain appeared to stem from unfamiliarity with the unknown.

Category 2: Yes. Negative stereotypes of people of color. There were 13 written responses that pointed towards negative and untrue stereotypes.

Category 3: Yes. Faculty have been helpful. It has been a good experience. Eight responses attested to faculty being helpful and having a good experience on campus.

Category 4: Yes. Reluctance to help students of color during, before, and after class. Seven participants indicated they believed faculty were hesitant to help them because of their skin color.

Category 5: Yes. Input from students of color is not taken as seriously as input from white students. There were six responses that denoted input from students of color was not taken as seriously as input from white students.

Category 6: Yes. Language barrier. Two responses spoke about a primary language difference as negatively affecting the way students of color are treated.

Category 7: Yes, with no explanation. Eleven participants marked no and gave no written explanation.

Category 8: No, with no explanation. Thirty-nine participants marked yes and gave no written explanation.

Here are some of the actual responses written by students of color for question three.

"I was wearing a hoodie on campus due to cold temperatures and I overheard a faculty member saying I look like a gangster. If I was Caucasian I believe that the faculty member wouldn't have said that."

"The way they look at me, like they don't want anything to do with me."

"I'm ridiculously disappointed with all the acting taking place on campus, employees pretending to not be racist, but saying and doing things that are."

"Some teachers put the student down or do not respect them or do not take time to listen to the students as they do with white students."

"In good ways. They (faculty) try to explain something carefully when I ask them."

Question three was also asked of white students. "Do you think your race affects the way you are treated by faculty?" Here again some students gave more than one written response. The following are seven categories that were developed from this group's responses (Figure 3).

Category 1: No. All races are treated equally. Sixteen participants believed that all races are treated the same.

Category 2: Yes. Racism in communication towards minority students (intentional or unintentional). There were 14 respondents that indicated faculty were using communication in a racist way in class. Whether the racism was intentional or not, the fundamental opinion was that this form of communication was not acceptable.

Category 3: No. My race does not affect the way I am treated. Seven respondents stated that race does not

affect the way they are treated. The difference between category one and category three is that with category one, the undertone indicated that faculty are making positive efforts towards equity; with category three, white privilege is being implemented.

Category 4: Yes. Favoritism is given to students who are diverse simply due to their diversity. Four participants stated they have experienced prejudice.

Category 5: Yes. Language barrier. There were two participants that indicated language diversity as a reason that some students are treated differently. "Differently" implied that diverse students were not treated as well as students who spoke English as their primary language.

Category 6: Yes, with no explanation. Three students marked yes with no explanation.

Category 7: No, with no explanation. Fifty-nine students marked no with no explanation.

Here are some of the written responses to question three by white students.

"I have never felt like the fact that I am white has affected anything."

"Because I am Caucasian, I feel as if instructors are more likely to give me the benefit of the doubt."

"The abundance of Caucasians on campus sometimes set the professors into a mode. They (faculty) don't really consider that other races are present sometimes and just teach from a Caucasian perspective."

"Faculty using the N word in class when minority students are not there."

Question four read, "Have you experienced or seen racism on campus?" These responses were coded into 11 categories with students of color. 57% of participants responded affirmatively, 43% of participants responded with nay. Some participants wrote more than one response (Figure 4).

Category 1: Yes. Racist comments and/or jokes heard hanging out on campus. Eleven participants have heard inappropriate comments or jokes regarding race.

Category 2: Yes. Being ignored by students and faculty. Seven students wrote that they feel ignored or overlooked by others because of their race. This may be due to feeling unsure of how to communicate with the unfamiliar.

Category 3: Yes. Looks of disdain or unjust treatment by students and faculty. Six participants wrote about

looks of scorn from others because of their race.

Category 4: Yes. Socially disregarded. Six students indicated that they feel unwelcome to socialization activities on campus, such as Greek life, other organizations, and the pool.

Category 5: Yes. Working on campus from staff. Five participants have felt discriminated against while working on campus.

Category 6: Yes. At dorms. Four responses indicated there is discrimination against minority students at the dorms.

Category 7: Yes. From Financial Aid Office staff. Three students stated they have been discriminated against by people at the Financial Aid office.

Category 8: Yes. At Dining Center, from staff and students. Three students wrote about incidents of racism, primarily from staff.

Category 9: Yes. Campus bus service staff and students. Two respondents indicated they experienced racism while using the campus bus service.

Category 10: Yes, with no explanation. Sixteen respondents marked yes without explanation.

Category 11: No, with no explanation. Forty-one respondents marked no without explanation.

The following are written responses from students of color from survey question four.

"Sometimes I guess some white people do not like our skin color."

"A few times I've been to the Financial Aid office to ask questions. The lady is rude to me. Her answers were curt, short and not helpful. Even though she was professional and nice with the Caucasian person before me."

"I have seen and experienced racism too many times. Especially at work at the Dining Center, the director was always picking on me; he did the same with the other Asian students."

"When I got my final grade at my math class, it was a "B" plus and it was .75 short of the "A." Same thing happened to a local (white) guy but he got the additional points he needed to get an "A". This is unfair."

"Subtle looks, words, or actions that show that people don't like you."

White students responded to the same question, "Have you experienced or seen racism on campus?" Here again,

some students gave more than one written response for the question. 44% of participants responded affirmatively and 56% of students responded with nay. It should be noted that of these 44% of participants who indicated an affirmative response, four participants indicated yes, but with a written response that they believe they were a recipient of racism because they were treated in an unwelcome manner by students of color. This is actually a case of prejudice rather than racism for these four participants. Eight categories were developed from this set of responses (Figure 5).

Category 1: Yes. Racist comments/jokes heard hanging out on campus. Fourteen students indicated they have heard racist jokes or comments on campus. There appears to be a grave lack of knowledge, or willful blinders, regarding what kinds of jokes are racist. Some students stated they were making a joke about a person's race but that it was "just a joke so it was okay".

Category 2: Yes. Racist acts at campus sponsored events. Eight students wrote about campus events they had seen that were overtly racist. The tone in these responses was that the students believed these events should not have taken place.

Category 3: Yes. Racist communication, verbal or non-verbal, from faculty, staff, and students. Six students indicated they have heard or seen communication that is racist. These students did not believe this type of communication was inappropriate.

Category 4: Yes. Avoiding students because they are different. Six participants stated that they have avoided students of color or saw students of color avoided because they are unsure of how to interact with diversity.

Category 5: Yes. Students of color unwelcoming to white students. Four students indicated that they felt students of color were being racist to them because the students of color were unwelcoming to them. This is more a case of prejudice than racism.

Category 6: Yes. At dorms. Two students wrote about seeing racism in the dorms.

Category 7: Yes, with no explanation. Six participants marked yes with no explanation.

Category 8: No, with no explanation. Fifty-six participants marked no with no explanation.

The following are written responses to question four from white students.

"I hear racist remarks and jokes on campus. Stupid people say stupid things."

"A few of my friends crack a joke or two when we hang out but it isn't anything hate oriented. We all make fun of everyone for everything." This is an example of racetalk.

"One of my friends is African American and if we are together, I will get more attention from people than he does."

"Mostly it has been indirect or subtle. I have seen a (white) student allow four white students to go through the door before him and then cut in front of a single student that was from a different race."

"I have witnessed two occasions of racism on campus. Both were committed by white-supremists and the targets were African Americans and a group of men from Sri Lanka. The attack was verbal and physical harm was threatened."

Discussion

Upon examining the individual responses and categories, meaningful underlying messages or themes, were found. Results from this study suggest five themes. One theme is derived solely from students of color, one theme is derived solely from students who are white, and three themes are shared by everyone.

A concerning theme from students of color is a feeling of being disliked and disregarded simply because of race. This feeling reportedly is brought about by the actions or non-actions, and verbal and non-verbal communication from white students, staff, and faculty. The following are additional written responses that demonstrate this theme.

"I have personally experienced the bias ways of treatment by faculty when I was the only brown person in a small class. I was never given the opportunity to express my opinions like other students did."

"I have seen a couple of my friends who were discriminated by some people at work. The people at work (on campus) give him a different kind of look and didn't like him right from the beginning."

"People are not comfortable helping me when I ask for help."

"In group work I feel like people act like they can't hear us."

"I don't appreciate the jokes that put down people based on someone's race."

One theme coming from white students is that they do not feel that race affects their lives, largely because they are white and so are most of the faculty and staff. Much of this rationale stems from lack of knowledge about

white privilege. This theme is supported with additional responses such as:

“My teachers are the same race as me, so I really don’t see any problem.”

“Around here I’m just the norm.”

“I’m white. I’m in the majority so I don’t think race affects me.”

“I guess because I am white, I do not feel that I have been treated differently.”

“I have never felt like the fact that I am white has affected anything.”

A third theme, shared by both groups, is the belief that racism exists on campus, and it is a problem. This theme is supported by statements such as:

“I am treated better because I’m white. Everybody should be treated well.”

“I sometimes feel that I am treated better than others because of my race. I feel that professors are more willing to help me when I have question than my peers of a different race.”

*“I had a teacher just today refer to African Americans as ni**ers.”*

“I have heard racist remarks and jokes said on campus even when just walking by people. They were not directed to me, however they were very inappropriate.”

“Outright racism at events sponsored by the campus.”

“Racism is everywhere on campus. The way people are looked at and the conversations behind peoples backs.”

The fourth theme, shared by everyone, is the notion that racism does not exist on campus. To a varying extent, this is expressed in survey questions three and four. Respondents in both groups indicated they have had a positive experience with regards to racial diversity. While this is a promising finding, there is still much work to be done in addressing the not so positive findings. This theme is further demonstrated with comments such as:

“Staff and faculty treat everyone good.”

“I’ve never seen somebody from a minority race treated badly because of their race.”

“Everything’s good.”

“So far everything’s been good on campus.”

“I haven’t experienced racism yet.” It is interesting to note the word “yet.” This word “yet” demonstrates

the hesitation felt by this student of color. She seems to have had a good experience so far, but is very much aware that racism could still rear its ugly head.

The fifth theme, also shared by everyone, is a sense of hesitation or discomfort with racial diversity overall. This theme is also shown in responses from both questions three and four. The hesitation often implies that little is known about the person from another race. In some responses, the fear or hesitation is clear and in other responses the fear or hesitation is more subtle. I refer to this as the hesitation factor. I venture to say that this hesitation factor, or feeling of discomfort, applies to many other forms of diversity, and is at the root of much mutual discord.

Here is some additional support of this concept, from students of color and white students.

“People who grew up here were sheltered from diversity and they don’t know how to react.”

“If I don’t know somebody and they look a lot different than me, I’m not comfortable talking to them.”

“I am sometimes afraid to approach a white person because I wonder if they’re racist.”

“In the dorm, people are afraid of other races.”

“Not sitting with other races and keeping distance.”

Conclusions

Five themes about racial discrimination emerged from a 200-person interracial survey at a mid-western, four-year public university. Three themes were shared between students of color and students who were white. These include: (a) instances of racism are recognized to exist on campus, (b) instances of positive inter-racial experience occur routinely, and (c) there is significant hesitation in taking action to resolve racial concerns. Furthermore, students of color expressed the viewpoint that they were often labeled by the color of their skin rather than individual ideas and abilities. Conversely, students who were white had a hard time visualizing discrimination in their community, let alone empathizing with those who might feel discrimination.

In order to create and sustain a campus environment that is welcoming and inclusive to all, we need to educate students, faculty, and staff about the importance of valuing racial differences. We must start by reaching people where they are in their identity development and in their understanding of diversity. Reaching out can start on an individual level with just a smile to someone from a different race. Reaching out can also begin in how we talk. For instance, using “we/they” language, by any group of people, creates an atmosphere of division.

At a structural level, we must strive to actually have students and faculty of color and then actively encourage exemplary students and faculty to assume important leadership roles. There is also a role for fun and inclusive, campus-wide events that underscore the benefits and importance of valuing differences as well as reducing inhibitions about recognizing and addressing racial concerns. There is also an opportunity in campus media (outdoor advertising, poster-boards, brochures, and web pages) to show students of color and white students working together in a positive manner.

Lastly, it is imperative that post-secondary institutions have a zero tolerance policy for racism and prejudice. While such policies must be enforced, precepts of Process Education are especially helpful in promoting diverse communities teaching and learning. Relevant principles include a desire to see growth in others, enjoyment of assessment, openness to feedback from others, commitment to self-growth, and passion for collaborative problem solving.

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Figure 1

<p>Teaching Learning Survey</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What race(s) do you consider yourself? (please circle all that apply) Caucasian African American Hispanic Native American Asian Other: 2. Are you: Male Female 3. Do you think your race affects the way you are treated by faculty? Yes No Sometimes Please explain, be specific. 4. Have you experienced or seen racism on campus? Yes No Please give example(s)

Figure 2 Students of Color responses to Question three
“Do you think your races affects that way you are treated by faculty?”

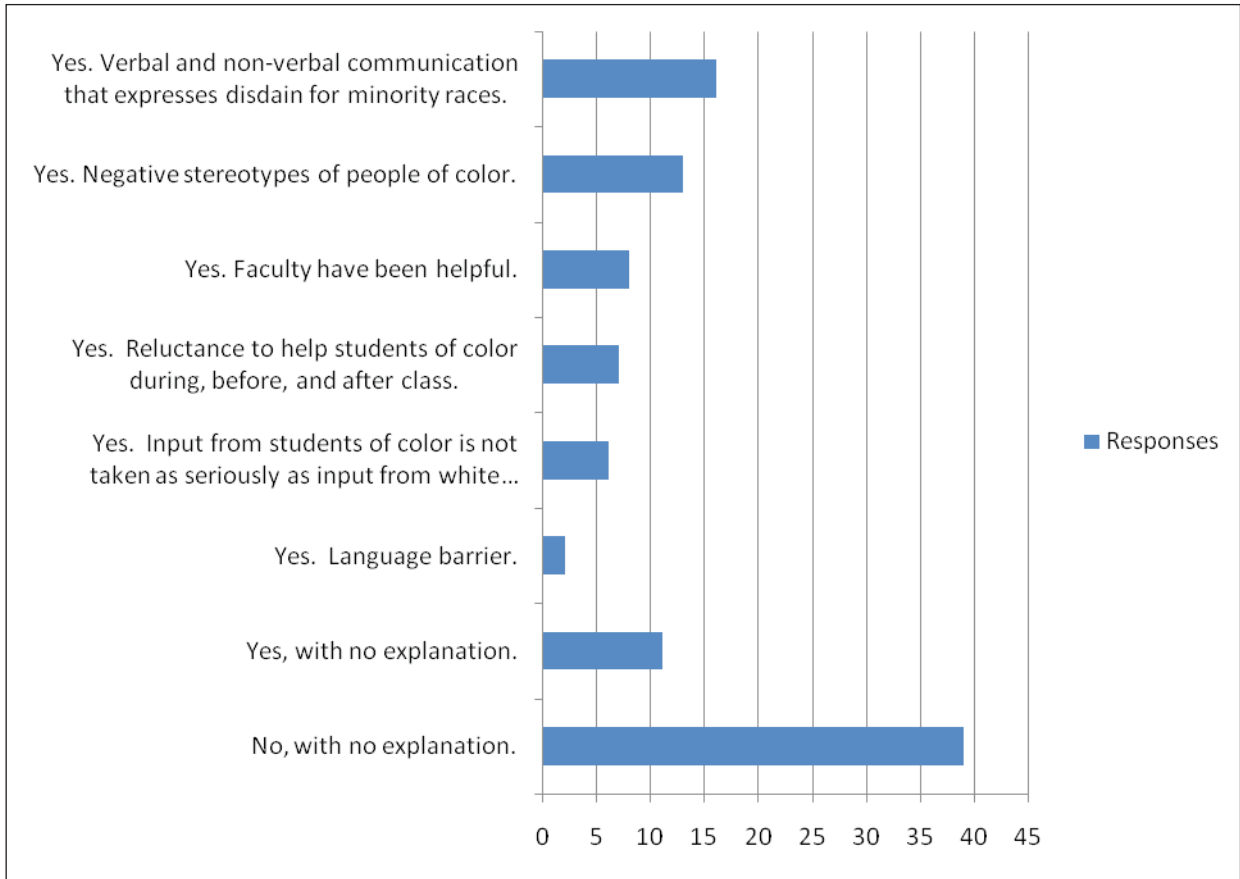
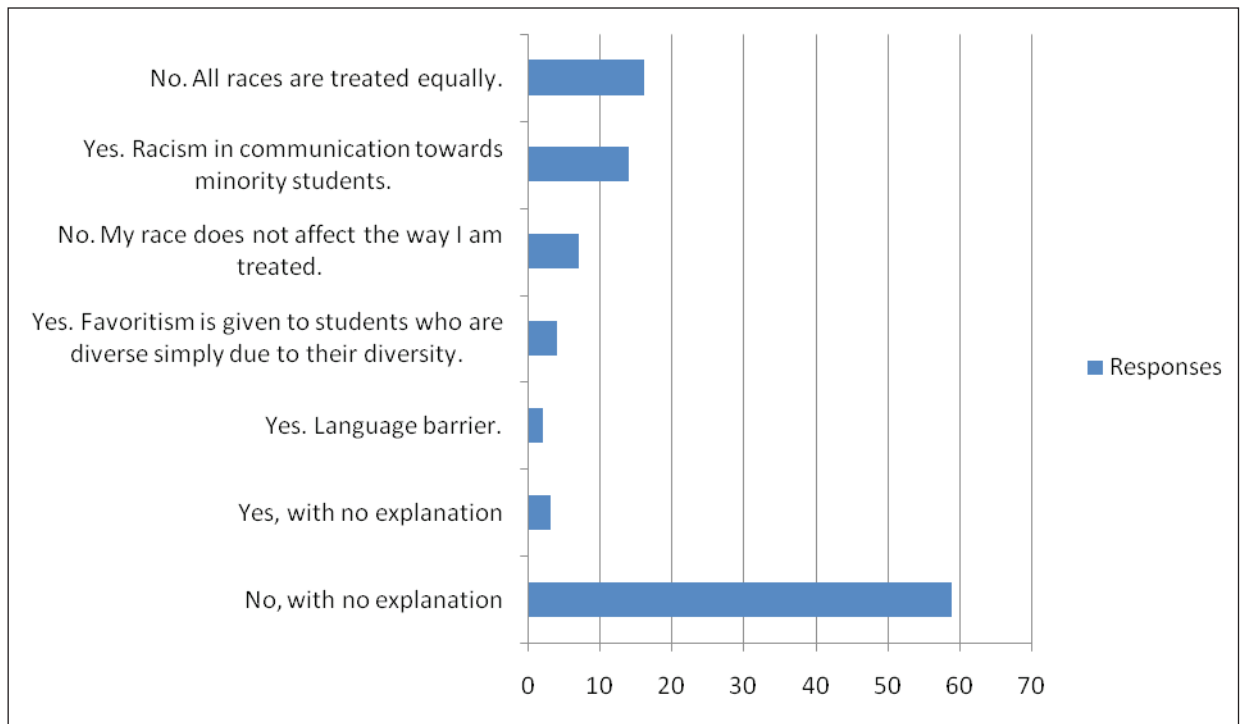


Figure 3 White students responses to Question three
“Do you think your races affects that way you are treated by faculty?”



**Figure 4 Student of color responses to Question four
“Have you experienced or seen racism on campus?”**

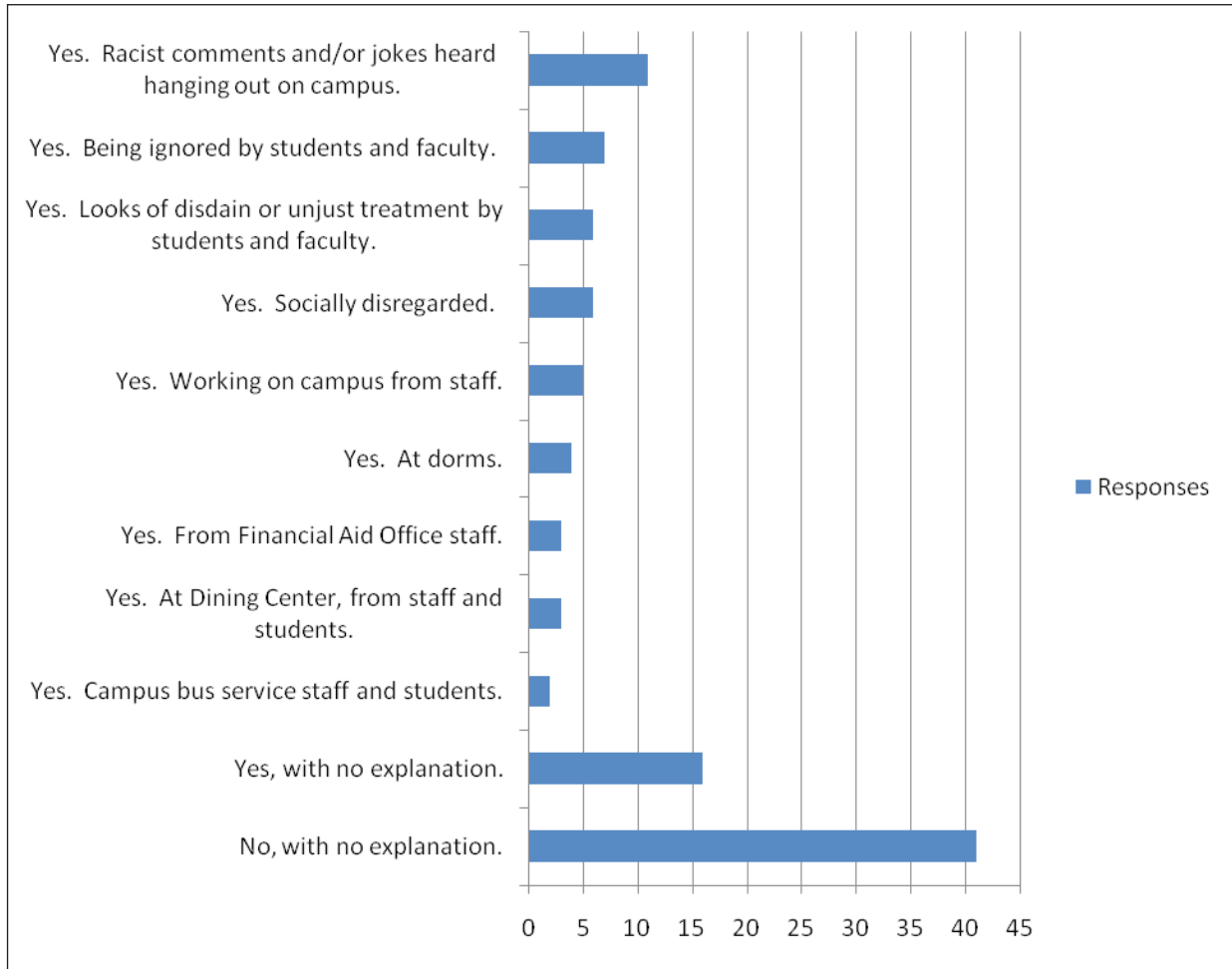


Figure 5 White student responses to Question four
“Have you experienced or seen racism on campus?”

