

Race As Human Capital:
The Impact Of Race On Student Contributions To Course Discussions
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Race in Higher Education

The national debate surrounding affirmative action policies in higher education have prompted numerous examinations of the effects of diversity in higher education. These studies have overwhelmingly concluded that when diversity is actively attended to a diverse campus will lead to increased educational and social outcomes for all students. As is well known, it is this research which has been at the heart of the two U.S. Supreme Court decisions regarding university affirmative action policies. Thus, it is safe to say that the benefits and importance of diversity on campus have been well demonstrated and can hardly be overstated.

"That" but not "How"

However, while researchers have conclusively demonstrated *that* diversity matters, relatively little is understood about *how* diversity matters. Pascarella (2006) has pointed to this as one of the key areas in the scholarship of campus diversity that is in need of attention. He calls on researchers to uncover the underlying mechanisms and processes which are responsible for producing the causal linkages that have been consistently found between campus diversity and student learning. Until now, however, researchers have largely focused their energies on establishing the existence of significant positive benefits (Alger et al. 2000). This is due in part to the pragmatic nature of such research as it directly impacted legal and policy decisions. The result has been that the actual dynamics which produce these positive effects have been largely treated as a “black box,” which has been identified, but not explored. Even in the research that does address classroom dynamic directly there is still not much empirical examination of how intergroup interaction takes place. For example, in her report about diversity effects in the classroom, Patricia Marin (2000), examined classroom dynamics directly through qualitative data including focus groups, interviews, observation and documents. She argues that a diverse student body is a necessary component in order to maximize outcomes, but she does not offer an explanation as to how these diverse interactions proceed. While this works does much to advance our understanding of how diversity works in the classroom, it ultimately leaves part of the puzzle unsolved.

We Fill the Gap

In this study, we investigate the impact of a racially mixed student population on topics arising in class discussion in order to provide a better understanding of exactly how diversity matters in the classroom. It may be reasonable to assume that students bring different life experiences with them into the classroom, but we do not yet know if and how these experiences translate into points of inquiry. We seek to answer the following question: “Does racial diversity in the classroom lead to a more diverse collection of thoughts, ideas, and opinions in the classroom? Is there a meaningful difference in the kind of topics discussed by students of different races?” We analyze more than 400 student contributions to a sociology of race course-blog (a course requirement intended to serve as an open-extension of class discussions). Our data suggests that White students are more likely to bring up the following: intersections of race with secondary institutions (e.g., schools), mentions of some race other than Black or White, mention of White ethnics, and second-hand experiences with racism. Alternately, Non-White students are more likely to mention the following: first-hand experiences with racism, anger or some other clear emotional expression about race, and media depictions of race/racism.

Questions For Discussion

- Ultimately, are the KINDS of contributions (personal, emotional, media-influenced) non-White students bring to discussions of race important to understanding race in a scholarly context?
- Are unique contributions (by race) only possible in race courses or race-based conversations?
- If these contributions ARE possible in other courses, is the impact of diversity lessened in those courses where student interaction is minimal (e.g., large classes, non-lab sciences)?