

Perceptions and Experiences of International and Domestic Students of Color at Hofstra University

Information item submitted by the Graduate Academic Affairs Committee of the University Senate

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Introduction

The opportunity to learn within a diverse student population is important for a complete social and academic experience on a college campus. Discussions that include individuals from varied backgrounds provide students with lenses to understand the complex nature of social and cultural issues. A multicultural collegiate environment will also better prepare students for success in the increasingly diverse work force. Therefore, it is important that students of all ethnicities and cultural backgrounds feel comfortable on Hofstra's campus in order to ensure an appropriate collegiate experience for the entire student population. Additionally, international students coming to our campus likely find themselves in a new and demanding environment, a reality that brings forth a host of challenges beyond those typically associated with attending a university in one's own country.

In the Spring of 2009, Hofstra participated in a diversity analysis which included data from 27 universities and 12,164 respondents (including 636 undergraduates and 387 graduates from Hofstra). Undergraduate and graduate students were asked to provide a rating, on a 5-point scale, in regard to several issues surrounding multiculturalism and diversity. Examples of targeted issues included (a) the value of, and how comfortable students are with, interacting with people of diverse backgrounds, (b) whether the students felt the university should focus on recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty and student body, (c) whether students felt they are treated fairly, (d) how comfortable students are reporting acts of discrimination, (e) whether or not students had witnessed acts of discrimination, and (f) how supportive the university was of people from varied ethnic backgrounds.

In general, the executive summary indicated that Hofstra students felt comfortable on campus in regard to issues of multiculturalism and diversity. For example, students indicated that they (a) felt comfortable interacting with students with diverse backgrounds, (b) were treated fairly on campus (75% of undergraduates; 86% of graduates), (c) had not witnessed discriminatory behavior (76% of undergraduates; 91% of graduates) or harassment (82% of undergraduates; 89% of graduates), (d) had not personally experienced discriminatory behavior (87% of undergraduates; 92% of graduates) or harassment (90% of undergraduates; 96% of graduates), and (e) felt Hofstra "encourages free and open discussions about difficult topics" (76% of undergraduates; 70% of graduates).

Focus Group Findings

Although the statistics from the Diversity Analysis were generally positive, the executive summary, and a closer look at the data by the Graduate Academic Affairs Committee (GAAC), revealed several areas of concern. Some of these concerns included students (i) not taking advantage of diversity-related learning opportunities, (ii) not knowing where to find information related to policies about reporting acts of discrimination, and (iii) reporting that Hofstra employees (administrators, staff, and faculty) were amongst groups that displayed discriminatory behavior. In order to examine these issues in more detail, the GAAC organized four focus groups (data are available from three sessions) centering on the experiences of graduate international and domestic students of color on Hofstra's campus. Two of the focus groups included graduate students (n = 8 for each session) from several programs across campus. Participants were recruited via graduate directors who submitted names of graduate students of color and international students interested in participating in diversity focus groups. The focus groups were held on December 2, 2009 and May 5, 2010. The ethnic backgrounds of the students are not available, but the 2009-2010 Annual Report of the Hofstra University Senate states that attendance "...was represented by multiple cultures, colors, genders, graduate schools and programs except the Law School" (p. 30). A third focus group included five law school students who identified as Puerto Rican, Indian, Vietnamese, and African American.

Law school students were recruited by the Director of Student and Multicultural Affairs at the law school. All focus groups were led by Dr. Jonathan Lightfoot, Department of Teaching, Literacy and Leadership, and one other Hofstra professor. The following pages report the themes identified throughout the focus group transcripts by the GAAC. Where applicable, the focus group findings are compared to data presented in the 2009 Diversity Analysis. The purpose of presenting the findings below is to inform the appropriate personnel and offices of the concerns brought forth via the focus groups.

Acts of Discrimination

Two of the focus group questions involved whether or not the graduate students witnessed or experienced “any racial, gender, sexual orientation, or other discriminatory behavior on campus within the last year.” Although several students mentioned that they had not, others provided specific examples:

Most. I guess from being older and experienced. There were a couple of professors, and I knew it was racial... You work at something so hard and you're given an A- when other students, white students, didn't do so much and was given an A. I take that personally... here are some problems. I've experienced it more than once with different faculty members... Some of the things that were said in the class were directed right at me. He degraded Hempstead, right in front of me. I said, “excuse me sir, these are young minds and these types of conversations are what keeps racism going.” He didn't like that though the students agreed with me. I had to drop the class one week before it ended and lost the money I spent on tuition. This was an adjunct...

It wasn't recent, and during my undergrad (this person I believe also teaches graduate school), the first day of class we were going around the room introducing ourselves and stating what program we're in. When my professor got to me he said, “Let me guess; you're going to be a Spanish teacher.” And I said, “No, I'm going to be an English teacher.” So it just made me feel like “what, because I'm Hispanic, I'm going to be teaching Spanish?”

The professor always called out on three male students. The women in the class felt like it was a boys club and they didn't appreciate it.

What I would like to say is, within our program (doctoral) there are some people who experienced negative things from professors. I'm not going to be specific, but it's not good. It wasn't very kind at all. There's no way to explicitly explain it, but it's sort of underneath the radar. Like you can't say this is what the person did, but you can tell through the dialogue of how the person speaks to students that there is something wrong.

One of the focus groups had a lengthy discussion regarding the students' concern about reporting acts of discrimination, especially subtle acts (see quote just above for an example). This concern is exemplified by the following quote:

What's the worst that could happen? Well it would affect grading. It would affect how people deal with you. I mean you know you have all of these other professors to still deal with, you don't want to be labeled as, you know, she was the person who said such and such and such.

These focus group data coincide with findings from the 2009 Diversity Analysis, in which faculty members were amongst the groups on campus that graduate students identified as exhibiting discriminatory behavior. Specifically, 29 graduate students in the Diversity Analysis indicated that

they were discriminated against or harassed, and "...the most often cited source of discrimination was administrator/staff member (48%), followed by faculty member (39%), and another student (32%)" (p. 23, Diversity: Undergraduate and Graduate Analysis, 2009).

Learning about Diversity-Related Issues

The focus groups were asked, "How do you perceive Hofstra in providing opportunities to learn about diversity-related issues?" Although a few stated that they knew of several activities offered to the students, many of the graduate students did not feel that they were learning about diversity-related issues on campus. Some of the responses included the following:

I remember when I was an undergrad, for graduate school I really don't hear anything about that other than when I'm taking classes like Prof. Lightfoot's but no one else.

I tried to get involved in clubs and I went to the Multicultural Office in the Student Center, and filled out a form about clubs I would like to join. No one ever got back to me or contacted me.

Well I feel in terms of classes, I feel 2 or 3 are related to law and race. They are taught by minority professors and these classes are really interesting regarding to race and immigration. I feel in general these classes will be taken by foreigners versus by the majority which could learn the most from these classes. I feel the general core classes could do more.

I only saw one class in the doctor's program that related to gender and ethnicity. And I took that and liked it, but otherwise that was it.

Data from the 2009 Diversity Analysis showed that the majority of the respondents were learning about diversity-related issues in the classroom (68%), but only 25% through campus involvement. Although graduate students may not participate in diversity-related campus activities because many events are during the day and most graduate classes are in the evening, lack of participation may also result from the students not knowing when these activities take place. The GAAC is currently constructing a document that will provide recommendations for disseminating relevant information to graduate students. The distribution of diversity-related activities will be included in the recommendations.

Perception of Diversity in the Classroom

A third theme that emerged from the focus groups was a perception of a lack of diversity, especially in the classroom. Although some students mentioned that the diversity at Hofstra "...is great" and "Pretty good in all classes I had...", there was sentiment that the campus appears diverse on the surface, but that a lack of diversity reveals itself in the classroom. This theme is exemplified by the following quotes:

When I walk around campus it seems pretty diverse to me, but I think in the Business School the numbers are really off....I am President of the Zarb School Black & Hispanic Association. We have 5 members and 4 are officers. The business school is diverse, but there are just some ethnic groups that have a higher population.

I agree that on the surface the school might appear diverse but in practice it is not. There were no African Americans in my entire section.

....I can say that in the two classes that I've been in there's been probably me and one other minority each year.

Planning Diversity-Related Activities

Graduate students in all three focus groups were asked how supportive “Hofstra people” are to people with different language and cultural backgrounds. The majority of responses from the graduate focus groups show that the students felt “Hofstra people” have been very supportive. These responses are congruent with data from the 2009 Diversity Analysis. Scores of 3.70 or higher (5-point scale; 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) were reported when graduate students responded to the following statements:

- (a) This college/university is accessible to people with physical disabilities (4.11);
- (b) This college/university is supportive of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (3.70);
- (c) This college/university is supportive of people with different ethnic backgrounds (4.15); and
- (d) This college/university is supportive of international students (4.12).

There were responses from the law school focus group that reflect the need for further support. Specifically, officers from law school diversity organizations (e.g., Asian-Pacific American Law Students Association [APALSA] and South Asian Law Student Association [SALSA]) mentioned the need for help in organizing celebrations of diversity, as can be seen in the following comments:

I also find it weird that Hofstra makes these ethnic groups spear head diversity orientation. This is a lot of work and we don't get paid. We shouldn't be doing their job. If Hofstra wants to address diversity then Hofstra should take the forefront not the students.

{Administrator Name} hasn't reached out to APALSA or SALSA and I plan on contacting him. Also I want to address student affairs regarding us having to spearhead diversity fair for new students.

I just feel like we need more assistance and help.

Increasing Sensitivity to Diversity

Keeping in mind the limitations of data gathered from focus groups, and that the majority of students report feeling comfortable on Hofstra's campus, opportunities to continue growing as a community regarding diversity-related issues were noted in the data. Therefore, following the focus groups, the GAAC had a meeting with various leaders from relevant programs and offices (e.g., Services for Students with Disabilities, Center for Teaching and Scholarly Excellence, Multicultural and International Students Program Office, Center for Civic Engagement, Hofstra Cultural Center) across Hofstra's campus. At this meeting, recommendations for increasing awareness of diversity-related issues and educating Hofstra employees were discussed. The core recommendations were as follows:

- (a) Survey faculty members in regard to perceptions of diversity-related issues;
- (b) Discuss the importance of integrating diversity-related issues with Deans and Department Chairs;

- (c) Create a professional development series for administrators, faculty, and staff regarding diversity-related issues that has a wide variety of activities (e.g., watch student interviews that are archived under the heading of “True Life at Hofstra,” workshops, seminars);
- (d) Examine multicultural programs and accompanying assessment data from peer institutions; and
- (e) Pursue grant monies to develop programs and assessment mechanisms for those programs.

Another notable point coming out of this meeting, along with discussions at GAAC meetings, is that it is important to be sensitive to the varying concerns among the diverse groups on campus. That is, each group may have distinct issues that concern them and these individual needs should be addressed. We need to avoid thinking that a particular diversity initiative will automatically benefit the variety of groups on Hofstra’s campus.

Concluding Comments

The focus groups identified several opportunities for improving the Hofstra experience for international and domestic students of color. Feeling comfortable, supported, and respected seems vital for a positive experience on a college campus and should be what we are striving for as leaders of the university. In addition, as the university focuses on increasing enrollment and retaining students, it is important that current students can tell prospective students that diversity is celebrated and supported on our campus. This positive “word of mouth recruiting” is imperative, as the number of international student applications is increasing in the New York metropolitan area. The GAAC trusts that the persons receiving the information above will use it to aid the ongoing process of improving the experiences of international and domestic graduate students of color.