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DEVELOPING A PLURALISTIC ORIENTATION:
A COMPARISON OF ETHNIC MINORITY AND WHITE COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Today's colleges and universities are more diverse than they have ever been. Significant changes have been made in the composition of college student bodies in the past four decades. In the 1960s, more African Americans were admitted into colleges and universities as a result of the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Higher Education Act. In the 1970s, large numbers of women entered higher education. In the 1980s, older students were openly recruited. In the 1990s, new ethnic student populations appeared on campuses. In the future, more Latino students are projected to enroll in postsecondary institutions due to demographic shifts in the American population (Fry, 2002).

However, in the last decade, programs and other efforts aimed at achieving racial diversity on college campuses have come under attack. For example, federal courts have dismantled affirmative action programs, and citizens in several states have voted to repeal affirmative action laws that provided equal opportunity in education. In June 2003, the Supreme Court is expected to rule on two lawsuits filed against the University of Michigan for its admissions practices for undergraduate (*Gratz v. Bollinger*, 2000) and law students (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2001/2002).

As a result of the challenges to the use of affirmative action programs, numerous studies examining the effects of racially diverse college environments on students' learning and personal development have emerged (e.g., Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Springer, Palmer, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin (2002) developed a framework for studying the effects of diversity on learning and democracy outcomes (e.g., active thinking, intellectual engagement, citizenship engagement, perspective-taking). They examined the effects of

classroom diversity and informal interactions among diverse peers and found that diversity experiences lead to positive learning and democracy outcomes (Gurin, et al., 2002).

In addition to the cognitive and social development of students, employers have articulated a need for a more diverse workforce to meet the needs of a changing population, as well as better prepared college graduates who have the skills to manage diversity in the work environment. *WorkForce 2000*, a report on work and workers for the 21st century, projected that 85% of the new entrants into the workforce will be women, immigrants, and racial/ethnic minorities (Johnston & Packer, 1987). A study by the RAND Institute also indicated highly valued cognitive and social skills desired for employees which include: the ability to work effectively in groups with others of diverse backgrounds, openness to new ideas and perspectives, and empathy with other workers' perspectives (Bikson & Law, 1994). These same skills are embodied in the AAC&U's (1995) American Commitments Initiative, which emphasizes the important role colleges and universities must play in teaching students "to live creatively with the multiplicity, ambiguity, and irreducible differences that are the defining conditions of the contemporary world" (p. xxii). Furthermore, students who have the capacity to develop a societal perspective on issues, exhibit empathy, and evaluate alternative perspectives on complex social problems are better prepared to take on roles as decision-makers and negotiators of difference in a pluralistic democracy (Hurtado, Engberg, Ponjuan, & Landreman, 2002).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to provide a baseline, empirically driven model of how colleges and universities are preparing students to live and work in an increasingly complex and diverse democracy. This study introduces a new measure, "pluralistic orientation" (i.e., ability to

see the world from another's perspective; tolerance for difference; openness to having one's views challenged; ability to work cooperatively with diverse others; and ability to discuss controversial issues), which encapsulates many of the skills necessary for students to work effectively in today's diverse democracy. By incorporating data collected from freshmen at ten collaborating universities, this study provides an important understanding of what factors mediate the development of a pluralistic orientation and how race influences this development.

Further, by using structural equation modeling techniques, this study provides strong empirical evidence for the validity and reliability of our measurement and structural model. As a result, our model serves as an important accountability mechanism for administrators and policy makers to use in creating and improving educational practices that prepare students for the challenges inherent in a pluralistic society.

Theoretical Framework

In order to build our structural model, we relied on two sets of theoretically driven hypotheses:

Hypothesis set 1: Interaction with diverse peers increases (a) an overall pluralistic orientation, (b) cognitive complexity, (c) cultural awareness, (d) an understanding that conflict enhances democracy, and (e) a commitment to taking social action.

- (a) Several studies point to the theoretical link between interacting with diverse peers and the development of a pluralistic orientation. Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn & Terenzini (1996) found that students who reported interactions with diverse peers showed a greater openness to diverse perspectives and a willingness to challenge their own beliefs after the first year of college. Springer, Terenzini, Pascarella & Nora (1995) also found that students who interacted with diverse peers reported more frequent discussion of complex

social issues, such as the economy, peace, human rights equality, and justice. Hurtado (2001) discovered that studying with a diverse peer was significantly linked to acceptance of people with different beliefs. Additionally, Hurtado et al. (2002) demonstrated a significant relationship between interactions with diverse peers and the ability to see multiple perspectives.

- (b) Research by Gurin, et al. (2002) and Hurtado (2001) demonstrates that interacting with diverse peers influences the development of active thinking skills in college students.
- (c) Several studies suggest that interacting with diverse peers increases students' level of cultural awareness (Astin, 1993; Milem, 1994; Hurtado, et al., 1999; Antonio, 1998; Antonio, 2001).
- (d) A study by Hurtado, et al. (2002) identified interaction with diverse peers as a highly significant predictor of students' beliefs that conflict is necessary in a democracy.
- (e) Similarly, Hurtado et al. (2002) discovered that interactions with diverse peers are a highly significant predictor of students' beliefs in the importance of social action engagement.

Hypothesis set 2: The development of a pluralistic orientation will be influenced by (a) student's cognitive complexity (b) level of cultural awareness (c) beliefs that conflict enhances democracy and (d) commitment to taking social action.

- (a) Work by King and Baxter Magolda (1996) and King and Shuford (1996) suggests a theoretical connection between cognitive complexity and multicultural thinking.
- (b) Intergroup contact theory (Stephan & Stephan, 1996; Triandis, 1972) provides a theoretical rationale for linking cultural knowledge to greater openness and tolerance for diverse others.

- (c) Students who exhibit an understanding of the importance of conflict in a democracy will be more open to having their views challenged and more willing to engage in discussions around controversial issues (Prentice & Miller, 1999).
- (d) Students who demonstrate a greater proclivity toward taking social action will likely be more tolerant of difference, open to new experiences, and exhibit a greater ease in working collaboratively with diverse others to effect societal change (Freire, 1972; Collins, 1996).

Methods

Data Source and Sample

The data for this study came from a survey that served as a primary component of a national collaborative research project entitled *Preparing College Students for a Diverse Democracy*. The survey focused on the pre-college behaviors and attitudes of first-year students who matriculated during the Fall 2000 academic year. All first-year students at the ten participating campuses were eligible for participation.

After consulting with each of the campuses, a survey distribution method most appropriate was employed. Three campuses administered the survey during summer orientation sessions; four campuses mailed the survey to their first year students and then did a second wave mailing later in the semester/quarter to students who did not return the initial survey; and the remaining three schools distributed the first year surveys to entering students in freshman seminar and English composition classes.

Response rates ranged from 81% at the high end to 12.3% at the low end. Participants totaled 13,307 students of which 25% of these respondents were randomly chosen for this study.

Thus, after constructing our listwise covariance matrix, this study included an analytic sample of 2,810 cases of which 1,892 were White students and 918 were ethnic minority students.

Measures

Table 1 shows the items that make up the five latent factors in our model (pluralistic orientation, cultural awareness, taking social action, Fletcher's attributional complexity, and conflict enhances democracy), along with their factor loadings and reliability coefficients. Previous studies (see Hurtado, Meader, Ziskin, Kamimura, & Greene, 2002; Hurtado, et al., 2002) examining similar factor structures guided our decisions on which items to include and provided a theoretical rationale to test these relationships using confirmatory factor analysis. With the exception of Fletcher's (1986) attributional complexity scale, which has been tested extensively, these latent factors represent more recent attempts to measure and understand how colleges are preparing students for the inherent challenges that await them as they enter an increasingly diverse and complex workforce. The novelty of several of the questions, therefore, required preliminary testing to ensure the face validity of the measures and congruency of interpretations among participants and researchers.

Background measures in our comparative model included gender, race, and a latent factor indicating the racial make-up of a student's neighborhood, high school, and friends. Both gender and race were dummy-coded to include referent groups pertaining to females and ethnic minority students, respectively. In addition, we used one single indicator in our model to measure students' interaction with diverse peers. Although the original measure included a series of questions directed at specific racial groups, we computed an aggregate measure that indicated students' overall frequency of interacting with peers from different racial/ethnic backgrounds.

Analyses

The principal analytic techniques used in this study consisted of confirmatory latent-variable structural modeling using the EQS statistical software program (Bentler, 1995). Structural equation modeling allows for the simultaneous estimation of hypothesized regressions using an estimated covariance matrix and generates goodness of fit measures to evaluate the overall fit of the proposed model. Thus, structural equation modeling has several advantages over traditional path analysis, including the assessment of the overall fit of a hypothesized model and the ability to take into account measurement error to obtain more precise coefficient estimates.

We relied on the reporting guidelines suggested by Raykov, Tomer, and Nesselroade (1991) and reported the goodness of fit measures known as the Normed Fit Index (NFI), Non-normed fit index (NNFI, also known as the Tucker-Lewis Index or TLI), and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI). Further, we followed Boomsma's (2000) recommendation to include the misfit index known as the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Current standards for determining acceptable fit suggest that fit indices should exceed .90 and RMSEA scores should fall below .10.

Our analyses were based on a pairwise covariance matrices, a choice predicated on earlier studies that show pairwise matrices produce similar results as listwise matrices without significant losses in statistical power (Vinokur & Schil, 2002). We began our analyses by testing our measurement model to confirm the overall validity and reliability of the relationship we hypothesized between observed variables and their corresponding latent construct. Next, we tested the full structural model for the entire population and examined the corresponding goodness of fit and RMSEA indices. We then compared ethnic minority and White students to

determine whether our model would retain its goodness of fit for these two groups of students. As standard practice dictates, we constrained the factor loadings, variance of exogenous latent variables, and paths for both groups to be equal for our initial group comparison model.

We made two modifications to our comparative model based on the LaGrange Multiplier test in which we lifted the path constraints between diversity of pre-college environment and interaction with diverse peers and between taking social action and pluralistic orientation. Additionally, we compared the strengths of the paths for minority and White students and provided data on the significant, direct effects for all of the variables in the model.

Limitations

This study relied solely on self-report data to model students' development of a pluralistic orientation. Although there are many disadvantages in using self-report data, there is currently a dearth of objective measurements available to the higher education research community related to the concept of pluralism (e.g., AAC&U, 1995). With many campuses and organizations touting the importance of students gaining skills necessary to succeed in a pluralistic society, self-report measures provide a viable alternative over assumptive-based decision-making that underlies the current debate over how students obtain these skills.

Additionally, students from different ethnic minority groups were aggregated for the purposes of this study into one group. Research has shown, however, that there is variation among different racial/ethnic groups, especially along perceptions of the overall campus climate and attitudes toward particular racial programs and policies (Cabrera, et al., 1999; Fleming, 1984; Hurtado, 1992; Hurtado, 1994; Inkelas, 1998; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Meader, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Future studies that disaggregate racial/ethnic groups could increase our understanding of group differences more clearly.

Finally, although the proposed theoretical model was based on prior research studies, there may be alternative models that are also supported by the data. Future studies are planned to investigate alternative paths among the various latent constructs.

Results

Measurement Model

The results for the measurement model are shown in Table 1. The goodness of fit indices (χ^2 (242, n=2855)=1609.73; NFI, NNFI, and CFI are .92, .92, .93 respectively, and RMSEA=.045) confirm our measurement model and provide an empirical justification for proceeding to our full structural model.

Table 1. Measurement Model for Predicting Pluralistic Orientation

| <i>Latent Construct</i> and Observed Variables | Beta Weight | Internal Consistency (Alpha) |
|--|-------------|------------------------------|
| <i>Pluralistic Orientation</i> | | .7347 |
| Ability to see the world from someone else's perspective | .659 | |
| Tolerance of others with different beliefs | .615 | |
| Openness to having my views challenged | .605 | |
| Ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues | .605 | |
| Ability to work cooperatively with diverse people | .566 | |
| <i>Cultural awareness</i> | | .7166 |
| Racial/cultural awareness | .769 | |
| Knowledge about the cultural backgrounds of others | .717 | |
| Knowledge about my own culture | .551 | |
| <i>Taking social action</i> | | .8160 |
| Make an effort to educate others about social issues | .823 | |
| Join an organization that promotes cultural diversity | .745 | |
| Challenge others on racially/sexually derogatory comments | .668 | |
| Make efforts to get to know individuals from diverse backgrounds | .598 | |
| Help members of the community get out to vote in elections | .579 | |
| Participate in student protests | .538 | |

| <i>Latent Construct</i> and Observed Variables | Beta Weight | Internal Consistency (Alpha) |
|---|-------------|------------------------------|
| <i>Fletcher's attributional complexity</i> | | .7727 |
| I think a lot about the influence that society has on other people | .725 | |
| I am interested in understanding how my own thinking works when I make judgments about people | .658 | |
| I think a lot about the influence that society has on my behavior | .621 | |
| I believe it is important to analyze and understand our own thinking processes | .616 | |
| I really enjoy analyzing the reason or causes for people's behavior | .566 | |
| <i>Conflict enhances democracy</i> | | .7194 |
| Democracy thrives on differing views | .698 | |
| Conflicting perspectives is healthy in a democracy | .642 | |
| Conflict between groups can have positive consequences | .573 | |
| Building coalitions from varied interests is key to a working democracy | .564 | |
| Conflict is a normal part of life | .349 | |

All beta coefficients are statistically significant at the .001 level. $\chi^2(242, n=2855)=1609.73$. Normed, Non-normed, and Comparative Fit Indices are .92, .92, .93 respectively, and RMSEA=.045.

Full Structural Model

The full structural model for all groups appears in Figure 1. The data provide a reasonably good fit to the model with $\chi^2(435, n=2810)=2414.526$, and with NFI=.90, NNFI=.91, CFI=.92, and RMSEA=.04.

With the exception of gender, all of the variables in our model have a significant effect on pluralistic orientation ($p<.05$) and explain approximately 52% of the variance. The main contributor to pluralistic orientation is cultural awareness ($b=.551$) followed by comfort with conflict ($b=.188$) and taking social action ($b=.135$).

Our race variable had a slight effect on pluralistic orientation ($b=-.05$), which was likely due to the smaller sample of ethnic minority students and other intervening variables associated with particular campuses in the study.

Interaction with diverse peers had a significant, direct effect on all of the factors in the full structural model, suggesting that students who interact with peers different from themselves are more likely to think more complexly, be culturally aware, believe that conflict enhances democracy, take social action, and develop a pluralistic orientation.

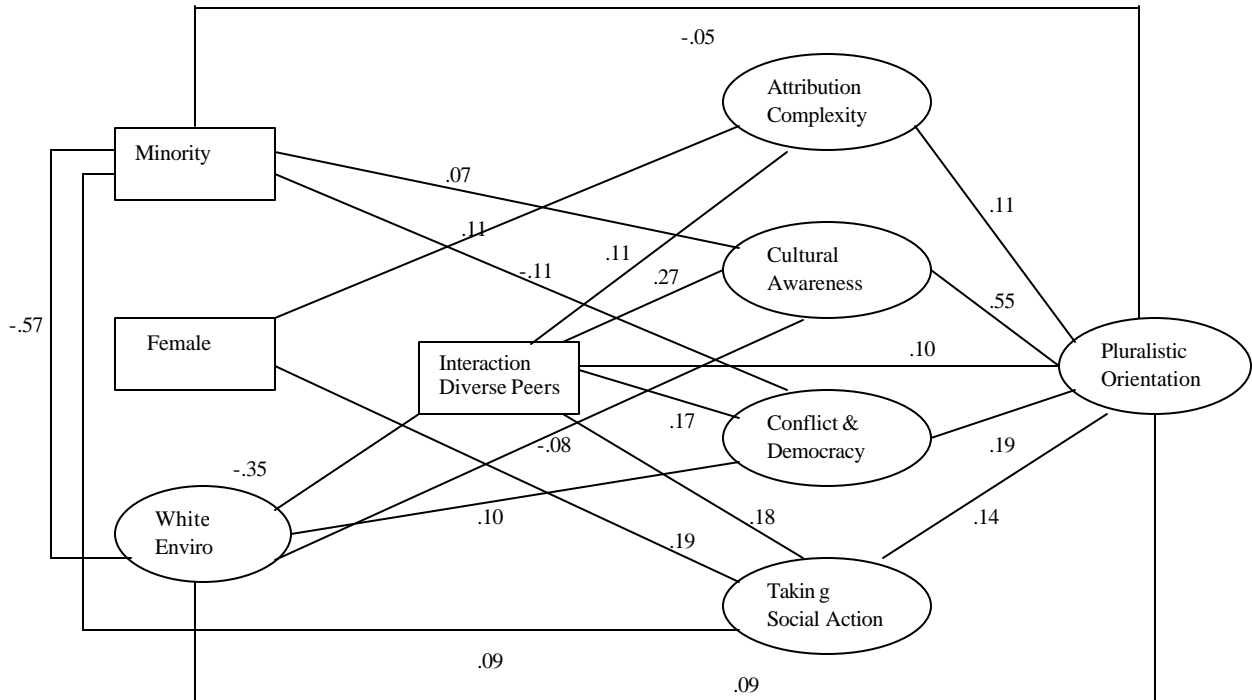


Figure 1. Full Structural Equation Model for Pluralistic Orientation for All Race Groups. Summary of the standardized path coefficients for pluralistic orientation model. $\chi^2(435, n=2810)=2414.526$, NFI=.90, NNFI=.91, CFI=.92, and RMSEA=.04. All paths are statistically significant at $p<.05$. Covariances, errors, disturbances, and observed variables corresponding to latent constructs are not shown in the model.

Comparative Structural Model

Our comparison model between White and ethnic minority students is shown in Figure 2.

Our results suggest an acceptable fit to the model with $\chi^2(753, n=2810)=2663.675$, and with NFI=.89, NNFI=.91, CFI=.92, and RMSEA=.03. Both groups explained similar amounts of

variance for pluralistic orientation (White; $r^2=.53$; Ethnic minority; $r^2=.52$) and had similar direct effects.

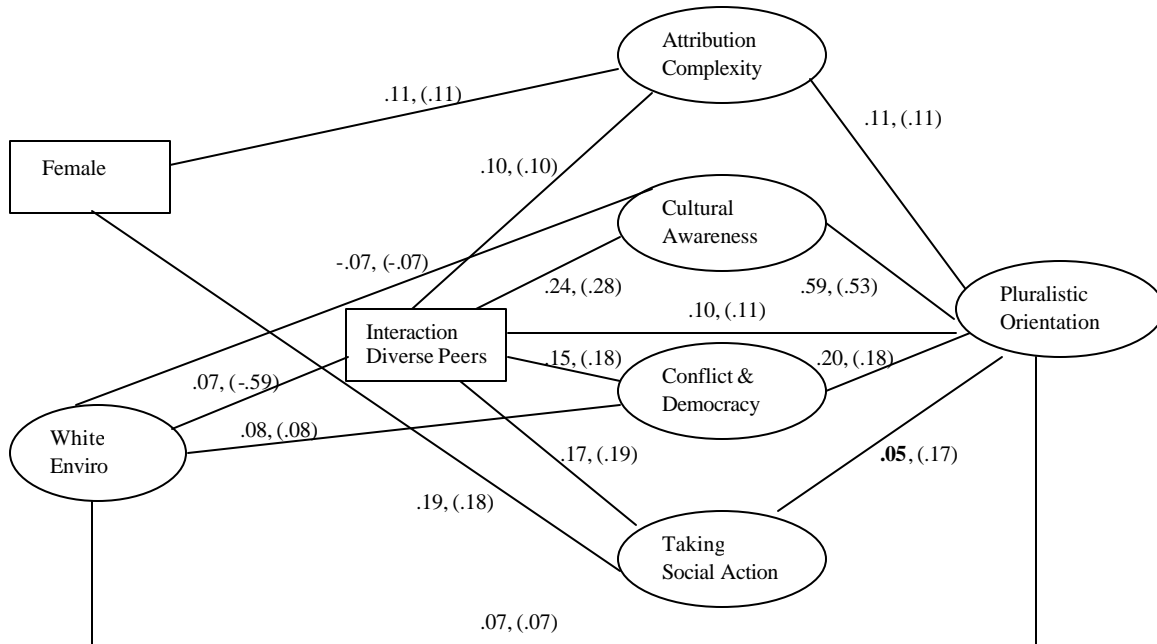


Figure 2. Comparative Structural Equation Model for Ethnic Minority and White Students. Summary of the standardized path coefficients for pluralistic orientation model. Figures without and within parentheses are, respectively, for ethnic minority and White students. $\chi^2(242, n=2855)=1609.73$, $NFI=.89$, $NNFI=.91$, $CFI=.92$, and $RMSEA=.03$. All paths are statistically significant at $p<.05$, except for the bolded path. Covariances, errors, disturbances, and observed variables corresponding to latent constructs are not shown in the model.

Two exceptions are worth noting: (1) taking social action was a significant predictor of pluralistic orientation for White students ($b=.172$; $p<.001$) and not a significant predictor for ethnic minority students ($b=.052$, $p>.05$); and (2) the relative strength of the path of cultural awareness to pluralistic orientation was larger for ethnic minority students ($b=.587$) compared to White students ($b=.531$).

While interacting with diverse peers was significant for both groups, the relative strengths of the paths were higher for White students. This suggests that for White students, interacting with ethnic minorities leads to higher predictive values on all of the associated factors

compared to the benefits ethnic minorities gain from interacting with students different from themselves.

Finally, the effect of the diversity of one's pre-college environment on interactions with diverse peers was distinct for White students compared to ethnic minorities. For White students, this path was highly significant and negative ($b = -.591$), suggesting that as the pre-college environment becomes more homogeneous for White students, they are less likely to report interactions with ethnic minorities. For ethnic minorities, however, this relationship is positive and not statistically significant ($b = .073$).

Discussion

In examining our full model, it is interesting to note that gender does not appear to have a significant effect on pluralistic orientation. Previous studies on college students have reported significant differences between females and males concerning their attitudes and behaviors toward diversity (e.g., Meader, 1998; Smith, 1992; Smith 1993; Sax & Arredondo, 1999). Perhaps our pluralistic orientation factor contains items that are distinct from previous measures of diversity-related attitudes and behaviors, and less sensitive to gender differences.

Our finding that students who live in primarily White neighborhoods, attend predominantly White high schools, and have mostly White friends are less likely to interact with diverse peers is not surprising. But the fact that interaction with diverse peers has a significant positive effect on all of our factors leading to a pluralistic orientation underscores the importance of having diverse peers on college campuses. Students who are coming from predominantly White environments, therefore, need opportunities to interact with peers who differ from them in order to develop a more pluralistic orientation.

Of our four factors leading to a pluralistic orientation, cultural awareness is the strongest predictor in our full model. Students who have knowledge about others' and their own cultural backgrounds prior to entering college may become more actively involved in issues related to diversity and intergroup relations while in college. It would be interesting for future studies to investigate this possible relationship, so we can find out which students are more likely to be involved with diversity related issues.

The results from our comparative model further underscore the importance of disaggregating ethnic minority groups in order to better understand the differential impact of college on different racial/ethnic groups. Although ethnic minorities were aggregated into one group for the purposes of this analysis, our results show several important distinctions among White and ethnic minority students. First, it appears that students' pre-college environment plays an important role in determining their overall frequency of interacting with diverse peers. White students, in particular, are less likely to interact with diverse peers when they matriculate at predominately White secondary school environments. The ramifications of such homogeneously White pre-college environments become clear in our model as interactions with diverse peers are a highly significant predictor of all of the factors leading to a pluralistic orientation.

Second, our comparative model suggests that interactions with diverse peers are associated with gains across all of the latent constructs for both White and ethnic minority students, although the weight of the effects are higher for White students across most of the structural paths. It may be that ethnic minorities enter college with more experience interacting with diverse peers (e.g., White students), which predisposes them to many of the cognitive and social dimensions that underlie a pluralistic orientation. As a result, the relative strength of

intergroup contact may be more pronounced for White students, which is reflected in their higher predictive values.

Third, White students and ethnic minority students differed considerably on the impact that taking social action had on the development of a pluralistic orientation. For White students, involvement in social action was a positive, significant predictor of a pluralistic orientation whereas the effect was small and non-significant for ethnic minority students. The difference in effects may be based on the greater experience ethnic minorities have in educating and challenging others on racial issues. In particular, with many ethnic minority students in our sample entering college from mixed racial environments, there is a greater likelihood of taking on a “spokesperson” role in educating others about social issues pertinent to their racial/ethnic background. As such, ethnic minorities may have already realized some of the gains associated with the development of a pluralistic orientation, whereas taking social action may be a much more dissonance-provoking experience for White students, which is reflected in the higher predictive strength of this effect.

Finally, cultural awareness remained the strongest predictor of a pluralistic orientation for both White and ethnic minority students. The effect was somewhat stronger for White students, who may enter college with less cultural knowledge based on their experiences in relatively homogeneous pre-college environments. Similar to the taking action construct, increased cultural awareness may lead to greater cognitive and social gains, especially if such knowledge challenges previously held attitudes and beliefs.

Implications

There are several implications of our study that are important to consider, especially given the tenuous stature of affirmative action and the pending Supreme Court decision. Our

study, for instance, demonstrated the importance of interactions with diverse peers in preparing students for the challenges that await them as they enter a diverse workforce and global society. As such, colleges and universities need to continue to recruit a diverse student body and develop alternative plans to achieve a critical mass of ethnic minority students. Without such diversity on our college campuses, students will lose out on many of the educational benefits that diversity offers, such as preparing them for the challenges of living and working in our increasingly pluralistic society.

Current trends suggest that students are continuing to enter college from relatively segregated environments (see Orfield, Bachmeier, James, & Elite, 1997), which places the onus on colleges and universities to provide students with structured opportunities to interact across racial/ethnic divisions. In this regard, the classroom may be one of the most important locations to provide students with opportunities to interact across difference. Programs in intergroup relations, for example, offer students structured opportunities to interact with diverse groups of students while equipping them with the skills necessary to effectively communicate across difference. Further, such programs foreground intergroup conflict and help students translate socio-historical knowledge into plans to take social action.

Other courses, such as ethnic and women's studies, provide students with important knowledge about different cultural groups while increasing their awareness of their own cultural backgrounds. If colleges and universities are committed to developing pluralistic skills in their student bodies, more effort is needed in integrating diversity issues throughout the general education curriculum as well as expanding those departments that capitalize on cultural knowledge. Given the high predictive power of cultural awareness, increasing programming and

courses around cultural issues is an important and realistic goal for colleges and universities to attain.

In general, our study suggests that both intergroup contact and cultural content around diversity are important variables in optimizing students' preparation for entering an increasingly diverse and complex democracy. More efforts are needed to infuse both structured interactions and cultural content into the undergraduate curriculum, and more studies are needed that investigate how these variables interact with one another and differentially effect the development of a pluralistic orientation. By concentrating on both intergroup contact and cultural content, students will be better prepared to tolerate difference, view the world from multiple perspectives, negotiate difference, and work cooperatively with diverse groups of people.

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