



Cornell University

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## Assessing and Enhancing the Student Climate for Diversity at Cornell

What follows is an executive summary of "[The Climate for Diversity at Cornell University: Student Experiences](#)" by Sylvia Hurtado, Professor and Director of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. Professor Hurtado's qualitative, focus-group-based research targets and expands on themes identified through the data in the Institutional Research report, "[Beginning to Assess the Student Climate for Diversity](#)," commissioned by the University Diversity Council in spring 2013.

Surveys completed by the general population of Cornell students reflect a broad satisfaction with the Cornell experience, but the university recognized that underrepresented students sometimes registered less positive responses around engagement and inclusion than the responses of the general population. Professor Hurtado's study was commissioned in an effort to better understand these less positive responses, as well as the steps that could be taken to support an inclusive climate for students. Professor Hurtado's team engaged in face-to-face interactions with 99 students, and collected individual comments from an additional 298 students. This study reflects Cornell's commitment to continuing to develop an ongoing responsiveness to the student constituencies mentioned above. We are very appreciative for the time that Professor Hurtado and her researchers spent with students, and for the depth of inquiry and the distinct voices that her study provides.

This new, in-depth information will be most valuable as it is integrated with ongoing diversity initiatives, particularly through the Toward New Destinations (TND) institutional diversity project. TND provides the conceptual context, structure, and scope that will enable units across Cornell, separately and collaboratively, to support the opportunities that Professor Hurtado's research highlights. In this context, Professor Hurtado's research is directly aligned with the TND core principles of Engagement and Inclusion. This study, though focusing on student engagement and inclusion, includes perceptions around opportunities that could be designed to help staff and faculty continue to develop programs and skills for the benefit of students. TND's annual initiatives framework enables the institutional planning process to support initiatives with an impact on climate for students that emerge from all constituencies.

The University Diversity Council will be encouraging the colleges and units to review and pursue opportunities raised by this study. The [TND menu of annual initiatives for 2014-15](#) has integrated initiatives based on the investigation of climate for students, as well as collaborative activities that serve these goals.

This spring, the University Diversity Council's regular meetings with the unit diversity council leads will be informed by Professor Hurtado's findings, the data in "Beginning to Assess the Student

Climate for Diversity,” and the metrics being developed around Engagement and Inclusion for undergraduate and graduate students.

The University Diversity Council will continue to promote activities, call for more efforts, and create measurement rubrics to impact Engagement and Inclusion, carrying forward such initiatives as:

1. The Intergroup Dialogue course (Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives and the Intercultural Center at 626)
2. The Skills for Success project (Division of Human Resources and Safety Services)
3. The online instructional course Avoiding Harassment and Discrimination in the Workplace (Weill Cornell Medical College)
4. The Annual Pioneers in Diversity Awards, highlighting achievement and best practices (Weill Cornell Medical College)
5. Programming for new students, following upon Tapestry of Possibilities (Office of the Dean of Students)
6. Programs on micro-inequities and bias, following upon recent speakers: Ernest Hicks, Nancy DiTomaso, Deborah Spar, and Kimberlé Crenshaw
7. New Bias Response Team structures and planning (Student and Academic Services/Human Resources and Safety Services)
8. Bridging activities such as the United Student Body initiative (Student Assembly)
9. The “One Cornell” vision supported through a design competition for the Open Doors insignia (University Diversity Council)
10. Active implementation of the university’s revised procedure for addressing discrimination and harassment, [Policy 6.4, Prohibited Discrimination, Protected-Status Harassment, Sexual Harassment, and Sexual Assault and Violence](#).



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# **The Climate for Diversity at Cornell University: Student Experiences**

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Background and Purpose**

In accordance with plans and discussions among the University Diversity Council to assess the climate at Cornell, the Cornell Office of Institutional Research issued a request for proposals (RFP) to engage a consultant to study student views of the climate for diversity at Cornell. This climate assessment represents a second phase of data collection intended to augment previously conducted surveys of undergraduate, graduate and professional students in 2012-13. The specific charge was to “conduct qualitative research (focus groups, interviews) that will explore and expand on themes and issues emerging from our analysis of survey data.” It is important to note that the charge in the request for proposals focused on student experiences of the climate rather than a diversity assessment of the entire environment. In accordance with the RFP, student participants were to be drawn from different social identity groups at Cornell along with selected program personnel and senior administrators with the expectation that 8-13 focus groups and 8-10 interviews would be conducted.

Professor Sylvia Hurtado, with her team from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA, was selected to conduct the assessment. She teaches intergroup relations, conducts research on campus climates for diverse students, and studies diverse learning environments. She assembled a team of professionals and graduate students skilled in qualitative research, mixed methods, and intergroup relations. The research team represented African American, Asian, Latina/o, Native American, LGBT, White males and White women, working-class, and middle class identities.

Dr. Hurtado conducted a preliminary site visit on September 5-6, 2013 to assess issues on campus and discuss the scope of work. She met with key student affairs and academic administrators, as well with staff in the Institutional Research Office to plan the logistics of the visit. The Office of Institutional Research used multiple methods to make students aware of this study and encourage their participation in focus groups: campus flyers, ads in the student newspaper, announcements in campus e-newsletters, and emails sent by program personnel working directly with various student communities. Interested students provided contact and social identity information via a “student climate for diversity focus group” website; based on this information, institutional research staff

followed up with students by email to schedule their participation in specific focus groups. The social identity of the focus group facilitator was matched with the social identity of focus group participants (except in the case of international students). Fourteen (14) student focus groups, including 99 student participants, and 14 staff/administrator interviews were primarily conducted during the site visit between October 26<sup>th</sup> and October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013 (four interviews were conducted via telephone immediately after the site visit). To allow for more input from students, a website was opened to collect more information regarding experiences with the climate and also recommendations from students who did not have an opportunity to participate in focus groups during the four-day site visit. Web respondents included 190 undergraduate students and 108 graduate/professional students. Documents were collected from the campus website and during the site visit. All data were coded for emergent themes and analyzed in relation to a model for assessing the climate for diversity (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2009; Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar & Arellano, 2012).

### **How This Report Expands Cornell Quantitative Climate Assessments**

There are several ways in which this report explores and expands on the surveys administered in 2012-13 and reported in September, 2013. First, we attended to the larger context and the multiple realities of the diverse communities that coexist at Cornell, much of which cannot be measured *a priori*. A key assumption in social construction of climates is that it is informed by positionality and there is no singular reality, although we can find groups or individuals who coalesce around particular themes and issues. In accordance with a transformative evaluation paradigm (Mertens, 2009), social justice aims are primary; this includes attention and respect for marginalized communities, awareness of asymmetric power relationships, and linking results with action. The latter is represented in an appendix at the end of this report that compiles concrete, individual suggestions from study participants as well as in our own overall action recommendations featured in this section. We expect this report will serve as a basis for the design of new questions in future and ongoing assessments of the climate. Second, while the survey reports average responses for groups by social identity category, we attempt to capture more variability within each category. For example, the Latina/o, Asian, and Black students come from distinct ethnic communities with different immigration and migration histories but are subject to social categorization (by others) despite heterogeneity in each population. Third, Native American students at Cornell hail from different tribal nations and are generally excluded from quantitative reports because of their small numbers. They have a voice in this report. Fourth, students' powerful stories and examples explore and problematize existing norms, illustrate perceived forms of bias/discrimination operating in the environment, and expand on student resilience and their interest in improving the climate at Cornell. Finally, we offer our own interpretations based on what we heard, tying avenues for action with diversity research in higher education. We also recognize our role as external evaluators is to report on issues that others on campus may feel silenced about or fear reporting.

## Key Findings and Recommendations

The research team presents the summary in the form of five interrelated actions that follow from an integration of the findings of a qualitative assessment of students' perspectives on the climate for diversity. These findings build and expand upon the report of the Cornell surveys focusing on different undergraduate and graduate student communities focused on the social identities of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and international status. Specific opportunities for response and follow-up, based on diversity research in higher education, follow each area and many individual suggestions from the campus community are provided in Appendix A that can be pursued as part of an action plan.

We encourage the University Diversity Council and Cornell's diverse campus communities to use the findings in this report to adopt an agenda that will assist the University to take action in addressing these key areas: Authentic Forms of Engagement; Diversity Skills and Knowledge; Bias, Discrimination, and Harassment; Power Dynamics and Equity; and Bridging Diverse Communities.

### Authentic Forms of Engagement

**Findings.** Representation, or compositional diversity as one of the key areas in the *Toward New Destinations* (TND) diversity strategic planning initiative, is the first step in achieving diversity in any work and learning environment. It is a necessary but not sufficient condition for engagement (another TND area). Although the campus prides itself on compositional diversity relative to other Ivy League institutions, some participants felt that there was more progress to be made in recruiting diverse faculty and staff. This may well be necessary to introduce expertise in the areas for action that follow. A key finding is that students from diverse Cornell communities were interested in having more conversations, addressing the issues, and listening to others. Some were quite articulate, thoughtful, and appreciated the opportunity to have a conversation as part of the project. Although this may be a function of who shows up for focus groups, overwhelmingly, study participants seemed ready for deeper forms of "authentic engagement." Students were tired of "shallow attempts at addressing diversity," and some staff suggested "it can't be just a one-time program" that is often in reactive response to an incident. Students also pointed out that there was no diversity education follow-up to the *Tapestry of Possibilities* program at the beginning of college. The study found that White students that want to be part of improving the climate also desire avenues for participation and engagement.

*"I feel like Cornell hasn't earned the word diversity yet...the 'ity' part, the divers 'ity' part hasn't been addressed enough." [Asian American Female Undergraduate]*

**Opportunities for Action.** Our findings suggest that there is an opportunity to create an intentional educational and cross-unit initiative that creates opportunities for ongoing, sustained conversations promoting self-reflection at the individual level and proactive activity at the institutional level. Such conversations could occur inside and outside of classrooms, perhaps beginning with elements of this report. A series of related events that further deepen the conversations could be extended to follow *Tapestry*, especially when students are ready to make sense of their experiences on a cognitive and interpersonal level. Common residential experiences like North Campus are natural sites for additional programming. The nascent Intergroup Dialogue Project is promising, but it needs to be scaled up and/or take place in many more units.

### **Diversity Skills and Knowledge**

**Findings.** A common theme was lack of awareness and examples of how some students, faculty, and staff “just don’t get it.” Lack of awareness is a form of privilege, as lack of responsibility for behavior often followed. Students expected better from administrators, faculty, and peers but also attributed “ignorance” to prior socialization and differences in experiences. Students from minority communities feel compelled to speak up, often have to take on the “burden of educating others,” and sometimes find themselves without support. This makes it difficult for students in classroom situations that should be facilitated by faculty, or when staff expect programming to be led by students who are also learning how to negotiate differences, or in situations where Cornell authority figures (faculty or staff) are the offending parties. Although some staff feel strongly that educational initiatives should be “student-directed,” the President suggests it should be a collaborative effort, and students expressed an interest in having faculty, staff, or administrators take more responsibility for directing education as a way of showing their support. Relying on students to always take the lead can hide low competency levels, and students can “feel the vibe of discomfort” when faculty or staff are unprepared. In terms of graduation requirements, some students felt that diversity was important enough to require knowledge about different groups and improve their abilities to negotiate differences in their future.

*“It’s like they expect us to be ‘any person, any study,’ but how can you expect this of us when you don’t provide any support for students?” [Female Queer International Undergraduate]*

**Opportunities for Action.** Students recommended diversity training and education, and we agree, but diversity research indicates that the approach should be designed to achieve desirable outcomes and tailored for students, faculty, and staff. To advance general education, students recommended diversity requirements across colleges and better monitoring of what qualifies as a diversity course. In this context, we recommend faculty development activities to provide support for inclusive pedagogies, activities, and/or content that addresses diversity, which could become part of the teaching portfolio at promotion and merit evaluation. Training and professional

development activities should be accompanied with job evaluations that outline expectations for diversity areas or diversity competencies at all levels (unit heads and supervisors, as well as staff who work directly with students). An inventory or audit may be useful to identify ongoing training initiatives, length and frequency of training, target audience, and sources of support or shared unit responsibility.

## **Bias, Discrimination, and Harassment**

**Findings.** President Skorton has made a [public statement](#) regarding bias and sexual misconduct, and Cornell has a comprehensive website and assistance network for those who wish to [report bias](#) or discrimination and initiate investigations.

*“Most of the damage is when it gets in your head.” [Native/White Female Undergraduate]*

However, students provided stories that illustrate many forms of bias, discrimination, and harassment that typically go unreported. “It’s a daily thing” to be reminded by others about one’s low socioeconomic status, invisibility, difference, or concern for safety in an environment where the norms of privilege are based on race, class, gender, and heterosexuality. In Appendix B, we provide a compendium of different examples drawn from students’ experiences that range from overt forms of traditional racism, sexism, or homophobia to more subtle forms of offenses or microaggressions that cause students to feel unsafe, internalize negative messages, or use adaptive strategies to subvert them. Some students felt as though they would be “causing more trouble by reporting something,” and some raised a concern that there appear to be no consequences for perpetrators of bias or discrimination. A related issue raised is the need for faculty and staff who can handle controversial discussions, have knowledge about multiple forms of diversity, and can identify implicit bias and common patterns of bias/discrimination across identity groups to help students make sense of their experiences.

**Opportunities for Action.** Monitoring and public reporting of incidents will be important to understand progress made in the reduction or elimination of bias, discrimination, and harassment. However, it is most important to focus on prevention through educational activity because most incidents go unreported, especially subtle forms of exclusion (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012). The university should help students, faculty, and staff become familiar with various forms of bias in order to empower targeted individuals to “name” the offense and identify ways to respond. The separate compendium of bias incidents and microaggressions names experiences and may help individuals to realize that they are not alone in these experiences. Further, it should make available specific articles and resources to show that there is a rigorous research tradition across fields of study that defines forms of bias, discrimination, and harassment and their causes. Finally, codes of conduct and policies should be reviewed to determine if they effectively deal with overt and subtle forms of bias.

## Power Dynamics and Equity

**Findings.** Several issues were evident regarding power dynamics on campus in terms of the way inclusion and exclusion operate for various groups. We noted students find their sense of belonging in very specific niches at Cornell, constituting comfort zones, areas of mutual interests, and personal goals. This is true for both majority and minority students but the distinction between them is legitimacy. The historical presence and hierarchy of Greek organizations, including “secret societies,” create a “division between us and them” that is part of a campus culture and affects the climate. Policies help to curb dehumanizing hazing behavior but otherwise, much goes uncontested. In contrast, cultural affinity and identity-based spaces that provide a sense of safety for students, belonging, and purpose are questioned as legitimate spaces for learning and socializing. We noted that program directors, like the students they serve, are expected to carry the burden of advancing diversity, with few resources and little authority. Further, some groups receive less support than others and this translates into invisibility and exclusion. Stories about the special challenges of women in male-dominated fields, sexual misconduct, or campus rituals suggest that young women are vulnerable at a time in their lives when they should feel empowered and resilient. We found Cornell students who devise adaptive strategies to navigate power dynamics and the maze of obstacles tend to make their own satisfying experiences, but their efforts are in contrast to the effortless worlds of privileged groups.

*“It’s important for Cornell administrators to know that in order to produce the most robust change it seems like they want to pursue, you have to address power dynamics.”  
[African American Female Undergraduate]*

**Opportunities for Action.** If diversity is a core institutional value, it must be integrated into the daily work of individuals as part of the campus culture. Each unit (and sub-units within) should be directed to take responsibility for equity, diversity, and inclusion. Metrics for equity, depth, and pervasiveness of initiatives should be included in TND goals to ensure transformative rather than incremental institutional change. It is important to recognize how power dynamics operate in the environment, including resistance to change, to discuss adaptive strategies at the institutional level. Ensure program directors participate in planning efforts and that more groups are included as part of diversity initiatives across both academic and student affairs. Cornell should provide more inclusive and attractive social alternatives to the Greek system.

## **Bridging Diverse Communities**

**Findings.** The “silo” metaphor was a predominant theme among focus groups and interviews, with fragmentation potentially leading to student isolation. But students were also quick to point out “it’s who you know” and how one gets connected, and social networks were used to find a broad range of opportunities through exploration or links with specific programs. The educational implications of a “lack of common cause” are that few students have common educational experiences. The decentralized nature of the University presented numerous opportunities but events and initiatives seemed uncoordinated across student and academic affairs, excluding some groups. Many students do not know about all of the opportunities that exist to engage across difference on campus, and the occasion of the focus groups brought many students to spaces they had not previously visited. In addition, web site respondents encouraged recognition of many diverse communities based on disability, religion, international identities, and political viewpoints in the diversity and equity discussions.

*“We are constantly thinking about not only the Black community, but how we bridge the gap between our community and other communities.” [African American Male, organization-specific member]*

**Opportunities for Action.** These findings point to the opportunity to devise a network plan for the campus, building on student modes of adaptation and mapping institutional diversity/inclusion efforts that can be coordinated with TND. Diversity research suggests the benefits of rewarding units, initiatives, and individuals that are doing the most to create community and address diversity goals, increasing the visibility of diversity-serving groups, clubs, and organizations with a common calendar of events, Facebook page, or app, and encouraging collaborations to share resources to support new initiatives. Some campuses have adopted diversity theme semesters that highlight diversity topics across academic and student affairs units, energize the campus, and focus on the development of students’ diversity skills and knowledge. We recommend the creation of events where like-minded students can gather and share their commitment to changing campus climate, and identify other ways of bringing the campus community together. This bridging activity requires coordination to increase impact across a decentralized campus. While several large universities have divisional models for coordinating diversity work, a collaborative model can work with a strong accountability mechanism. We were not asked to assess the entire climate for diversity, but the campus may consider a broader organizational assessment in the future.