

Students' Voices

Students Speak Out on Cultural Diversity and Academic Excellence

A Report Based on the Online Survey
"What Do Students Need?"
Notre Dame de Namur University
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This interim report is based on the findings from the online survey “What do Students Need” which was designed by the Office of Mission and Diversity in collaboration with the Diversity Council. The survey was administered to students from November 19 to December 10, 2004 and there were 113 valid responses. This report is the first of several reports, with the following sequence envisioned:

- Interim Report #1: Survey Data on the Classroom Experience and Academic Excellence
- Interim Report #2: Survey Data on Residences, Co-Curricular Activities, and Academic Support
- Interim Report #3: Group Interview Data – based on discussions with survey respondents who volunteered for further small group conversations.
- Final report

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Introduction and Methods: The Need for Narrative Understandings

In 2002 and 2003 the Office of Mission and Diversity conducted Campus Climate Surveys that were administered to students, faculty, and staff. The conclusions that the Diversity Council drew from that survey suggested that the experiences of students of color often varied markedly from their white counterparts. The results drew attention to what is often referred to as the difference between composition (or numerical) diversity and interactional and curricular diversity. Recent research has shed light on the rather intuitive notion that it is one thing to create an environment in which minority students are simply “present” in reasonable numbers, and quite another to create an educational environment that nurtures those students.¹ This interactional and curricular diversity takes the form of course content and teaching methods that appeal to and challenge students of color. Such diversity also encourages the informal interactions among students and faculty and staff of color such that diversity is ever-present in any number of daily interactions.

¹ Hurtado, Sylvia, Milem Jefferey, Alma Clayton-Pederson, and Walter Allen. "Enhancing Campus Climates for Racial/Ethnic Diversity: Educational Policy and Practice." *Review of Higher Education* 21, no. 3 (1998): 279-302.

The quantitative Campus Climate surveys of 2002 and 2003 and the subsequent discussions with the campus community raised concerns and this report attempts to add additional depth to those concerns. The goal of the online survey was to elicit first-hand commentary from students. The respondents were encouraged to explicitly communicate their concerns and to offer suggestions as to what they would like to see. It is this kind of specificity and context that is most helpful in drawing our attention to the areas where the institution must focus in order to meet the expressed needs of our students.

The purpose of this qualitative research is to reveal in some detail the variety of experiences our students have at NDNU. It aims not to quantify the extent or objective scale of a particular problem, but rather, to provide more insight into the nature of certain problems. By its very design, the survey is not a vehicle through which one can make general statements about the experience of the “typical student” or the majority of students. However, its value lies in giving voice to student concerns.

Indeed, the very reason many of our students attend NDNU is because they do not want to be reduced to a number or statistic, but rather, they want their individual voices to be heard and their particular concerns addressed. This report might be read in the spirit of a candid conversation with students. Students were asked to share what was on their minds and many were generous enough to do so. Fundamentally, the report serves to put student voices on the record. The lack of a rich understanding of student concerns that often gives rise to the debilitating “I had no idea that some students felt that way” can only be

countered with information. Students provided some of this information in the survey and as an institution, it is incumbent upon us to respond such that they know they have been heard. To that end, this report foregrounds student voices.

This report will highlight two areas in which students communicated concerns. The first area is diversity and the second is academic excellence. Among the critical areas of student concern in diversity are 1) the fact that students have almost no opportunity to take courses with faculty of color due to the unacceptably low numbers of African American and Latino faculty, 2) that the curriculum does not incorporate multicultural themes as much as students would like, and 3) some faculty members have difficulty treating students of color in an equitable way in the context of classroom management.

The second section of the report addresses student concerns with what they describe as a lack of academic rigor at NDNU. While the Campus Climate Surveys of 2002 and 2003 did not focus on academic issues, it was felt that the present survey might be an appropriate vehicle to gather information on what has been a recurring concern among many faculty and administrators, including the President's Cabinet and the Academic Management Team. Clearly, both cultural diversity and academic excellence play pivotal roles in the success of the University. The following report hopes to shed light on what students call for in both these areas.

This is NOT an empirical statistical study in which the results are expressed as percentages or other computations. There were many positive responses from students who expressed their satisfaction with a whole range of

issues on campus, and those positive responses will be represented in this document. However, for the purposes of addressing institutional shortcomings, this report will present areas of improvement in somewhat more detail. This is done out of a belief that highlighting problem areas from varying angles and with varying degrees of detail will better allow us to envision the gravity of the important concerns addressed.

Cultural Diversity in Students' Voices²

Diversity of the Faculty, Staff, and Student Body

The most encouraging commentary in this section is the satisfaction with which some students assessed their experience with other students of color in the classroom and elsewhere. They highlight the value of studying with classmates from a range of backgrounds:

I feel that my classroom experience is diverse because I have the opportunity to interact with people from all around the US and the world. (other, undergraduate).

These comments are representative of a view expressed by students that in terms of classroom interaction, NDNU instructors are doing a good job of incorporating diversity in their courses. The classroom experience is a positive one for these students not only because of diversity course content, but also due to, as demonstrated in the quotation above, the diverse student body. The diverse student body is a great benefit according to many respondents.

I have found the graduate courses to be filled with students from all ethnic backgrounds. Teachers are sensitive to the needs of their diverse classrooms.

² In all quotations from students, confidentiality concerns dictated that information that might identify any individual be modified or omitted. Any department or academic program mentioned will only be identified by the School to which it belongs.

The School of Education makes an effort to include everyone (White, graduate student).

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I think that classes here are fairly diverse. The school is very small and I think it has a pretty diverse student body for its size (White, undergraduate).

•

I think the faculty does a good job meeting the needs of a diverse population of students. I have had the opportunity to work on group projects with people with very different backgrounds than mine. It was in some cases uncomfortable at first but in every case I learned something positive from the experience (no reported ethnic identity, undergraduate).

These students report that interaction with fellow students from a range of ethnic backgrounds is of value to them and that NDNU largely satisfies that need.

Indeed, a white graduate student from out of state reported, “I am amazed at the ethnic diversity. I think it is wonderful to hear the stories from so many different ethnic groups.”

While such stories referred to above may, indeed, come from students of diverse backgrounds, they don't appear to come nearly as much from faculty or staff of color. The great majority of the complaints with respect to diversity in pointed to the paucity of faculty members of color. Across the board, but particularly among minority students, the fact that there are so few minority instructors is of great concern to respondents. Indeed, while many students reported that many faculty members who are not ethnic minorities do a good job of introducing diversity content in their courses, this does not mitigate the need

for a diverse faculty, as expressed in the following response by a white undergraduate:

The faculty I have had experiences with have not been diverse in their ethnicities but have been diverse in their backgrounds. I would say having a more racially diverse faculty would be more interesting for me.

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My academic needs are being somewhat met. There are not enough diverse professors as I wish there were and the courses are challenge but not as diverse as I expected (ethnicity declined, undergrad).

Thus, while recognizing the importance of a faculty willing and able to introduce diversity-related themes in their coursework and manage their classrooms in a culturally-sensitive way, it clear some students value the opportunity to take courses with racially and ethnically diverse instructors. It is to these calls for a more diverse faculty that this report now turns.

The need for a more culturally diverse faculty was a concern voiced by both graduate students as well as undergraduates. From an Asian-American graduate student we hear, “I can see that most instructors, faculty, and staff here on campus are not diverse. Maybe we can do something about it.” Another graduate student who self-identifies as white notes, “NDNU needs more African/Black American professors! I haven’t had a single one so far and am about to graduate!”

Another graduate student, this time an African-American, adds another voice to the chorus:

There are certainly not enough African American students or African American teachers. I would like to see a more representative sample of teachers from all ethnic backgrounds. All my teachers have been white. It would indeed be refreshing to be taught by someone other than a white teacher.

And this undergraduate is likewise dissatisfied with the diversity of the faculty, explaining that, "I have only had one professor that is of color (he is now not even teaching).

The message is loud and clear – many students see the lack of a diverse faculty as a shortcoming at NDNU. The following response from a white graduate student sees faculty diversity in terms of ethnic background as well as in age cohort:

Although I love Notre Dame's intimate atmosphere I notice there isn't a lot of diversity in regards to faculty. Almost every professor I've had has been a female Caucasian mid 40s to late 50s. Not a lot of young diverse instructors.

Indeed, this respondent's mention of NDNU's intimate atmosphere in which students have the opportunity to interact with their instructors in more casual and one-on-one situations can be read as a signal to the potential of NDNU. The readily-recognized value in students working closely with faculty would be further enhanced were students able to interact this way with a more diverse faculty and staff.

As many of these examples show, faculty and staff diversity is a general source of dissatisfaction among many student, both white and minority. It should be noted, that students see the low numbers of African Americans on campus as particularly glaring, as suggested by this African American graduate student:

This university lacks diversity in the sense that there is low minority enrollment as well as minority faculty and staff. Particularly African Americans.

Not only is a diverse faculty important to serve the needs of the entire student body that rightly feels entitled to a faculty reflective of a multicultural world, but the following quotation demonstrates another benefit of a diverse faculty and staff – mentoring:

I am extremely disappointed with the diversity of the faculty. Latino students make up a large part of the minority population on campus. Why is it that we can only relate to the Facilities and Bon A petit Staff? (Latino, undergraduate).

This is particularly revealing in that it highlights the ways that people of different ethnic backgrounds experience life quite differently, oftentimes, and see the world through different prisms. To this Latino student, the role played by Latinos in the overall institutional structure of the University is striking. The over-representation of Latinos in the area of maintenance and food service and their near (if not absolute) absence the faculty and administrative staff ranks silently

perpetuates pervasive stereotypes that the University would be well-served to correct.

One need only look at the our official institutional data to see that currently the University has one full-time African American faculty member (offering four courses per year and free from advising duties) and one Latina full-time faculty member. This is not acceptable to NDNU students and many see a more diverse faculty as valuable to their educational experience – a value, the need for which is going unfulfilled at NDNU.

Diversity in the Curriculum

An African American undergraduate student who has had a good experience with cultural diversity in the curriculum says:

I think that so far I have had a good experience with diversity in the classroom. I have had the chance to read different books by different authors who are of different ethnic backgrounds. I feel that I have experienced a lot of diversity so far.

Another example of positive student evaluations of the curriculum as it relates to diversity includes a white undergraduate student who reports, “I think academically this University emphasizes diversity and understanding and learning of different cultures and I think that’s wonderful.”

Of the students who were not satisfied with the curriculum as it relates to cultural diversity, the majority of them point to a desire to see more courses that touch on themes of a multicultural or international nature. Among those students desiring more of an international perspective is a white graduate student who says, "I would like to see courses with a more global perspective or dimension added, including courses dealing with development and globalization (White, graduate)."

Other students see an opportunity to open up the curriculum by providing courses that take as their topics non-European peoples. A white intensive evening student expresses such a desire when stating, "In general, though, I would have to say that most teaching styles and course content are Eurocentric." Similarly, another undergraduate suggests, "I would like to see courses that are more culturally relevant to other ethnic groups." One might infer here that the "other" ethnic groups that need more curriculum attention are minority groups. A Latino undergraduate puts a finer point on it by drawing attention to the ethnic cultures of California:

I also think that more of the history aspect of courses should be focused on the history of California. Many students fail to see that Latinos have done more for this area than perform the typical labor jobs and many don't know that this state was once Mexico.

Along the same lines are the comments by two white students who would push the curriculum toward greater inclusion of domestic diversity:

Academically NDNU is a great school. Classes that teach students specifically about the different cultures beliefs and lifestyle difference right here in the US would be ideal (White, graduate student).

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As a transfer student I did not get to experience the freshman curriculum at NDNU. I hope that the material in the lower division classes emphasizes diversity to a greater extent than upper division. I would love to see more culture interwoven into the upper level courses. More world based courses within the majors as well (White, undergraduate).

A similar call for more courses with cross-cultural content come from a Latino intensive evening student: “I believe that my academic needs are being met. I would like to see more cultural classes.”

One of the most powerful findings from this survey was unexpected. Few students mentioned particular courses but four individuals called attention to a one-weekend course called Building Community through Diversity. This was an interactive course that encouraged students to grapple with issues of diversity and racism and endorsements of the course are presented here:

I would like to see the Building Community through Diversity course become a requirement for every student (White, intensive evening).

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I thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated the weekend course: Building Community through Diversity and I hope that becomes a mandatory class to graduate seeing as it relates specifically to the mission of the University (other, undergraduate).

These comments suggest the value in addressing diversity training for students in an intentional, structured way. The fact that students are responding positively to pilot efforts in diversity training is instructive and appears to present an opportunity that the University would do well to further cultivate.

Cultural Sensitivity

Some students indicated that they appreciated the way that diversity is integrated into the classroom, as evidenced by a white undergraduate student who comments, “No problem here. Everybody is treated as a human being. I have experienced only “colorblind” classes at NDNU.”

Two students of color, however, held a contrary viewpoint with respect to the cultural sensitivity of their instructors:

My personal experience has been that the faculty don't want you to take courses that are more academically challenging for example sciences medicine or biology. They would rather you stick to languages or English courses. The grading is unfair too because I noticed that I was given one point less than another in the same class and the teacher admitted having made a mistake. This is not the first time I have experienced this. As a minority trying to get a difficult degree in science I welcome this opportunity to express myself before it really becomes a problem.

This echoes a common theme in issues facing minority students throughout their educational experience – that of not being encouraged to study in the natural sciences and technical fields. When perceived inequities in grading are coupled with discouragement from academic mentors, the results can be particularly demoralizing for minority students.

In a similar vein, the experience of a Latino undergraduate student points to a lack of cultural sensitivity that should give us pause:

There is definitely a lack of understanding about the Latino Culture among the faculty. I can recall being in a class and having my professor hand me my paper back and saying: "I know Spanish is your first language but where did you learn English? You write so well." I had never spoken to my professor about my personal background so I knew that she was judging me solely on the way I look and in turn assumed that my English skills should not have been so advanced. I never mentioned it to anyone until now even though it has bothered me since then. I am now constantly trying to prove to my professors that I am competent enough to be in the classroom with the rest of the students. I realize now that it wasn't my professor's intention to make me feel this way but I think that some type of "Cultural Sensitivity" or "Seeing your students not their ethnicity" training would be really good for all faculty.

Here, incorrect cultural assumptions made in a callous way and the attending academic (low) expectations have very harmful effects. The fact that the professor may not have intended to be hurtful and was unaware of the power of those words points to a serious knowledge gap. The student, however, offers a solution that might avoid such incidents in the future – training. When students of

color suggest that their instructors take part in diversity training, it would seem that resistance to such training is further evidence of the very problem.

Academic Excellence in Students' Voices

Satisfied Students Offer Praise

In examining the student responses to the online survey, a lack of academic rigor was a recurring theme. Indeed, of the students who chose to characterize the academic rigor of the curriculum one way or another, about half characterized it as essentially not rigorous enough, with the other half seeing the rigor as appropriate. No respondents to this survey characterized the academics as too difficult.

The responses that point to an overall satisfaction with academic rigor include the following comments from undergraduates:

I think the academics here are excellent. I have been very happy with most of my teachers and they are very open-minded. At a community college I attended I felt one of my teachers excluded me and gave me a lower grade than some of my peers who had done as well as I had (at least that's what I thought). I have not had that experience here. (White, undergrad)

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The courses at NDNU are suitable for college students (Pacific Islander, undergraduate).

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My course work is adequate. I am constantly challenged and I look forward to other classes related to my major. (Undergraduate)

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My academic needs are definitely being met. I try to put as much into each course as possible so that I can get the most from each class. (White, undergraduate)

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Almost every professor I have had at NDNU with the exception of one or two have been great. They are all well educated and well-versed in their subject matters. They have always been fair not too easy and not unrealistically difficult. (White, undergraduate).

An example from a graduate student who is satisfied with Notre Dame de Namur academics is encouraging:

I intentionally changed from a graduate program at another university to purposefully attend NDNU. Graduate classes are rigorous and applicable in addressing diversity issues. Faculty expectations are high which is what I expect from a graduate program.' (Native American, graduate student).

These comments are heartening and show that many students are sufficiently challenged by able instructors who are engaging and effective. These are the kinds of experiences that the University would expect to be shared by the great majority of students and be representative of a generalized NDNU experience. This does not appear to be the case; the comments of students for whom the

encounter with NDNU academics has been deficient shifts our attention to problem areas.

Raise the Bar: The Need for Academic Rigor

The two problems areas that emerge appear in a sense to be two sides of the same coin: lax grading and courses that are not challenging. The report now turns to those concerns:

I have been disappointed with grading at times. Sometimes students get an A on a project when they don't actually understand the material. Some faculty seem to be easy graders and I don't think an A in a class always demonstrates that the student has grasped the material well. I think getting an A in a class should require some mastery of the subject (graduate).

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I think the classes grading and level expected from students could be harder. It's easy to get an A in classes without having to try too hard (White, undergraduate).

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I feel like some students slack and they are still given a good grade when I have not slacked and have gotten a good grade too but it still is unequal. I took a class where there was a regular day student allowed to take an intensive class and she slept through most of the class made disruptive noises and the teacher thought it was funny. He never even reprimanded her. All of us were there taking the 4 hour class and

none of us fell asleep even though we were all extremely tired. (Latino, evening intensive).

This last comment points to how leniency in grading and an instructor's overall lax attitude toward classroom management can have discouraging effects on students who are approaching their academics very seriously. The following comments serve as further illustrations of perceived unfairness due to soft standards:

Coming from a community college I felt as though I worked harder there than here. Here the attendance doesn't matter only the workload which is unfair because someone who has attended every class and someone who has only attended a few can for the most part earn the same grade (African American, undergraduate).

Indeed, other students evaluate NDNU unfavorably when compared with previous colleges where they have studied, as this Asian graduate student sums up, "Courses are generally not challenging enough, compared to similar coursework at other universities."

Two other graduate students expressed displeasure at academics:

Some of my professors and courses have been great but about 50% have been a real disappointment. The professors aren't qualified to teach the course and the courses are way too easy for graduate level (White, graduate student).

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Some courses have not provided a substantial challenge in the graduate courses I have taken. For example in one course the professor chose an undergraduate type book versus a more challenging graduate level type book (White, graduate student).

A particularly worrisome critique of the rigor of the undergraduate program comes from a graduate student who is taking courses with classmates who earned their bachelor's degree from NDNU:

The grading in some [courses] was very lenient. Raise the bar on some courses and programs so that not just anyone whose graduated from the undergraduate program can enter the graduate program. I felt in some classes the students were too junior and in some cases slowed down the movement of the course.

The above commentary would seem to suggest either a problem either with the preparation of NDNU graduates or of the admissions criteria of the graduate school. However, one would expect an undergraduate degree from NDNU would prepare a student for the rigor so graduate work. In this case, not only is there a perception that NDNU undergraduates are not prepared for graduate study, but just as importantly, that the graduate school instructors "teach down" to the level of the NDNU graduates, thus compromising the standards of the graduate programs as well.

The perceived lack of preparation of their classmates and how that leads to a less than satisfying academic experience is not only a concern of graduate students. One undergraduate student was blunt in this regard:

The school lets ANYONE attend here which is no secret!!! So there are people in our classes who cannot put together a sentence.

Another undergraduate student expressed similar concern with the academic rigor and would like to be offered more challenging courses:

In terms of academics I feel that students of a similar reading level should be grouped together. I don't feel too challenged and I wish there were AP-level courses offered. (White, undergraduate)

Such comments indicate that some students perceive a wide range of academic preparation among their classmates and they are concerned that instructors may be attending more to the academic needs of those who are not as well prepared, thus leaving those needing more challenging work to resign themselves to high grades with little effort.

Further calls for a more rigorous curriculum include a Latino undergraduate student who is clearly not satisfied with the high grades that he earns. Rather, he would like the kind of academic rigor that leads to greater intellectual growth:

I think Academics at NDNU can improve tremendously. My lack of performance in many courses wasn't due to the level of difficulty as it was to the lack of interest. I must say that I have passed many of my courses with As and Bs even though I haven't done most of the readings. This is not something I'm trying to brag about. I would rather get Bs and Cs if I were learning something, the material were interesting and I was being challenged. I also feel there is a lack of expectation from the professors. I am a fairly good writer but I was disappointed many times when professors handed back my papers. There was never anything but minor corrections on my work. I would have liked comments ideas or constructive criticism on how I could better improve my writing. I may have proved to my professors that I

could use spell and grammar check but I actually wanted to improve my writing and there is always room for improvement.

Such a commentary clearly expresses the concern not simply of “grade inflation” but, rather, of a lack of rigor and thoroughness of the academic experience.

According to this student, the instructors have not set expectations high enough and for that reason, there is little to stimulate him intellectually.

Lack of intellectual stimulation is also the concern of another undergraduate student who laments what she calls “busywork” in lieu of more engaging work that will prepare her for life:

I think NDNU needs to be more aggressive when it comes to education. There are many times I feel like I am still in a high school with the attendance policies and the amount of busywork I am assigned. I have gone to different universities and it seems as if they are a lot harder. [...] Therefore doing "chapter outlines" and such should be optional. We are preparing for the rest of our lives and no one is going to make us do anything. We as adults should have the option to do it or not. If we don't our grades will show it. That's life.

An African American undergraduate is similarly disappointed, but is optimistic that things will improve over the course of her undergraduate career:

I think it could be a little bit more challenging. Right now it just seems like a lot of work and that is all. I'm sure that it will get much harder for me in the coming years.

It is critical that the University seize on this optimism and address the concerns voiced in this report in a comprehensive way. The students are communicating their needs and it is incumbent upon the University to fashion a response.