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Group Dynamics and Race

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Purpose

The purpose of this study is to identify what impact race has on relationship and community building among a small and diverse group of people. The impact of group dynamics and race was measured through a quantitative analysis of the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program cohort experience at The University of Vermont (UVM). I asked members of the 2004-2005 1st and 2nd year cohorts to complete a brief survey to inform this inquiry. The following research questions guided this research:

1. How has race influenced our cohort experience?
2. Does race influence relationship-building among a small and diverse group?
3. Does race influence community building among a small and diverse group?
4. Does race influence the learning process within a small and diverse group?
5. Can race have a positive impact on the group dynamics within a cohort?
6. Can race have a negative impact on the group dynamics within a cohort?

With the increased number of professionals from diverse backgrounds entering the field of student affairs and higher education, understanding how race impacts group interactions may be critical to one's educational and professional success. Therefore, it is my hope that the results derived from this research will assist program coordinators, faculty members, and students in preparing for and dealing with issues of race throughout the graduate school experience.

Conceptual Framework

As cohorts within higher education programs become more diverse, it is critical to consider how issues of race within this small group may contribute to the overall group dynamic. To explore this topic, I have utilized literature focused on groups, the cohort format, cohesiveness, and racial identity development.

Very little literature considers group dynamics and race within a cohort setting. Therefore, to further support the nature of this topic, the term *group* is analyzed from three different perspectives–the definition, a cohort, and unified community (Forsyth, 1990; Hughes, Sharrock, & Martin, 2003; Maher, 2004). Unpacking the definition of a group from these three different angles will help to understand the potential impact race can have on relationship and community building among a small and diverse group. To further support this research, I review the definition of racial identity development by Helms (1990).

What Is A Group?
A *group* can be defined as "a collection of people bound together by some common experience or purpose" (Brown, 2000, p. 4). Groups exist when two or more people define themselves as members of a group and the existence of the group is recognized by others (Brown, 2000). Individuals identified within the same social unit are also regarded as a group. They are interrelated within a micro-social structure that interacts with one

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another (Brown, 2000). For example, characteristics such as race, gender, families, classes, professional networks, and educational affiliations are among some of the many ways a group identity can be defined. Therefore, a group can be constructed when two or more independent individuals interact and influence each other through social interaction (Forsyth, 1990). Thus, for the purpose of this study, the HESA cohort constitutes a group.

The Cohort Format
Since the 1980s, cohorts have played a major role in the learning process of students pursuing Masters degrees in higher education (Maher, 2004). Research has indicated that cohorts are unique because they provide "a nurturing and collaborative learning environment in which students can make connections with each other and learn from other students' professional experiences" (Maher, 2004, p. 20). The close nature of a cohort allows students the space to explore deep and sensitive issues they may not acknowledge among a group of strangers (Maher, 2004). Thus, the depth of relationships and community building within a small group such as the cohort may be more meaningful and perhaps easier to attain than in a larger group.

After reviewing several higher education websites it became apparent that the use of the cohort format to promote relationship and community is a common practice. Activities such as town meetings, HESA listservs, and alumni networks, in conjunction with commonly used terminology like "HESA community" and "a community of scholars," further support a sense of cohesion within a cohort, graduate program, and affiliated members (Bowling Green State University, n.d.; The University of Vermont, 2004). Therefore, a bond or connection can be built among members of a cohort from the structure or philosophy espoused by a graduate program. This is the intent of the HESA program in constructing the graduate program around a cohort model.

Group Cohesion
In this research, cohesion is used to define community building. According to Emile Durkheim (1897), cohesiveness influences unity among a group of individuals, saying "To understand any group we must consider its cohesiveness or strength of the relationships linking the members to one another and to the group itself" (as cited by Forsyth, 1990, p. 10). Groups vary in terms of cohesion, and researchers found that a group with greater solidarity had more influence over its members. For example, members of a closely knit group are more likely to participate and communicate more frequently with each other and are less likely to remove themselves from the group. People in cohesive groups experience heightened self-esteem and lowered anxiety as a result of feeling secure and protected by the group. A group that has established a strong sense of cohesiveness will maintain better retention of its members (Forsyth, 1990). One of the purposes of this study is to see how race impacts the group cohesion in each cohort and in the overall HESA program.

Racial Identity Development
"Identity is the embodiment of self-understanding. We are who we understand ourselves to be, as that understanding is shaped and lived out in everyday experience" (Nakkula, 2003, pp. 7-8). Conceptions of our identity are "shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts" (Tatum, 1997, p. 18). These factors influence indicators of our social identities regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, and socio-economic status.

From a racial standpoint, identity development carries greater communal significance. Helms (1990) defined racial identity as "a sense of a group or collective identity based on one's *perception* that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group" (p. 3). "What people believe, feel, and think about distinguishable racial groups can have such implications for intrapersonal as well as interpersonal functioning" (Helms, 1990, pp. 3-4). Therefore, racial-group membership implies the presence of "belief systems that evolve in reaction to perceived differential racial-group membership" (p. 4). In other words, one's mindset can be constructed according to the social and conceptual norms within their racial group membership. Racial group membership can influence how we relate to members within our identified racial category, members outside of our identified racial categories, and more importantly, ourselves. Racial identity can influence how students in the HESA program perceive racial dynamics and learning, and thus, it is important to understand what racial identity development means before reporting the results of this study.

Methodology

Quantitative methods are used to consider the impact of race on relationship and community building among a small and diverse group of people. Quantitative methods are measures that require "a numerical or other evaluative symbol assigned to the constructs of interest" (Stage & Manning, 2003, p. 6). This type of methodology allows researchers to understand and interpret complex phenomena based upon numbers that can be measured and generalized (D. Goldhaber, personal communication, September 23, 2004). The numbers used in quantitative research also invoke "the authority of analytic inquiry and scientifically based knowledge" (Blimling, 2004, p. 3). Therefore, methods used in quantitative research (i.e., survey sampling) can provide authentic and accurate results that are relatable to an inquiry, are more likely to be free from bias, and help to control for error (Blimling, 2004; Kuncl, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Quantitative research is the methodology best suited for the purpose of this study. The impact of race on relationship and community building among a small and racially diverse group can be measured through survey research (Jaeger, 1997). I used a survey focused on group dynamics and race to determine whether race did in fact have an impact on relationship and community building within the small HESA cohorts. I also chose to use a survey when researching HESA students because other methods of collecting this data would have made it difficult for students to maintain their confidentiality while responding to the research questions.

Data Collection & Analysis

I administered surveys to members of the 2004-2005 1st and 2nd year cohorts of the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) cohort at The University of Vermont (UVM) to help answer this inquiry. Surveys were mailed to 36 members of the HESA program during the second month of the spring 2005 semester. In this survey, participants indicated whether they strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, strongly agree, or believe the question was not applicable, concerning the impact race has on relationship and community building in their HESA cohort. The survey questions used to research this topic are linked to the six subquestions guiding this research. The identities of the respondents to this survey were anonymous to ensure confidentiality.

Current members of the HESA program were an accessible population for this research. They encompass the required variables necessary to analyze the topic of group dynamics and race, those being that each member is a part of a small and racially diverse group and are earning their Masters degrees in Education using the cohort format. Also, issues of race are more present and regularly incorporated into the course curriculum and class discussion. Due to the nature of this program, students in the HESA program allowed me to more deeply explore their experience with race within a small group.

The results collected from this survey have been summarized in the findings section of the written report. The information gleaned from this survey has been generalized to measure what impact race has on relationship and community building among a small and diverse group of people, specifically those learning within a cohort format in higher education. Also, mismarks were not a large issue in this study; on one occasion, a White student respondent marked two opposite categories on question 20.

Results

Thirty-two surveys were collected for this research. Of those who responded, 14 were 1st year students and 18 were 2nd year students in the HESA program. Four surveys were not returned. Fifteen students of color and 17 White students replied to this survey. Thus the survey yielded an 89% response rate, which is remarkably high for any mail survey ("To e or not to e?," n.d.). The information collected from this research is reported below.

1. How has race influenced my cohort experience?
Survey participants indicated that race influenced group dynamics and their overall cohort experience. In survey questions 1, 2, and 22:

• 13 out of 15 (86.7%) students of color and 15 out of 17 (88.2%) White students strongly agreed that race affected their cohort experience.

• 12 out of 15 (80%) students of color and 12 out of 17 (70.6%) White students both strongly agreed that race had influenced the group dynamic of their cohort.

• 12 out of 15 (80%) students of color and 12 out of 17 (70.6%) White students agreed that their understanding of race had changed as a result of their cohort experience.

2. Does race influence relationship-building among a small and diverse group?
For the most part, race and relationship-building were highly related across cohorts and races. Twenty-seven out of 32 (84.4%) respondents agreed that race influenced relationships within their cohort. Although both students of color and White students identified race as highly influential, fewer White students indicated that race might have inhibited their ability to establish friendships. Questions 3 and 4 supported this finding:

• 14 out of 15 (93.3%) students of color and 13 out of 17 (76.5%) White students agreed that race influenced the relationships established in their cohort.

• 9 out of 15 (60%) students of color disagreed that race had not influenced their ability to establish friendships with members of their cohort. In contrast, however, a total of 6 out of 15 (40%) students of color agreed that race had no impact on their friendships. White students were less varied than students of color when answering this question. A total of 12 out of 17 (70.6%) White students agreed that their ability to establish friendships with members of their cohort was not influenced by race.

3. Does race influence community building among a small and diverse group?
Both students of color and White students indicated that race influenced the sense of community within the HESA program and their cohort. Although the ability to identify a sense of community was affected by race to some degree, respondents' ability to relate professionally and socially to the program and the cohort varied. Survey questions 5 through 8 illustrate this variation:

• 10 out of 15 (66.7%) students of color strongly agreed that race influenced their sense of community among members of the HESA program, whereas a total of 15 out of 17 (88.3%) White students agreed.

• A total of 13 out of 15 (86.7%) students of color and 14 out of 17 (82.4%) agreed that race influenced their sense of community among members of their cohort.

• Race failed to have as much of an impact on professional relationships for students of color with their colleagues. 10 out of 15 (66.6%) students of color and 12 out of 17 (70.6%) White students disagreed that race affected their ability to relate professionally to members of their cohort.

• In contrast, social relationships with the cohort appear to be influenced by race. 10 out of 15 (66.6%) students of color felt that race influenced how they related socially to members of their cohort. White student respondents were split on this statement. 9 out of 17 (52.9%) agreed that race had influenced how they related socially to members of their cohort, how ever, 7 out of 17 (41.1%) disagreed that race had an impact.

4. Does race influence the learning process within a small and diverse group?
The influence of race on the learning process for students of color and White students was varied. The respondents identified situations where race was influential to the learning process and certain points where it was not. According to questions 9 through 19:

• 12 out of 15 (80%) students of color strongly disagreed that race had influenced their ability to learn in class, whereas a total of 10 out of 17 (58.8%) White students disagreed to some degree with this statement.

• A total of 8 out of 15 (53.3%) students of color disagreed that race influ- enced their ability to learn from members of their cohort. However, a total of 7 out of 15 (46.7%) students of color thought that race influenced their ability to learn from members in their cohort. The reaction from White students was also split on this statement. 5 out of 17 (29.4%) strongly disagreed that race had influenced their ability to learn from members of their cohort. 11 out of 17 (64.7%) White students agreed that race had influenced their ability to learn from members of their cohort.

• 11 out of 15 (73.3%) students of color agreed that race had challenged their ability to learn with members of their cohort. In contrast, 10 out of 17 (58.8%) White students disagreed that race had challenged their ability to learn with members of their cohort.

• For the most part, students of color and White students agreed that race made dialogue difficult in class. A total of 11 out of 15 (73.3%) students of color and 10 out of 17 (58.8%) White students somewhat agreed with this statement.

• Students of color and White students both disagreed that race has made communication with their cohort an easy task. 9 out of 15 (60%) students of color strongly disagreed and 13 out of 17 (76.5%) White students somewhat disagreed with this statement.

• To some degree, both students of color and White students agree that their previous experience with race influenced how race affected their learn- ing process. A total of 14 out of 15 (93.3%) students of color and 15 out of 17 (88.2%) White students found this statement valid.

• For the most part, students of color and White students agreed that race has influenced their ability to understand each other. A total of 9 out of 15 (60%) students of color and 10 out of 17 (58.8%) disagreed that race influenced their ability to understand the perspective of other members in their cohort.

• Race has influenced people's ability to understand individual perspectives. A total of 14 out of 15 (93.3%) students of color and 11 out of 17 (64.7%) White students disagreed to some degree that race had not influ- enced the ability for other members in their cohort to understand their perspective.

• A total of 7 out of 15 (46.7%) students of color and 8 out of 17 (47.1%) White students disagreed that race had not made it difficult for them to engage in class discussion. However, 8 out of 15 (53.3%) students of color and 8 out of 17 (47.1%) White students asserted the opposite. Both groups agreed to some degree that race had not made it difficult for them to engage in class discussion.

• Students of color and White students believed that race challenged their individual learning process. 11 out of 15 (73.3%) students of color strongly agreed and 14 out of 17 (82.4%) White students agreed that race had challenged their learning process.

5. Can race have a positive impact on the group dynamics within a cohort?
For the most part, students of color and White students agree that race has had a positive impact on their overall cohort experience. Question 19 indicates that:

• 13 out of 15 (86.6%) students of color and 14 out of 17 (82.3%) White students agreed that race had an overall positive impact on their cohort experience.

6. Can race have a negative impact on the group dynamics within a cohort?
The belief that race had a positive impact on the overall cohort experience was further supported by the data. Question 20 reveals that:

• 11 out of 15 (73.3%) students of color and 11 out of 16 (68.7%) White students disagreed that race had a negative impact on their cohort experi- ence. The answer from one White student respondent was not factored in this question because they had marked two opposing categories.

Discussion

"…in a therapy group or discussion group of eight people, Whites would feel more comfortable if six or more of the participants were White, whereas Blacks on average feel comfortable if at least four were Black; in a classroom of 25 students, Whites would feel comfortable if 18 or more of the students were White, whereas Blacks would feel comfortable if half were of each race."
-Helms, 1990

I include this quote here because I believe it explains what I discovered in the survey results. The racial composition of the program, more than the students' year in the program, affected their ability to learn, communicate, establish friendships, understand, and build community with members of their cohort. In her research on Black racial identity development, Helms (1990) discovered that "Whites were likely to prefer heteroracial groups in which they are numerically dominant, whereas Blacks are likely to prefer groups in which there are equal numbers of Blacks and Whites" (p. 190). The racial proportions of these groups in the HESA program sparked a reaction similar to that found in Helms's work. Levels of power and dominance were linked to the number of racial group membership in each cohort. Ultimately, the racial make-up of these groups not only had a profound impact on the comfort level for its members, but also set the stage for their group dynamics.

As a result of this research, I have determined that race does influence the cohort experience. In terms of comfort with race and racial understanding, it is of less importance what is occurring in the classroom, assistantships, and practicum sites. Having roughly half White students and half students of color together in a program has a significant impact on relationships, friendships, community, and learning around race. Thus, the basic premise driving this research is true: race does have an impact on relationship and community building among a small, diverse group of people.

The validation that race has had an impact on relationship and community building among a small and diverse group was drawn from data collected from this survey. When a cross tabulation of year in program to survey questions was performed, I found no difference between cohorts. For the most part, 1st year students and 2nd year students responded similarly to all of the questions. However, in a comparison between the cross tabulation of race and year to the survey questions, I was able to identify a difference between students of color and White students in questions 4 and 11. In these questions, 12 out of 17 (70.5%) White students versus 6 out of 15 (40%) students of color tended to agree that race had not influenced their ability to establish friendships, whereas 9 out of 15 (60%) students of color disagreed that race had not influenced friendships versus only 4 out of 17 (23.5%) White students. Also, students of color are more than two times as likely as White students to say race challenges their ability to learn with members of their cohort. 11 out of 15 (73.3%) students of color indicated that race challenged their ability to learn within their cohort. Only 5 out of 17 (29.4%) White students agreed with this statement.

Drawing from the results of this research, it is clear that the group dynamic established among the 2004-2005 HESA cohort members is a result of race. This outcome suggests several explanations: racial identity development for students of color and White students, the expectations and interpretations of the HESA program and cohort, and the impact of previous experiences with race and group settings on the current group dynamic are all key factors. Given the increased racial diversity of the HESA program, it is an important finding that race is having such a significant impact on students. The following graph illustrates the way the HESA program has increased in racial diversity since 1999.

Table 1.

UVM HESA Preparation Program: Racial Diversity

Academic Year	Total # of Students	White Students	Students of Color	% Students of Color
1999-2000	32	29	3	9%
2000-2001	31	27	4	13%
2001-2002	29	24	5	17%
2002-2003	32	23	9	28%
2003-2004	34	21	13	38%
2004-2005	38	20	18	47%

From "Talented & gifted graduate students of color: Creating inviting campuses," by Diaz, J., Kelly, B., Kelly, R., Mmeje, K., & Sturdivant, A., 2005, PowerPoint presentation at American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Convention, Nashville, TN.

Conclusion & Implications for the HESA Program

"Your graduate work is the beginning of your professional career–a career where you must learn to interact productively and collaboratively with colleagues. So remember the advice of Dean Margaret Tyler: 'build relationships.'"
-Moody, 1996

Relationships and a sense of community are key priorities in the profession of higher education and student affairs. While in graduate school, HESA students are encouraged to build connections among their colleagues and peers. These connections not only foster a sense of community among professionals in higher education and student affairs, but they also enhance career development. Graduate school is an ideal time for graduate students to begin exploring collaborative projects with their colleagues on and off campus (Moody, 1996).

Students enrolled in the HESA program are members of a group and thus bound together by the common goal to develop relationships and community. However, when race impacts the cohort experience, the group dynamic changes and hinders this common goal. The survey data suggests that race has an impact on relationship and community building among members of the HESA program. Students of color and White students indicated that race had an impact on their cohort experience and group dynamic. Furthermore, although students of color and White students agree that race plays an influential factor, additional questions in this survey prove that students in this program are at different levels when considering its impact. For example, more students of color believe that race has influenced their ability to establish friendships with members of their cohort than their White counterparts. Also, more White students than students of color disagree that race has challenged their ability to learn with members of their cohort.

It is possible that the varied responses from students of color and White students, specifically for questions regarding relationships and community within their cohort experience, has less to do with the cohort experience and more to do with their understanding of race. Perhaps students of color may have entered HESA with a more informed understanding of race (e.g., lived and went to school with White students, talked about race with friends and family, and experienced acts of racism) so that the cohort experience did not change their understanding of race, but in some ways may have reaffirmed what they knew about it. Perhaps some White students entered this program not having considered their race or the race of their classmates and thus have never viewed race as a barrier in their learning process.

Despite the different experiential knowledge about race students of color and White students brought with them into the program, some work around race is happening! Across cohort and race, students are conceptualizing and engaging in dialogue about race. The findings of the data indicate that this progress is both

personal and complex. The racial experience in the academy has been both positive and negative for HESA students. More importantly, this research indicates that race seems to have taken a primary role in shaping the overall HESA experience–through relationship building, community development, and personal growth.

Clearly, race matters (West, 1993). It matters more than it has been recognized on an institutional level among graduate programs in higher education and student affairs. We (graduate students, faculty, and administrators) must consider the impact of race and group dynamics as we work toward constructing nurturing and collaborative learning environments (Maher, 2004). This requires that we recognize how race might intersect among a group of people, more specifically, members of a cohort. Thus, a new definition and implementation for HESA community can arise–one that takes into account the impact of race and group dynamics.

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