Introduction

This analysis focuses primarily on a set of questions about diversity asked of students in January-February 2007 who are participating in the NECASL panel study of the Class of 2010. This interview was the second of three administered to the panel sample in their first year of college. The questions were as follows:

One of the core values of ______ College is a commitment to diversity.
   a) How would you define diversity at ______?²
   b) Based on your experience thus far, what can you say about diversity at ______? (Probe for specific examples.)
   c) Has your academic experience been affected by this diversity? If so, in what ways?
   d) Has your residential or social experience been affected by this diversity? If so, in what ways?

Students of color and international students are over-represented (relative to their proportion at each college) in the panel. Although not all students answered all of the diversity questions, the total number of students in each racial/ethnic group was: 36 Asian American, 36 African American, 36 Latino/a, 36 international and 72 white students. It is important to keep in mind that some of the colleges in the consortium experienced racial incidents on their campuses in the fall of 2006. In some cases these clearly influenced how students described their experiences with diversity at college.

Definitions of diversity

A large majority of students gave broad, inclusive definitions of diversity that incorporated various forms of group difference: racial, ethnic, national, geographic, religious, socioeconomic, and sexual. “Diversity? I guess it means like people with different values, different ethnic groups, different morals, different interests, all combined,” as one student put it. Almost all students mentioned cultural and ethnic differences as key elements of diversity, but very few gave definitions of diversity that focused exclusively on one or both of these characteristics. “Diversity to me just means that there are multiple aspects to something,” noted another student. “Not only culturally, or ethnicity rate. Not only the different cultures or different people from different countries, but also people from just different backgrounds, people with different sexualities. So kind of just, diversity means having everybody involved. Like a big wide spectrum of all different people.”

¹ Data from Middlebury College are not included in this report, because they had yet to join the consortium when these interviews were administered.
² Participants understood this question as asking about their individual definitions of diversity and answered as such.
Many students picked up on the notion of “differences in background,” by which they usually meant variation in family or childhood experiences. A good number referred to “viewpoint diversity:” everyone has different opinions, ideas or points of view. A typical response: “I kind of define it as having people from different backgrounds and experiences all coming together to be able to share those experiences, and being able to learn from them, and be able to cultivate a good understanding of what differences are like. And also, just kind of being able to see new people and things.”

Definitions of diversity did not vary markedly between students of color and white students.

**Diversity at my college**

In contrast to the homogeneity of responses to how diversity is defined, students were divided in their perspectives regarding their college’s commitment to diversity and ability to create a diverse student population in which differences are respected. A large group of students—the majority at some schools, a near-majority at others—believed that their college had made significant efforts to bring to campus a diverse group of students and that, compared to other schools with which they were familiar, their college was “doing a better job.” This group (particularly those who had come from socially-homogeneous communities or high schools) found their college communities to be diverse in many respects—politically, geographically, socioeconomically, culturally and racially. At some schools these positive depictions of diversity were disproportionately held by white students; at others they were not. At some schools with comparatively less structural diversity, students who held positive views often focused on the presence of international students in diversifying their campuses.

A sizeable group of students at each college had something negative to say about diversity on their campuses. Some students from colleges with comparatively less structural diversity thought their school was “a long way” from becoming racially diverse. Students from more structurally diverse colleges often noted that the racial/ethnic diversity of the student body masked the political, socioeconomic or geographic homogeneity of their peers. In addition, several students at each college thought that there was relatively little meaningful interaction among students across races, cultures or backgrounds. (White students were more likely to make this claim on some campuses.) A small, but articulate, number of students (almost all of whom are students of color or international students) claimed that, at their college, diversity was “completely forced,” something that was “spoon-fed” to students.

**The effects of diversity on the academic experience**

A large number of students—ranging from about a third at some schools to well over half at others—stated that diversity had no effect on their academic experience, with most failing to provide an explanation for this lack of connection. Those who did provide a reason for the absence of a link between diversity and their academic experience noted: 1) that there had been little opportunity for classroom discussion to be informed by diversity because they were mostly enrolled in larger, lecture courses; or 2) that the lack of diversity among the student body meant that classroom discussions rarely evinced strong differences in perspective.
A smaller but sizeable group articulated a positive connection between diversity and their academic experience, many noting how their peers and professors had exposed them to diverse cultures, experiences, ideas or ways of thinking. (Given the comments in the previous paragraph, it is not surprising that links between diversity and academics were often made in the context of discussion-based courses.) Some students in this group provided more tenuous connections between diversity and academics, referring to the diversity of the curriculum or describing in vague, general terms a relationship between the two.

A small group of students—all of them students of color—mentioned how diversity (or its absence) affected their academic experience in negative ways, either because they felt obliged (by themselves or their peers) to represent the “minority point of view” or because of insensitive or uninformed comments made in class by their peers.

The effects of diversity on residential and social experience

Most students could see connections between diversity and their residential or campus social experiences and, for many, the impact of diversity on these experiences was great. Several spoke of long, meaningful conversations they had had in their residence halls with international students, students from other parts of the U.S., or students whose backgrounds and opinions differ from theirs. Many noted that their friendship groups were diverse in a number of ways and that they had learned a great deal from the new friends they had made. Several students called attention to the number of groups and events on campus focusing on cultural traditions/heritage that give visibility to the diversity on campus. In general, white students were more likely than students of color to see the diversity of the student body as having positive effects on their social experiences.

A smaller (but on some campuses substantial) group of students failed to see any impact of diversity on their social or residential experience. Of those who offered an explanation for this, some cited the lack of ethnic/racial diversity in their residence hall or on campus, or the homogeneity of their friendships networks. International students and students of color accounted for the majority of students in this group.

On some campuses a small group of students (almost all of whom were students of color) expressed negative effects arising from the lack of diversity on their campuses. These students related social/residential situations or circumstances in which they experienced discomfort related to their race, class or political beliefs.

Questions

1. To what extent are students’ expectations about diversity shaped by their high school experiences? To what extent are these expectations met after they arrive at college?

2. Should we be concerned about the large number of students who fail to see a connection between diversity and their academic experience in the first year of college? If we should, what would be an appropriate response?
3. We have not returned to the issue of diversity in interviews with the panel students since their first year. If we were to ask about this issue in the senior year interviews, what questions should we pose? Were the questions we asked in the first year the “right” ones?

**Illustrative quotations about diversity drawn from the first year interviews**

*On defining diversity….*

“Diversity to me doesn’t always have to do with race or ethnicity, but just how people think and their motivation, their personalities, their goals in life. So I think it’s really beyond just color of skin and ethnicity.”

“I think diversity is the presence of a range of experiences. And it could be experiences that have come from socioeconomic difference or cultural difference or religious difference.”

“Diversity mean to me? Well, I don’t know. I guess racial diversity, ethnic diversity, cultural. Like I guess it’s more like what you grew up with rather than, I don’t think race is so much what defines diversity as in the experiences you had while you were growing up. Like whether you grew up in a big city or small town, whether you’re rich or poor, whether your neighborhood was (unintelligible), but different from yourself, or whether everyone was just like you.”

*On diversity at my college….*

“Where I come from there’s no diversity. Well there’s some, but not really any diversity. Everyone seems to think the same way, believe the same way, dress the same way. Being here, you always bump into someone who has a different religion, came from a different country, it’s a lot more dynamic, in a sense.”

“[My college] is very diverse. People have lots of different opinions, they express it, express it well. Like I know what everybody thinks and feels here, because they’re open about it. And I really like that.”

“I remember visiting my cousin’s college… and like compared to his university like there’s a lot more diversity here. Like people from like all over the world are here, but not so much in the other colleges I visited. And that’s something my parents noticed, too, actually.”

“I feel like all colleges kind of have the same problem. When you look on their brochures, you know, you see two black kids. You might see one Asian and you’ll see three white kids. And percentage wise, that’s not what this school reflects. But I won’t blame [my college] for doing that because it seems to be characteristic of all colleges. But as far as being misleading about diversity here, I don’t think [my college] is….No, [my college] is what [my college] is. And if you come and see it you definitely see that diversity is growing here but it’s not quite sufficient yet.”

“But I think it gets proclaimed, you know, [my college]’s diverse, [my college]’s diverse, so much that sometimes I think, are we really diverse? Or do I just think we’re diverse because I’m part of a big
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“...So I don’t know, the proclamation of we’re diverse, we’re diverse, I think sometimes acts as a facade, in that we’re not as diverse as we could be.”

“I mean you see it in the lunch room. All Latinas are sitting with each other, all the Caucasians, all the African Americans, all the Koreans, all the Chinese, all the international students. So it’s just like, you know, definitely a lot of cliques based on race and ethnicity.”

On the effects of diversity on the academic experience…

Has your academic experience been affected by this diversity? “So far no, not really. Where I haven’t had any real discussion-based classes, I don’t feel like there’s been the opportunity to get some different viewpoints on stuff. Hopefully this semester with my seminar I can maybe benefit a little bit more from that diversity.”

“I think diversity is really important for the classroom and that’s why I really wanted to go to a diverse school… But I haven’t had that many classes where the diversity has made an impact.”

“But the people are generally liberal here and generally democrats here so it’s not like you have, and generally speaking, it’s not like when we talk about poverty or taxes that there’s going to be this radical shift of everybody talking or focusing on one issue, so. I don’t think, and I came from like the same environment where it was basically liberal and democrat so it’s not different. My academic experience hasn’t been any different than it was before.”

“Like especially sociology, you get viewpoints from like people from all different backgrounds and places… I think stuff like that really kind of changes your perspective little bit… it’s definitely been enriching.”

Has your academic experience been affected by this diversity? “I don’t think it has. Well, I take that back. I think one thing I really enjoyed about my history class was just, it was a big class I would say, probably the biggest one from last semester, but we had different people. There were a few African students in there but each one of them was from a different country. And each one would talk about her experience there, and if we were talking about a certain topic they would give I guess their own opinion, or how it’s viewed in their home country. Because, you know, I mean because some articles sort of generalized, you know in Africa this and this happens, but they would say, no, I’m from Africa, but I’m from such and such place and in my country this is how we do it, or this is how we see such and such. And then there were students who had visited as well. And then me, I’m from the Caribbean, so some of the things were similar to what we, like what our experiences are and some were different. So I got to compare and contrast what we talked about. I think that impacted, I think diversity impacted academics in history class and in classes that kind of reflected diverse or, I guess, I wouldn’t say diverse topics, but just not American topics or not just straightforward math or things like that.”

“Also like within the classroom, and (unintelligible) be the only like minority in the classroom, or something like feeling kind of defensive because I’m by myself, so like, not that people necessarily turn to me, like oh, you must know about everything, but feeling like I had to speak up and kind of defend my race or something like that.”

Is there a specific incident that you can tell me about in

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which this happened? “Kind of happened a few times in [a class on race and identity], so it’s not surprising. And I wasn’t the only Black person in the classroom but, like two more but one of them didn’t really speak at all, but there were like assumptions made about characters like, that like maybe myself and other black girl was, we were more sensitive to because of our experiences, whereas other people are kind of oblivious to. And I think it’s important that like we’re there to be able to like challenge other people ideas, but (unintelligible) to feel like you have to bear that burden at that time. It’s bothersome I guess.”

On the effects of diversity on social and residential experience….

“I think my friends and I could probably be the poster children for diversity, because we always joke that when we go out, we have a representative from every race. And like we always expect someone to pop out from behind a tree and like take [a photograph of] the crew of us for the brochure.”

“Yes we have very different personalities at [my residence hall], and I think that’s what makes it great. There’s people from all over the place. And it’s good because you find out things that you didn’t know existed before and, I don’t know, you become more open-minded.”

“I think one of the nicest things is like talking about what your life was like before you came to [my college] because we all sort of have, not the same life, but we all have this like common experience now that we sort of all get. But some of my favorite conversations with my friends have been about what, who were before you came here.”

Has your social or residential experience been affected by diversity here? “I don’t think so. Not that I’ve felt. Unless I said something that you could, I mean, I guess, like I’ve said I learned certain things from them, but I don’t think that’s changed me socially.”

“I think in general, like on my floor in general I’m like the only, no, there’s another minority who’s Asian. So I feel like they don’t clique a lot because they’re always like playing stuff that I would consider stupid where I’m from, and being loud in hours that, you know, whatever. But anyways, I feel like people having little diversity here like always like shuts us down, people who are here in small numbers, because like the other people never get to, you know, know where we come from. They already have this prejudice thing in their face. Like oh, you know, a black women, that, that, I feel like I see, I feel like I intimidate people in general because I am a black woman.”