

**AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT PERCEPTION AT
HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY: A FOCUS GROUP STUDY
REPORT**

PRESENTED TO

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Introduction

Within the past six years, colleges and universities across America have seen a decrease in African American student enrollment. More recently, the University of California and California State Universities have also experienced these declines. There are several possible reasons: limited recruitment efforts, poor inner-city education, cut-backs in collegiate athletics, and laws such as Proposition 209 in California that have dismantled affirmative action programs. The enrollment problem is compounded given the fact that the attrition rate among African Americans is higher than other student groups. While some of these students are disqualified for academic reasons, others leave for a variety of personal reasons, including dissatisfaction with their college experience.

In the Spring of 1994, Dr. Paul Crosbie of Humboldt State University's Sociology department analyzed the findings of a CSU study, the Student Needs and Priority Survey (SNAPS). This survey was administered to selected samples of students at all CSU campuses including Humboldt. Crosbie wrote that students of color (who made up 10.1% of the Humboldt sample) often "feel lonely" and "less often experience friendly and supportive relations." The survey also noted that students of color experienced a higher level of insensitive behavior based on culture and race.

In her follow-up study to the SNAPS survey, Assistant to the Vice President of Student Affairs, Randi Darnall Burke, focused on the experiences of students regarding their perceptions of the campus climate at Humboldt. Burke's research revealed that of the students surveyed, African American students were the least satisfied with their experiences at HSU. Burke pointed out that students of color experienced or observed at least twice the number of racially insensitive incidents compared to white students. For

African Americans it was even higher: forty-nine percent of African American students reported incidents of racial insensitivity, while at the other end of the scale only seven percent of the white students surveyed reported such experiences.

In an attempt to better understand the experience of African American students at HSU, I was commissioned by Vice President Edward Webb to conduct a series of focus groups. Focus group research differs from questionnaire research surveys, because they are face- to-face, and they provide the opportunity to evoke more specific responses. They can be aimed at a specific social group and probe for detailed answers to general questions.

Focus groups are group interviews. A moderator guides the interview while a small group discusses the topics that the interviewer raises. What the participants in the group say during their discussion are the essential data in focus groups. Typically, there are six to eight participants who come from similar backgrounds, and the moderator is a well-trained professional who works from a predetermined set of discussion topics (Morgan, The Focus Group Guide Book, p. 1).

After reviewing the SNAPS report and Burke’s thesis, Vice President Webb and I generated six questions intended to probe deeper into the Humboldt experience as seen through the eyes of African American students. The questions and responses follow.

Methodology

Questions were tested on a pilot group of African American students and minor changes were made in accordance with their suggestions.

The focus groups were conducted during the last six weeks of the Spring semester. One hundred thirty-four students were contacted; 126 were selected from a generated list of students who “identified” themselves as African American on their

applications to the University (a few of the students on the list turned out to be White). The remaining eight were students whom I knew personally but who were not on the list generated by enrollment management. I phoned, mailed, e-mailed, and personally recruited students for the study. Ultimately forty-three students were included in the study, just under one-third of the total HSU population. Focus groups were held between 5:00 and 7:00 p.m. during the week. A standard set of questions was asked of each group. Table 1 reflects the demographic information for the student participants.

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FOR RESPONDENTS BY PERCENTAGE

GENDER		RESIDENCE	
Female	49%	On campus	49%
Male	51%	Off campus	51%
AGE		CLASS LEVEL	
Less than 20 years	33%	Freshman	30%
20-24 years	49%	Sophomore	14%
25-29 years	14%	Junior	16%
30-34 years	2%	Senior	35%
35 years and older	2%	Graduate	5%
ADMITTANCE LEVEL		MAJOR AREA	
Freshman	61%	Science & Natural Resources	19%
Sophomores	12%	Arts and Humanities	21%
Juniors	16%	Social Sciences	26%
Seniors	9%	Professional Studies	25%
Graduates	2%	Interdisciplinary Studies	7%
		Undeclared	2%
HOMETOWN			
Local Area	2%		
Bay Area	28%		
Los Angeles Area	37%		
San Diego Area	7%		
Central Valley	7%		
Out-of-State/Other	19%		

The seven focus group meetings conducted varied in size from 2 to 11 people. Groups were kept heterogeneous when possible so as to ensure a variety of experiences. However, the last group meeting was comprised of male athletes who were not able to attend earlier sessions.

Responses to the Questions

Question 1. How connected do you feel with other students from your own cultural group? If you have a major, do you feel a connection with non African American students within it?

The first question was intended to determine how many students had a personal bond with their peers. Thirty students reported some feelings of connection with other African American students; however, varying degrees were reported. Most students from the inner city felt a strong bond with others from inner city areas and said it was easy for them to talk to students who shared their experiences.

Of course I feel a connection with other Black students, they are my people. We are all the same.

Others who didn't experience as much of a connection tended to come from more diverse suburban areas; even they sensed a bond simply because they "looked alike." While these suburban students acknowledged their culture, many reported not having many African American friends while growing up.

When I was growing up in _____, I was always called the White girl, and now that I am here I am called the Black girl.

Sixteen students reported a feeling of connection with other students in their major. Students with majors in the sciences, math, and business reported stronger bonds with those in their majors than did students majoring in other disciplines, citing more opportunities for interaction. Football athletes developed a loyalty and connection to their team. Four of the football players reported no connection with students outside the team. Other student athletes reported a connection to their teammates as well, but none as strong as football.

Question 2. Do you have at least one faculty or staff member you would call a friend? Why- why not? If yes, is this a person of color?

A friend was defined as someone who went out of his or her way to help another, and as someone approachable outside of class with school or personal problems. Nearly all students cited a faculty or staff member as a “friend.” Twenty-six students said that this was a person of color, eight mentioned a white person, and 3 students counted both African American and Whites as friends. The list of faculty and staff “friends” was short and repetitive with three African American staff members mentioned consistently. These three members were held in high esteem because of their work with African American students. Students reported being helped by them in many ways and in a friendly and relaxed manner. One white faculty member was mentioned regularly, partly because of his eagerness to recruit interested students in the social sciences. Other faculty and staff were mentioned, but not as consistently as these four.

Students in the focus group sensed a “double standard” concerning student interactions with faculty and staff. White students were perceived by participants to enjoy friendlier, more relaxed relationships with faculty and staff. African American students perceived their relationships with faculty and staff as more formal. While they were always assisted in the task at hand, they rarely felt the same sense of belonging or believed that they had a department where they could go for help.

The Native American Students have ITEPP and their own major, what about the Blacks and Latinos.

Question 3. What activities or campus clubs interest you the most? How important are they to your life at HSU?

Over 90% of the students in the study belonged to a campus club or participated in some extra-curricular activity. Those who participated in athletics felt the strongest ties.

If my sport wasn't here, I wouldn't be here.

The other students didn't report as tight a bond with their clubs. Twenty-five students listed clubs and activities such as the Black Student Union, athletics, and Associated Students as being important to their lives at HSU. They reported that these clubs gave them something to do outside of their studies. Many said that if these clubs didn't exist, their life at Humboldt would be "more boring" than it is now. Ten had a loose connection with a club and joined only because their friends were members and said the club was "cool" to belong to, but that membership didn't improve the quality of their lives at HSU. Four other students didn't belong to any club and didn't feel a need to join.

No clubs appeal to me, I go to school and go home. I'm too busy to join any clubs.

The only club that all the students were aware of was the Black Student Union (BSU) and a minority of them attended on a regular basis. Aside from BSU there were few or no campus clubs that were seen as attractive. No students reported involvement off campus, and most were not involved in any community groups. However, a few attended local churches irregularly.

Question 4. If you have selected a major, why did you choose it?

Virtually all the students in the study had a major, one-fourth in either social sciences or professional studies. Most students majoring in the social sciences chose social work because they hope to make a difference in their communities. Those students said they “love” the social work program because of the instructors.

Steve Stamnes is real cool. He makes you feel welcome, and he always helps you out with whatever you need.

The student participants from Professional Studies were mostly business majors who said they chose business for financial success. They were very satisfied with the curriculum and felt Business Administration would prepare them for work after college. Twenty-one percent were majoring in Arts and Humanities and liked the diverse curriculum. Another 19% percent were science majors who reported a “passion” for the sciences, especially Biology and Botany. Science students did not report a strong bond with any of the professors, but believed that their professors were very good. Fewer than 10% of the students were interdisciplinary or undeclared.

Question 5. Would you recommend HSU to another African American? Why--why not? What advice would you give this person if he or she were considering HSU?

Thirty of the students (81%) in the focus groups said they would recommend Humboldt State to another African American. Most students cited the strengths of the academic programs, not the social life, as the reason for the positive recommendation.

I can't lie, I've been to three other schools before coming here, and Humboldt State is the best education there is.

They would advise prospective students to be serious about their studies because there are few social outlets in Humboldt County. Students missed such familiar outlets as clubs, shopping centers, malls, and movies that would appeal to a black audience. While some criticized the lack of diversity on the campus, other students felt that HSU does prepare them for “real world experience.”

Think about it, this is the way the world is. After you graduate and go to work, you're not going to see a gang of black people in any one particular work place.

Some reported that they enjoyed the “peace of mind” they experienced at HSU. Those from the inner city liked the idea of being able to let their guard down a little and enjoy a different quality of life. Two of the students who came from black colleges loved the unity among the African American students on this campus.

Black Colleges are all hype, they are cool to go to if you want, but they are broke and students are divided by every little thing. The rich stay with the rich, athletes with athletes, frats with frats. Man, sometimes you had dark-skin brothas and light-skin brothas going at it.

Seven students would not recommend Humboldt because they felt that going from the city to a place like HSU would be too great a culture shock, and that the contrast would not be conducive to learning for many African Americans.

You can't learn in class, because the teachers are too busy asking you questions about your race or culture.

There was a mixed opinion about the advisability of younger students coming to HSU. The majority said it was “easy to concentrate” at Humboldt, because there isn't much to do. Others students felt some students would go crazy, because they couldn't release their energy. Two said it would depend on the major a prospective student chose. The best advice they would give to prospective students considering Humboldt would be to get involved with some club or organization and to network with other African Americans early in their collegiate careers.

Question 6. What do you like most about your experience at HSU, on and off campus? What do you like least?

The students liked many things about Humboldt State: the small class size, the student teacher ratio, the Multicultural Center, and the friendly staff. Students agreed that HSU has the best education for the money. Surprisingly, some liked the small numbers of African Americans at Humboldt it provided an opportunity to build closer bonds.

Some who attended larger campuses said there was less cohesion among the African American students in those schools. Others stated the opposite, feeling that the small numbers limited their friendships. The low enrollment of African Americans was connected to other dislikes such as lack of faculty and staff role models, instructor insensitivity toward issues of race, diversity in the curriculum, and perceived lack of respect from the majority of the campus. Many were of the opinion that HSU doesn't want to change and cited the downsizing of the Ethnic Studies department as an example.

They moved Nathan Smith from Founders Hall, to the Library, to the Annex. They want the Ethnic Studies department to be out of sight and out of mind.

Older students also mentioned other Ethnic Studies professors who left or who were not rehired.

If Humboldt was serious about diversity, they would've kept professors like La Plant in music. That man was a good professor, but they let him go.

Conclusion

Overall, the students who participated in this study were very satisfied with their education at Humboldt. Because of the small population of African American students-- that is the lack of a "critical mass"-- they often felt awkward and conspicuous on campus. They often found it hard to assimilate to college life because of constant reminders of being the "minority." Those who stay and graduate realize that they sacrifice much of their familiar social life but gain a realistic perspective of the working environment they will soon be entering.

Recommendations

Most of the following recommendations apply to all students, but are particularly important for African Americans and other students of color:

- Recruitment: be honest and truthful about how different “life at Humboldt” can be.
- Social life: strengthen and offer support to the Black Student Union and the Multicultural Center. African American students need strong organizations for support and a comfortable refuge.
- Assist African American students in becoming familiar with other campus clubs. Encourage these “mainstream” clubs to reach out and include students of color.
- Help African American students find a major early. Students who make academic connections early in their college careers are more likely to stay and graduate.
- Actively recruit faculty and staff of color. African American students need mentors and advisers to turn to for personal and academic advice.
- Residence Halls: room assignments should be made to purposefully group African American students closer together. Students need to feel support from fellow residents who understand their social and cultural backgrounds and who are accessible.
- Educate the campus on the perceptions and experiences of African American students. Understanding is the best way to make Humboldt an accepting environment for students of color.