

Diversity Awareness Education in an Introductory Seminar Course to Promote Social Responsibility

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ABSTRACT

The Applied Science program at the University of Wisconsin-Stout has incorporated diversity awareness education into the Applied Science Profession I (APSC 101) freshmen seminar course for the past three years to promote social responsibility. Since that time, over two hundred APSC 101 students have been involved with in-classroom and out-of-classroom diversity awareness experiences. To assess the effectiveness of the programming, a pre-and post-course survey was implemented. Results indicate APSC 101 programming is helping students become more aware of ways they can support a more inclusive campus community and an increasingly culturally diverse working environment.

Keywords: STEM, Conference Proceedings, Social Responsibility, Survey Results

BACKGROUND

The Core Commitments project of the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) aims to reclaim and revitalize the role of institutions of higher education in fostering students' development of personal and social responsibility (Dey, 2009). Using data from the Personal and Social Responsibility Institutional Inventory (PSRII), administered to twenty-three campuses, researchers found that a majority of students, faculty, administrators, and student affairs staff believe that personal and social responsibility should be incorporated across the curriculum and co-curriculum. However, all surveyed groups reported that their campuses were not focusing enough attention on this issue (Dey, 2009). The AAC&U states that a key opportunity for advancing civic learning and social responsibility will be department programs and requirements (AAC&U 2009). Currently, the Applied Science program is the only academic program at UW-Stout that integrates diversity awareness education in a freshmen seminar course, Applied Science Profession I (APSC 101). The diversity programming was first incorporated fall 2009 (James and Carlson 2012). Students participate in activities designed to help them identify shared values, beliefs, and perceptions and reflect on their own values, beliefs, and perceptions on issues related to diversity and social responsibility.

METHODOLOGY

A "Race and Ethnicity Perceptions" survey was administered electronically to all 105 students enrolled in Applied Science 101 at the beginning and end of the fall 2011 semester. The response rate for the September, 2011 pre-course survey was 93% with 98 students completing the survey. The response rate for the post survey was 77% with 89 students completing the survey. One follow-up reminder was sent to initial non-respondents of each survey. The survey asked for information related to the climate, action/efforts affecting the climate at this institution, and student perceptions of themselves. Average scores were based on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree)

FINDINGS

Results indicate APSC 101 programming is helping students become more aware of ways they can support a more inclusive campus community and an increasingly culturally diverse

working environment. Of the 89 students responding in the post-course survey, 46 reported attending two or more of the out-of-classroom events and 23 students reported attending one event. Twenty students were unable to attend the events due to work scheduling conflicts; those students were given alternative diversity awareness activities to complete. When APSC 101 general population data was analyzed, students were significantly more positive at the end of the course for the statements “I am knowledgeable about the culture of different groups”, “I admit my stereotypes about other groups”, and “I am drawn to others who are different.” These students were also more likely to agree that “All non-minority students have had more opportunity than students from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds”. When the responses of students of color were compared to those of White students, the only statement with a significantly more positive difference at the end of the course for students of color was “I find it more satisfying to work within a diverse team”.

Compared to the pre-course survey results, female students were significantly more positive at the end of the course for the statements “All non-minority students have had more opportunity than students from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds”, “I am knowledgeable about the culture of different groups”, “I am drawn to others who are different”, and “I understand cultural influences are at the root of some of the behaviors I see”. Both male and female students were significantly more positive at the end of the course for the statement “I admit my stereotypes about other groups”.

CONCLUSIONS

Research shows that students in environments where diversity is engaged through the curriculum and co-curriculum rate themselves higher on knowledge and abilities associated with social responsibility and complex thinking for a diverse democracy (AAC&U 2002; Banks, J. 2004; Neville et al. 2010). The earlier students become engaged in activities that build their knowledge and skills, the more likely it is they will find subsequent curricular and co-curricular opportunities that will reinforce their engagement as complex thinkers and responsible citizens (Hurtado and Deangelo 2012). The results from this study demonstrate that one strategy for effectively engaging students in diversity awareness programming earlier in their college careers is through a freshmen seminar course required by an academic program. If other programs adopted a similar model, more students would be exposed to social responsibility programming earlier in their academic careers, making it more likely they will engage in similar curricular and co-curricular opportunities throughout their college experience.

The findings from this study contribute to the growing body of literature indicating that while diversity courses and activities are helpful to all students in promoting positive outcomes, they appear to have the most impact on White students (Chang et al. 2004; Gurin et al. 2004). It has been contended that diversity experiences may have a different effect for students of color because these students routinely experience more frequent cross-racial interactions with White students. White students, on the other hand, tend to have less frequent cross-racial interactions with students of color (Lewis et al. 2012). The gender differences that were revealed in this study support other published research results. Compared to men, women have higher levels of involvement in diversity-related experiences, they endorse affirmative action policies more, they value efforts of diversity promotion, and they value diversity itself (Aberson 2007). It has been suggested that women may be more likely than men to understand issues of discrimination due to their experience with sexism (Neville et al. 2000).

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