



Preparing College Students for a Diverse Democracy

Selected Results from a Survey of Fall 2000 Entering First-Year Students

**Diverse
Democracy
Update**

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SUMMARY. The University of Massachusetts Amherst is participating in a national longitudinal study of the relationship between student diversity and learning outcomes in higher education institutions. First-year students participating in the New Students program completed an initial survey of their prior experiences and expectations for college. The results indicate that students come to UMass Amherst with varying degrees of experience with racial and ethnic diversity. In general, white students have had less exposure to other racial/ethnic groups than ALANA and multi-racial/ethnic students have. Attitudes towards university practices also vary. White students are much less likely to believe that a diverse student body is important and that universities should aggressively recruit students of color. While these differences are striking, there are also important similarities. Most students rate their ability to work cooperatively with diverse people and their tolerance for others with different beliefs fairly highly. There is also substantial agreement that discrimination is still a major problem in the U.S. and that universities have a responsibility to help students learn to live in a multicultural society. Our entering student population illustrates a core social dilemma. As a group, students believe they are tolerant and open to working with students from other racial/ethnic groups. However, their actual experience with diversity and their beliefs about actions the University should take to promote diversity differ substantially across racial/ethnic groups.

In April of 2000, UMass Amherst in conjunction with nine other public research universities launched an extensive research study designed to explore how diversity inside and outside the classroom is linked with learning on college campuses. The main goal of the project, directed by Sylvia Hurtado at the University of Michigan and funded with a three year grant from the U.S. Department of Education, is to understand how students develop cognitive, social, and democratic skills and predispositions through campus programs and initiatives and informal interactions with diverse peers. In an effort to empirically inform the practice of educating a diverse student body, the project will utilize a variety of methods to collect information on student learning outcomes, including a longitudinal survey of students, classroom-based studies, student focus groups, a campus inventory of diversity-related practices, and analyses of student data.

The longitudinal survey component of the project began this past summer when 3,077 entering first-year students completed a survey while attending the New Students Program. The results of the survey provide valuable information on the background characteristics of entering students, including prior experience with people from different racial and ethnic groups, baseline measurements of democracy, cognitive, and social-cognitive outcomes, and student beliefs about the role of higher education in addressing issues of race and ethnicity.

Background Characteristics of Entering First-Year Students

Of the 3,077 students surveyed during orientation, 3,006 actually enrolled for the Fall 2000 semester. The racial/ethnic breakdown of these students is reported in **Table 1**. The distribution of race/ethnicity for *all* Fall 2000 enrolled first-year first-time students is included for comparison.

	Respondents	2000 Enrolled
White/Caucasian	83%	77%
Asian American/Pacific Islander	8%	8%
Latino/Hispanic/Chicano	3%	4%
African American/Black/Cape Verdean	2%	4%
Multi-racial/ethnic*	2%	not a category
Unreported	1%	8%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	less than 1%	less than 1%

*Student marked more than one racial/ethnic group
 Figures exclude non-resident aliens

There were clear and significant differences in the responses of each racial/ethnic group to most survey items. Unfortunately, the number of students who identified themselves as American Indian/Alaskan Native was too small (n=4) for these students to be included as a separate analysis group.

The proportion of students who were the first in their family to attend college and self-reported annual family income differed across student race/ethnicity. A higher proportion of Asian American students (30%) were the first in their family to attend college, compared to Latino (21%), African American (18%), white (16%), and multi-racial/ethnic (13%) students. Almost a quarter of African American, Asian American, and Latino students reported an annual family income below \$20,000, compared to 12% of multi-racial/ethnic students and just 4% of white students.

Prior Experience Interacting with Diverse Peers

Several survey items assessed students' experience interacting with people from different racial and ethnic groups prior to attending UMass. The results for two of these items – racial/ethnic composition of the student's high school and amount of time spent studying with someone of a different race/ethnicity – are presented in **Figures 1 and 2**. A large majority of white students (79%) attended high schools that were all or mostly white. Between 40 and 60 percent of students in each remaining racial/ethnic category also attended a predominantly white high school. In general, ALANA and multi-racial/ethnic students reported having had more experience interacting with people from different racial/ethnic groups than white students did. For example, over 60% of African American, Latino, Asian American, and multi-racial/ethnic students reported having studied with someone from a different racial/ethnic group at least a few times a week, compared to only 32% of white students.

Figure 1: Racial/Ethnic Composition of High School

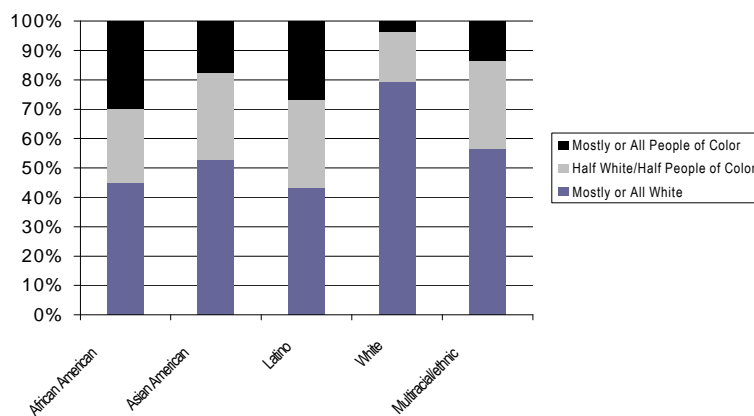
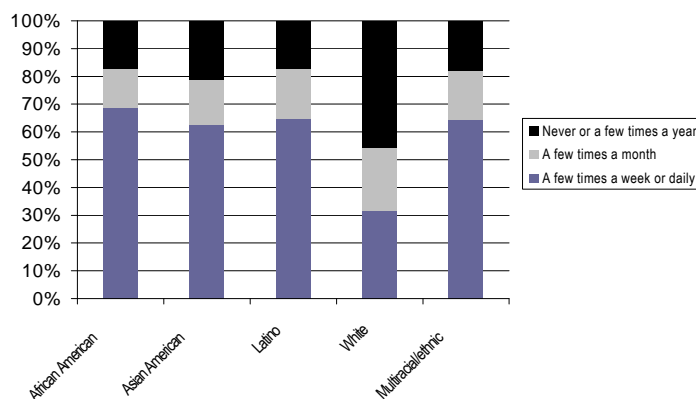


Figure 2: During high school, how often did you study with someone from a different racial/ethnic group?



Multicultural Skills and Knowledge

Despite different levels of experience interacting with people of a different race/ethnicity, the majority of students rated their ability to work cooperatively with diverse people as at least somewhat strong (**Figure 3**). However, the proportion of students seeing this ability as a “major strength” varied greatly across racial/ethnic groups. Fifty-eight percent of African Americans, 50% of multi-racial/ethnic students, and 44% of Latinos rated their ability to work cooperatively with diverse people as a major strength. Though a majority of Asian American and white students rated this ability as at least somewhat strong, only 28% viewed it as a major strength. Most students also rated their tolerance of others with different beliefs as at least somewhat strong (**Figure 4**). Differences in responses across racial/ethnic groups on this item were apparent, but not statistically significant.

Figure 3: Rate your ability to work cooperatively with diverse people.

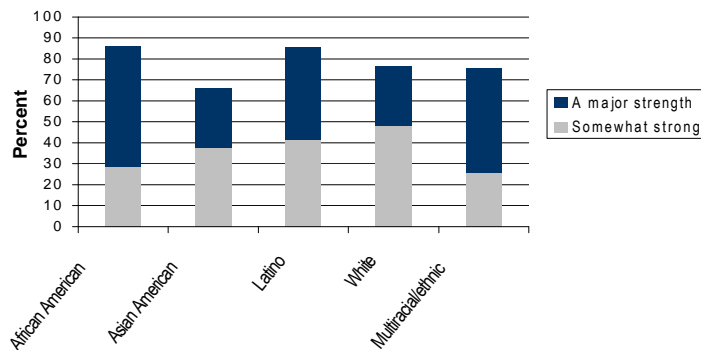
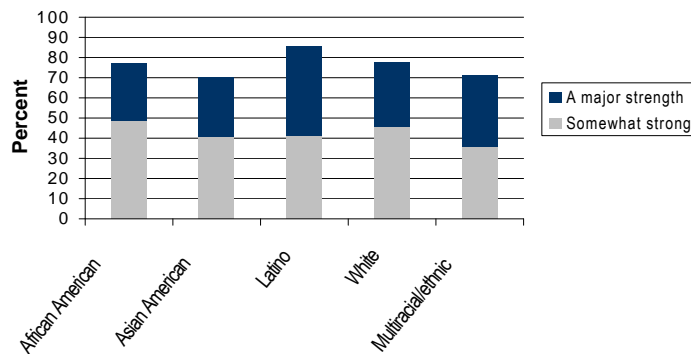
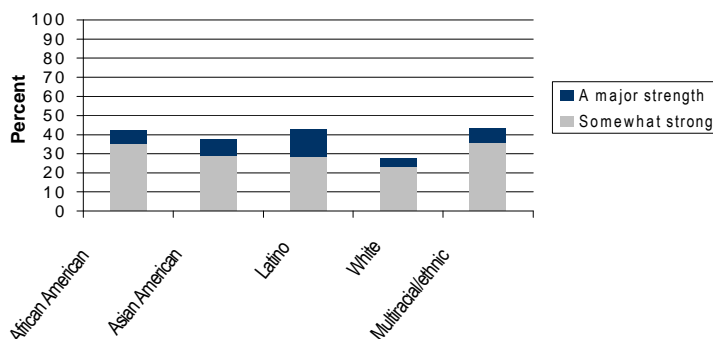


Figure 4: Rate your tolerance of others with different beliefs



Though most students see their ability to work cooperatively with diverse people as a strength, far fewer rate their knowledge of the cultural background of others as strong (**Figure 5**). White students were the least likely to rate their knowledge of the cultural background of others as at least somewhat strong.

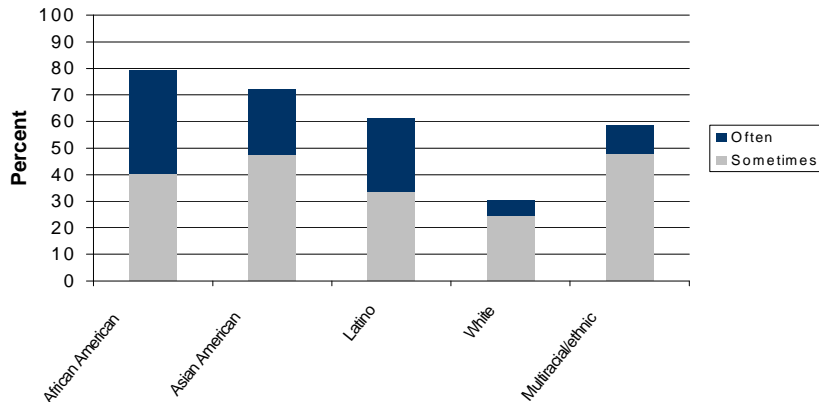
Figure 5: Rate your knowledge about the cultural background of others.



Attitudes Towards Racial/Ethnic Identity and Discrimination

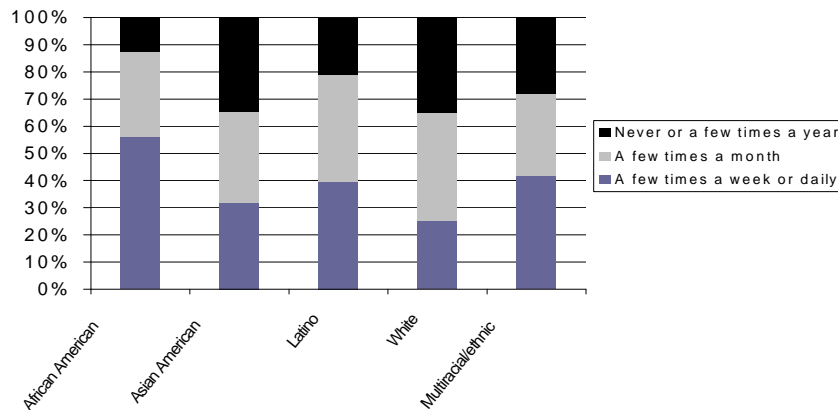
When students were asked to estimate how often they think about their race, dramatic differences emerged across racial/ethnic groups (**Figure 6**). White students were far less likely than other racial/ethnic groups to say they thought about their race often or sometimes (30%). In contrast, 39% of African American students reported thinking about their race often, and another 40% reported thinking about their race at least sometimes.

Figure 6: How often do you think about your race?



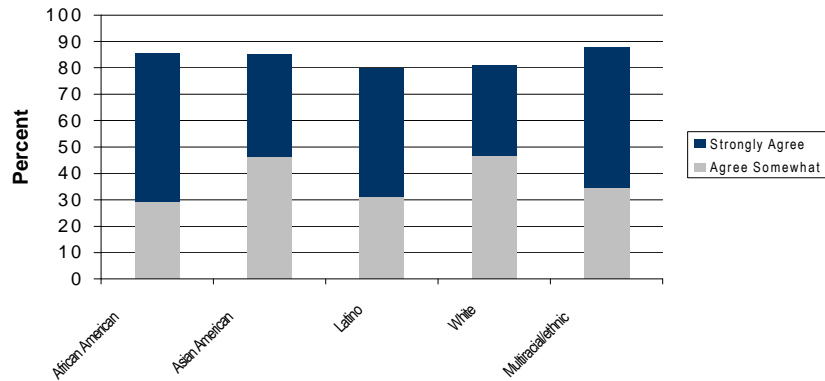
Compared to other students, African Americans were also more likely to report discussing race/ethnicity issues a few times a week or daily during high school (**Figure 7**). Fifty-six percent of African American students reported discussing race/ethnicity issues at least a few times a week, compared to about 40% of multi-racial/ethnic and Latino students, 32% of Asian American students, and 25% of white students.

Figure 7: How often do you discuss racial/ethnic issues?



Though the frequency with which students discussed race and ethnicity issues varied, the majority of students, regardless of race/ethnicity, agreed that racial/ethnic discrimination is still a major problem in the U.S. As **Figure 8** shows, 80% or more of students in each group agreed at least somewhat that discrimination is still a problem. The proportion of students “strongly” agreeing with this statement, however, differed according to racial/ethnic status. Between 49% and 56% of African American, Latino, and multi-racial/ethnic students strongly agreed that discrimination is still a problem in the U.S., compared to 39% of Asian American and 35% of white students.

Figure 8: Racial/ethnic discrimination is still a major problem in the U.S.



Attitudes Regarding the Role of Higher Education in Racial/Ethnic Issues

In general, entering first-year students agreed that enhancing a student’s ability to live in a multicultural society is part of a university’s mission, ranging from 77% of white students to 92% of multi-racial/ethnic students agreeing somewhat or strongly (Figure 9). When asked to rate the importance of a racially and ethnically diverse student body, however, vast differences in the responses across racial/ethnic groups were apparent. As shown in Figure 10, responses ranged from almost 90% of African Americans to only 32% of white students rating a diverse student body as very important or essential.

Figure 9: Enhancing student ability to live in a multicultural society is part of a university's mission

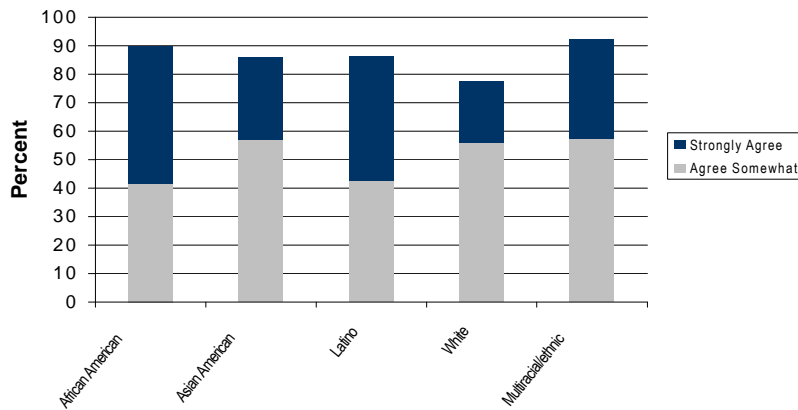
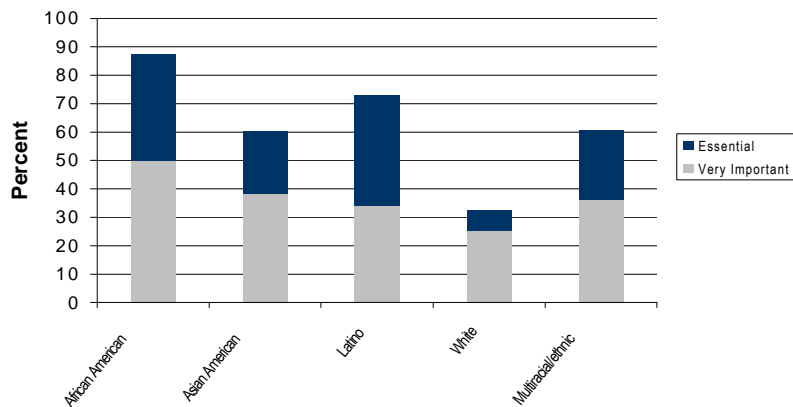
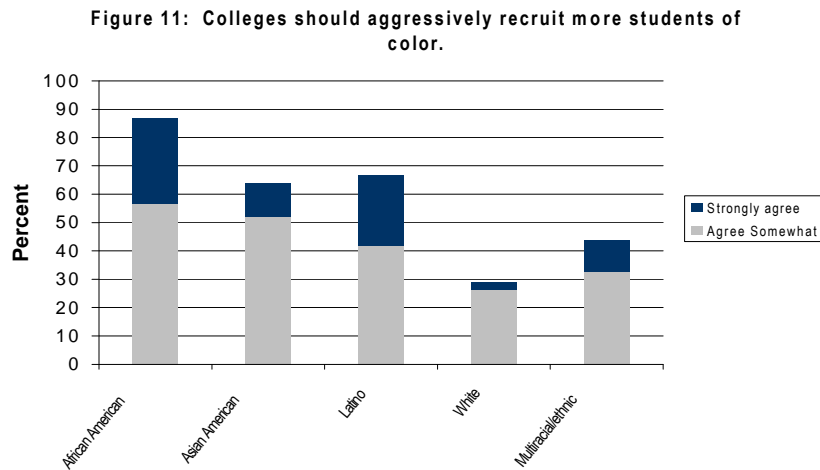


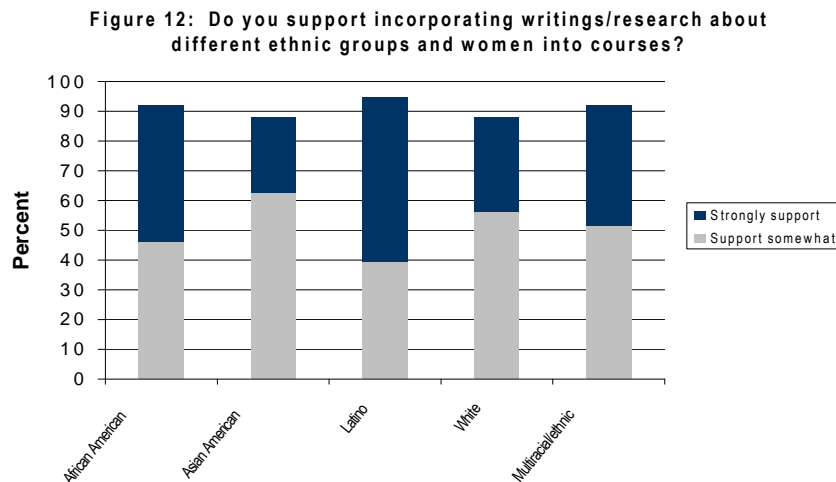
Figure 10: How important is a racially and ethnically diverse student body?



When asked if colleges should aggressively recruit more students of color, a similar response pattern emerged, with one exception. Whereas over 60% of multi-racial/ethnic students rated having a diverse student body as important, only 45% agreed that colleges should aggressively recruit students of color (**Figure 11**).



Students overwhelmingly support incorporating writings and research about different ethnic groups and women in courses (**Figure 12**). How strongly they support such coursework differs significantly across race/ethnicity. Just 25% of Asian American students strongly support incorporating diversity writings and research into classes, compared to 32% of white students, 40% to 46% of multi-racial/ethnic and African American students, and 55% of Latino students.



Next Steps

These results represent just a sample of the items contained on the survey of Fall 2000 entering students. A follow-up survey is scheduled for the Spring of 2002. Additional study components are scheduled to take place prior to the next survey administration including a site visit by the principle investigating team from the University of Michigan in Spring 2001.

For a more detailed description of the goals and components of the entire study, visit the project web site at <http://www.umich.edu/~divdemo>. For information about UMass Amherst's participation in the project, contact the campus liaison, Ximena Zúñiga at 545-0918 or xzuniga@educ.umass.edu.