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Diversity Climate Assessment of the Communication Studies Department

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Diversity Assessment in the Department of Communication Studies

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Abstract

This study is a mixed-method assessment combining survey questionnaire, textual analysis, and qualitative interviews in assessing and understanding student experiences in the Department of Communication Studies at Western Washington University. The purpose of the study is twofold: (a) to examine students' perception of the diversity climate in communication classes and the department in general; and (b) to understand communication patterns that silence marginalized voices in the classroom. Survey questionnaires are administered to measure student perceptions of classroom climate pertaining to cultural diversity issues. Textual analysis is conducted on communication syllabi ($N = 60$) to identify key terms associated with diversity. Student narratives collected through face-to-face interviews are explored in order to understand their experiences related to diversity issues in communication classes and in the department at large. The participants consist of enrolled WWU undergraduate students who have taken at least four communication classes and been attending the classes in the past two academic quarters. These selection criteria are imposed to ensure that the participants are familiar with the recent department climate and classroom culture. Through the assessment data, I seek to better understand student learning and to address diversity-related issues in curriculum design and instruction. More importantly, the dissemination of the knowledge gained through this scholarship can also be used to encourage genuine and meaningful interracial dialogue in higher education.

Quantitative Methodology

I am currently in the process of distributing survey questionnaire to WWU communication students. The use of survey research allows participants to self-report their perception and experiences with confidentiality (Beltrán, 2011). Since we seek to quantify the data, the use of survey questionnaire permits the use of display and inferential statistics in the report. Items used in the survey questionnaire are adapted from the **Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) survey**, administered in many colleges nationwide. The measurements have high reliability that ranges from .71 to .94 in the subscales (Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnston & Yeung, 2014; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008). I chose subscales that best fit the purpose of this study: **the Learning Environments Survey, the Classroom Climate Module, and the Intergroup Module**. Although campus climate assessment data are available at WWU, the data are not specific to students who take communication courses. Therefore, I have collected data that will specifically serve the purpose of this study and the department.

In addition to the survey, I performed a quantitative textual analysis of **60 communication studies syllabi** from Winter 2016 to Winter 2018 quarters. The analysis includes the identification of key terms associated with diversity (see Findings for the 30 key terms used).

Qualitative Methodology

Thus far, I have conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 13 participants. Qualitative interview is suitable for this study, since it allows in-depth investigation of the students' experiences in the classroom. My own status as an undergraduate student permits interaction with fellow undergraduates in "a relationship in which there is mutual influence, yet in which individuality needs to be recognized" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 33). The interview protocol is designed using Spradley's (1979) techniques to infer cultural knowledge from symbols used in participant discourse (also see Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2010; Schall, 1983; Schmidt, 1998). During interviews, I asked participants generic grand-tour questions surveying their descriptions of classroom experience. Interview questions used in Brunner (2006) and Halualani (2010) were partially modified and incorporated; the questions focus on the undergraduate students' perception of diversity on college campuses. Follow-up questions (i.e., probes) for soliciting clarifications and examples were also typical in interview protocol.

Implications

The findings of the study allow the understanding of students' perspective on the diversity climate of the department. Students' voice, thus, can be used to encourage conversations and actions. Recommendations proposed by students may be used to enhance cultural, curricular, and administrative matters in the department and the wider campus community. In short, this diversity assessment indicates the need for the department community to move toward racial equity.

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Background

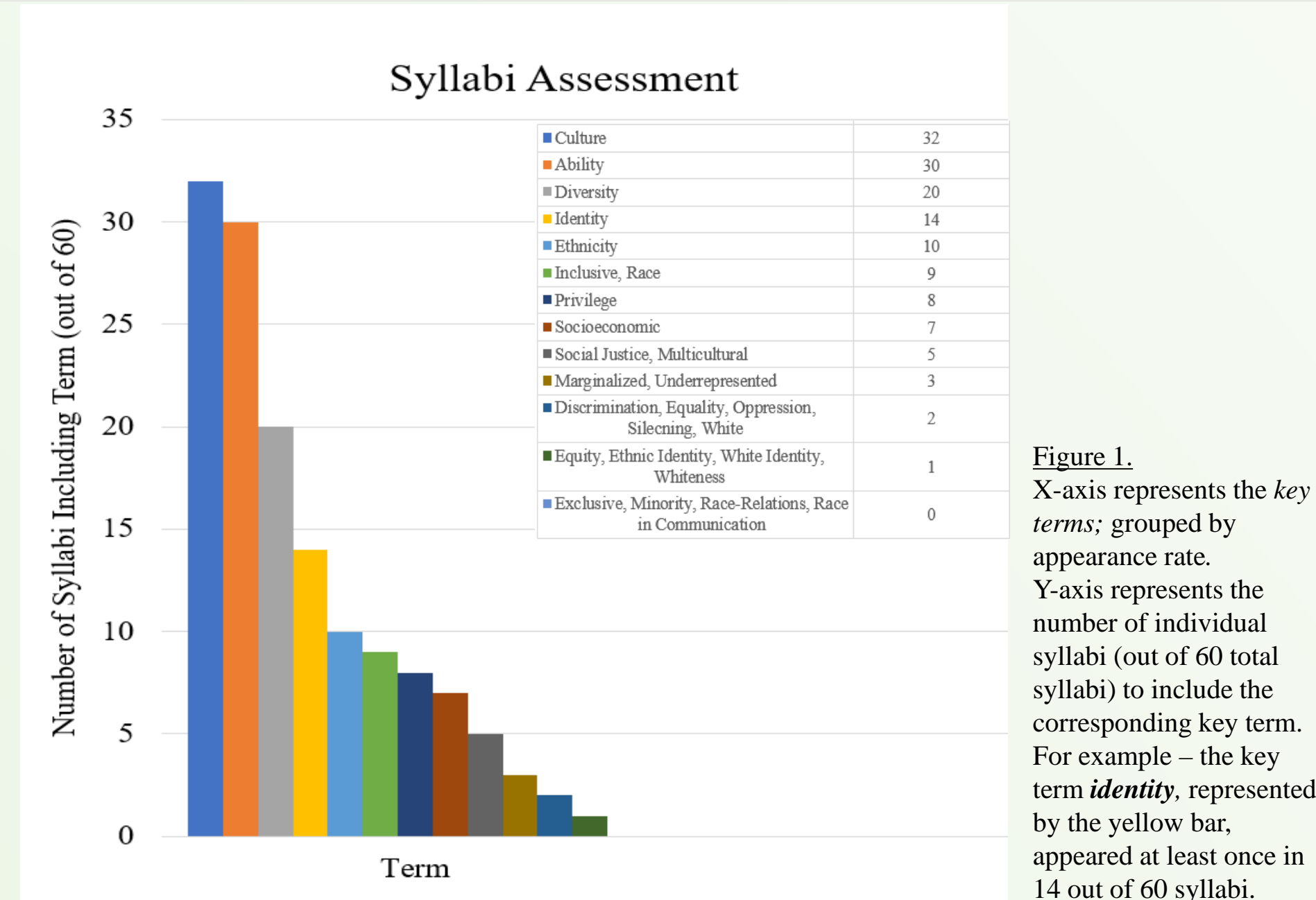
The diversity assessment of communication instruction and curriculum, to date, is yet to meaningfully incorporate student voices (Halualani, 2010). In fact, Halualani (2010) is the first comprehensive published study in the communication discipline that investigates **diversity climate assessment** at a multiracial university on the U.S. West Coast. According to Starosta (2010) and Hendrix and Wilson (2014), **the White-washed curriculum** in the communication discipline does not reflect the backgrounds of the scholars and the students it serves. Accordingly, my research is meant to live up to the communication studies department's mission—"We teach communication studies that nurture inclusive civil discourse, critical thinking, and cooperative solutions in a diverse global community" (WWU Comm. Dept. Mission Statement)—and to provide a meaningful assessment and understanding of the diversity climate. While all instructors claim their support for diversity in their instruction and research, the amount of attention devoted to this subject, alone, is abysmal. Still, the consequences of disregarding a diversity assessment are even worse, because it leads to the perpetuation of dominance and normalization of Whiteness (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995).

According to Starosta (2010), empirical journals in the discipline refuse to publish perspectives of marginalized groups regarding **racial and diversity issues**. He evidenced higher publication acceptance rates among White researchers writing intercultural studies than among non-White researchers (Starosta, 2010). Kramarae's (1981) claim of "**Members of subordinate groups are not as free or as able as members of the dominant group are to say what they wish, when, and where they wish**" is seen in such a practice. Apparently, journal publications constitute textbook knowledge and curricular practices. The education that students receive, thus, is rooted in this bias and assumption that is not made transparent. In this study, I aim to observe the occurrence of such norms in the department community and to reveal how they may silence students' opportunity to engage in deep, meaningful **racial dialogue that disrupts White normalization**.

Findings

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

- The term that appeared most frequently among the 60 syllabi was **culture** ($n = 122$), followed by **diversity** ($n = 62$), and **ability** ($n = 49$).
- The terms that did not appear were **disability, exclusive, inequality, minority race in communication, and race-relations**.
- The term **culture** also appeared in more individual syllabi than any other term, with an average appearance rate of $m = 53.4\%$ (32 of the 60 syllabi mention **culture** at least once).
- The second most apparent term was **ability** ($m = 50\%$) with 30/60 syllabi including the term, and **diversity** ($m = 33.4\%$) was the third most apparent with 20/60 syllabi including the term.
- The following terms only appear in one out of 60 syllabi: **equity, ethnic identity, white identity, whiteness**, each with an average appearance rate of $m = 1.7\%$.



INTERVIEW DATA ANALYSIS

I. How would you describe the term diversity?

Student Responses:

- Diversity is a standard of openly listening to the experiences of others and taking them for truth.
- Diversity is a setting in which people of different perspectives or backgrounds share a common space and goal, such as a classroom.
- Diversity is demographic representation, including groups of people who differ in race, ethnicity, age, gender, class, sexual orientation, and the like.

Given your overall experience, how would you describe the diversity climate at the department?

Student Responses:

- Students reported a **poor diversity climate** in need of improvement.
 - Because it is **not diverse**: "I think there's a lack of diversity in thought here. I think that we have this surface level support [for] diversity and people of color and social justice and... it's all like, kind of, talk at this point... I don't feel like I've increased my skills in working with diversity or inclusion or things like that, you know?" (Participant 5: pp. 8; 23-25, pp. 9;1)
 - Because it is **non-inclusive**: "I think it could be better... I think the faculty has a lot of growing and learning to do before they can really say they're trying to uplift and celebrate diversity and in turn—if professors are willing to have those [diversity] conversations... people of color will feel lifted instead of alienated." (Participant 11: pp. 14-15; 33-2)
- Specifically, students reported that the **communication curriculum lacks coverage and rigor in diversity issues**.
 - "I don't think any of the comm classes challenge kids in these ways until far too late or teach kids how to talk about really complex [diversity] issues [until] the very end of their career... whereas they should be starting earlier, especially with the major being communications." (Participant 1: pp. 11; 20-23)

In regards to curriculum, participants reported **instructors' use of classroom materials as "White-washed,"** since predominantly White authors and White viewpoints are presented.

- "I'm more aware of the lack of diversity... in what's being published [and] I do think we're being taught from the dominant group and our demographics are shifting—and it's really important to be informed." (Participant 7: pp. 15; 3-6)
- "I'm still getting different perspectives, but that being said there's only one [professor] who's providing non-White perspectives." (Participant 3: pp. 9; 16-18)
- Additionally, students reported **White professors' disengagement in racial dialogue**.
 - "I don't think a single one of my White professors has ever brought up race and actually attempted to have a discussion about it." (Participant 6: pp.14; 8-10)
 - "I had professors that were White and I chose not to address issues of race [or politics] honestly, because they would change the subject right away." (Participant 8: pp. 13; 10-12)

II. Could you describe a negative experience you encountered that involves diversity in the communication classroom?

Student Responses:

- Participants noted a **lack of representational diversity** in the classroom.
- Participants further acknowledged the effects of **WWU as a predominantly White institution** on the quality of education in communication classes.
 - "Noticing that the educators here are predominantly White... was kind of shocking to know that in the communication department. I feel like there should be more [diversity] since communication is very broad and that covers a lot of different languages and cultures." (Participant 9: pp. 14; 1-7)
- Participants also reported **curriculum design and instruction that do not include genuine intercultural dialogue**.
 - Students reported that genuine intercultural dialogue is rarely discussed in depth, and they attributed to professors disinterest, and lack of time, knowledge, and comfortability.
 - "With my White professors, no because they're not necessarily comfortable talking about those things [diversity issues] nor has it been a part of their lesson plans or their pedagogy's." (Participant 2: pp. 11; 16-18)

Could you describe a positive experience you encountered that involves diversity in the classroom?

Student Responses:

- Many students reported a particular course curriculum, as their positive experience.
 - The most commonly mentioned courses were upper-division 'Intercultural Communication' and 'Issues in Intercultural Communication' for several reasons.
- Students reported an appreciation of challenging coursework and exposure to new epistemologies.
 - "I personally have wanted to take those classes because the they... still do open up my eyes to these [diversity] issues and I also want to get the most out of my education, so I want to be constantly challenged with school work [and] with my own ideals too." (Participant 8: pp.8; 5-8)
 - "I would hope everyone would have a class like this in school because it really does... open your eyes to issues that aren't there in other courses and that can actually be really good for us as students and future professionals in the workforce." (Participant 9: pp. 16; 12-18)
- Furthermore, students positively regarded the unique opportunity for comprehensive investigation and meaningful discussions about race.
 - "...the only one that I've really talked about diversity and diversity issues within the education system is the Issues in Intercultural [Communication]" (Participant 9: pp. 2; 4-10)
 - "If I want to really be tested and expose responsibility [that] I have, I need to hear honest, genuine, personal experiences from a different perspective."₁
 - "In 420 we had a really good classroom and... the culture that we fostered in that class was very critical and... we would [discuss] that whatever view is available was likely written from the dominant group. So, there's some other side that was not written and that's what we would look at..."₂ (Participant 5: pp. 10; 11-13 & pp.11: 12-19)
- Students agree that their communication skills improve as a result of such dialogue.
 - "I feel a lot more comfortable addressing those issues and supporting people because I know a lot more about the world around me... and I know how to convey myself in a way that makes sense, but doesn't attack people." (Participant 11: pp. 7; 1-3)
 - "I think just taking a class from a person of color, has allowed me a lot of insight into academia."₁
 - "It's definitely forced me to expand my own view-point and seek out multiple view-points when approaching any issue in life, not just in racial issues, but.... another thing it really did for me was it asked of me to remain unbiased when coming into a learning environment."₂ (Participant 2: pp. 3; 19-20 & pp. 5; 1-4)
 - "I think when a professor does go beyond just teaching the course [material]... not only do you gain more knowledge and insight [into] racial issues, but I feel like you learn more in the class because you try harder." (Participant 6: pp. 14; 8-10)

III. What is your opinion about the department's efforts toward fostering diversity?

Student Responses:

- Participants are **uninformed of any formal departmental efforts** taking place.
- Participants assert that **action on social justice is needed, but not being taken**.
- Participants noted a **disparity in education they receive from White and non-White professors**.
 - They noted that **non-White professors provide them with more challenging and comprehensive diversity instructions** than White professors.

What do you think could be done to foster a better climate?

Student Responses:

- The department needs to **take initiative and action**, particularly:
 - To make available opportunities for discourse about diversity issues and particularly **intercultural dialogue that is honest**.
 - To **initiate outreach efforts to people of color** in the department and to **respectfully solicit and include their input** on said issues.
 - To **create space for students and professors of color**, such as:
 - The implementation of clubs or groups for mentoring; enhanced curriculum design that is compatible with the demographics of the community; and the promotion of events that appreciate diversity.
- Professors **need to further educate themselves** on issues about social justice and equity, especially in understanding the marginalized perspective. Diversity training that is meaningful for faculty and staff is needed.
- The **department needs to include professors and students of color** and to hear their concerns and respect them.