

Assessment Committee Research Paper #4 Diversity and Interactions across Difference at St. Lawrence

For the discussion of diversity, it is important to provide some greater context of our student body. St. Lawrence is a private, non-sectarian, residential, selective liberal arts college located in the northern part of New York State, in close proximity to Canada. For the last 5 years, St. Lawrence University's incoming class size has ranged between 580 and 650 full-time first-time students and our transfer population is low (<3%). Students are traditional 17-18 year old students, all expected to live on campus. Gender split is 45% male and 55% female. Approximately 41% come from New York State (13% from the immediate North Country region), 53% are from out-of-state and 6-7% come from outside the US – about 3% from Canada and 3% from 15 - 20 other countries per year. Many of our international non-Canadian students enroll at St. Lawrence as scholars – several have studied at one of the United World Colleges - and come from non-western countries (admissions statistics averaging 2007-2012).

Although our admissions recruitment has focused its efforts on increasing the racial diversity of our student body – and was particularly successful in the last year – our remote location also makes this goal more challenging. In addition to being in a rural setting relatively distant from many significant urban centers, northern New York is not particularly racially diverse and is predominantly white. Here at St. Lawrence, as of Fall 2012, US Students of Color accounted for roughly 14% of the entering classes (up from 11% in previous years), compared to the national average of 20% for the Carnegie classification of “Baccalaureate – Arts&Science Institutions” and 17% for SLU's peer group (IPEDS).

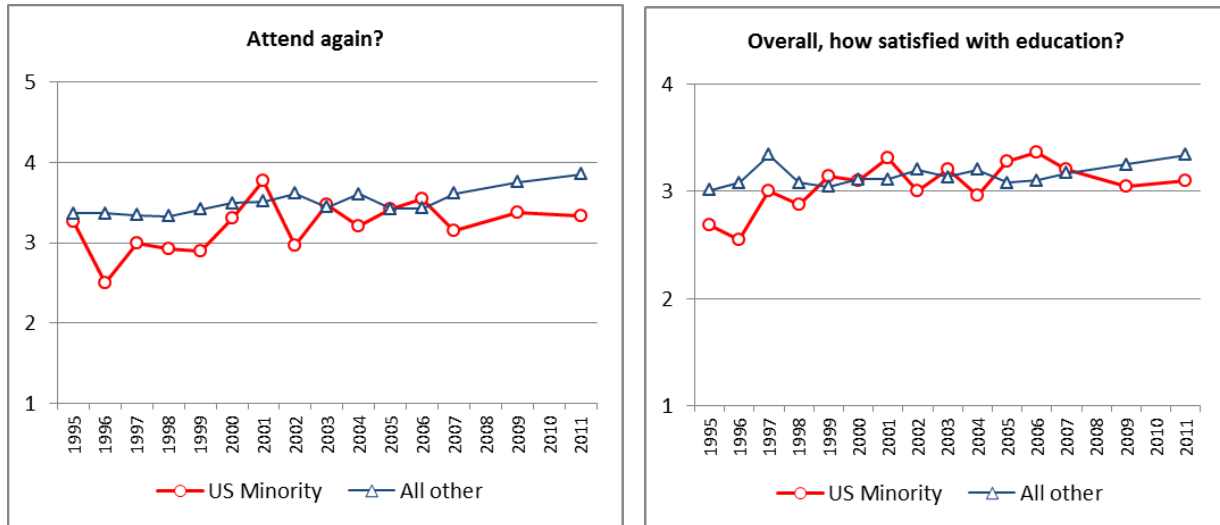
From our CIRP survey, we know that many white as well as minority students have grown up with little exposure to diversity. E.g., from the Class of 2014, 88% of all white students came from high schools that were predominantly white and 94% grew up in neighborhoods that were mostly or entirely white. Also, 32% of US Students of Color came from non-white high schools and 50 grew up in completely/mostly non-white neighborhoods. Fewer than 60% socialized “frequently” with different ethnic groups in high school, and 5% (which equivocates in terms of our incoming class to an entire FYP of 32 students) indicated not having socialized with someone of another racial/ethnic group at all (CIRP 2010).

This paper examines three aspects of diversity: First, how Students of Color experience diversity on campus; second, to what extent students in general have meaningful interactions and experiences with diverse aspects of the campus cultures, including identifying when, where and how these occur; and third, to what extent our curriculum including study abroad experiences contributes to a greater cultural understanding and diversity learning.

In addition, the Teagle Committee analyzed survey data from the College Success Questionnaire, HEDS and HERI senior surveys and the Global Perspective Indicator.

I. Experiences of Students of Color

Overall, Students of Color are more satisfied now with their overall St. Lawrence experience than they were in the mid-to-late 1990s (mean rating of 2.7 in 1995 vs. 3.1 in 2012, HEDS Senior Survey.) While long-term trend data on satisfaction remains positive for both white and non-white students (see below), in recent years, there is noticeable separation in the rates that may warrant a deeper examination.



Source: HEDS Senior Survey

While Students of Color have similar academic experiences and similar satisfaction ratings for most campus facilities and services as other students, satisfaction levels are 0.4-0.6 points lower for campus climate related ratings (HEDS and HERI Surveys, CSQ.)

Select 2012 HERI Senior Survey Satisfaction Ratings

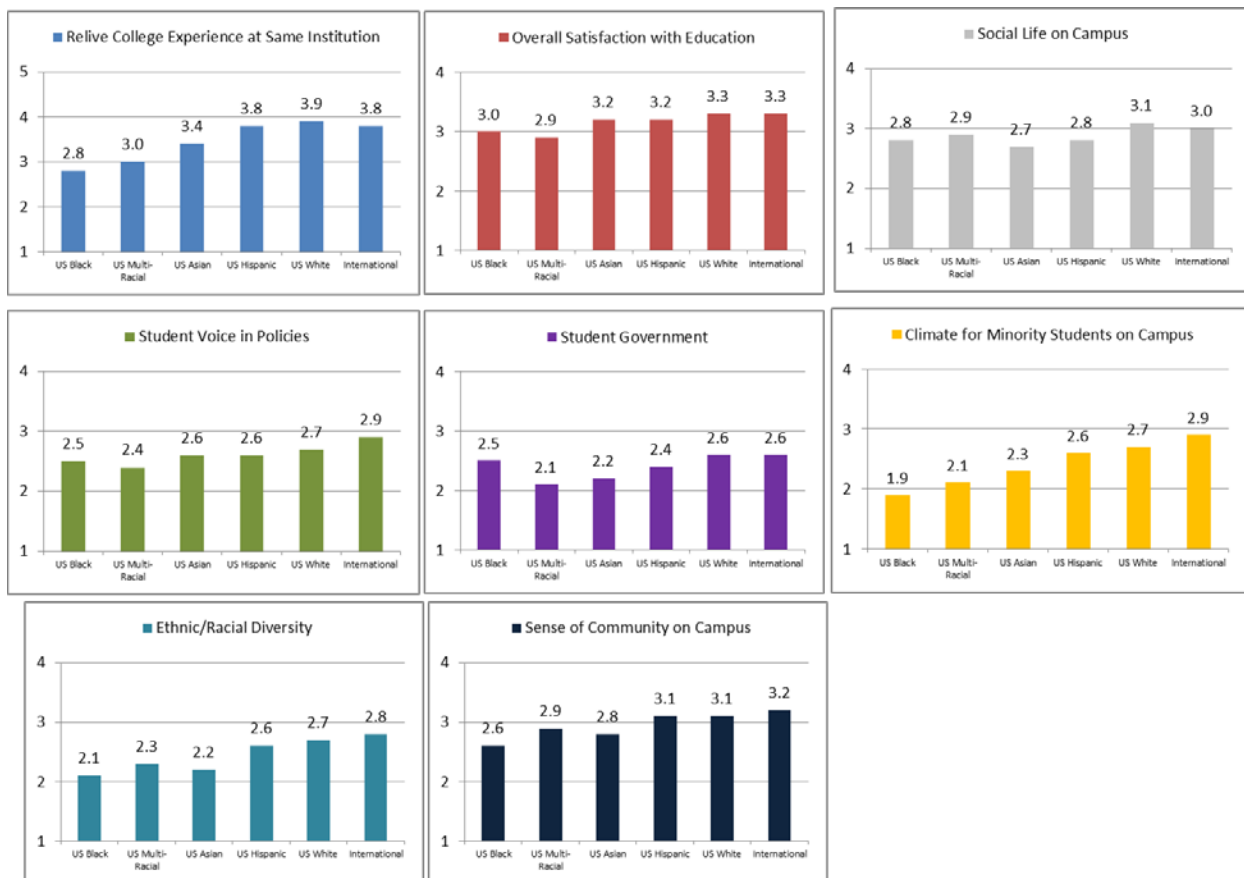
	Students of Color	All other
Overall sense of community among students (mean)	3.8	4.2
Availability of social activities (mean)	3.8	4.1
Respect for the expression of diverse beliefs (mean)	3.6	3.9
Racial/pro-ethnic diversity of the student body (mean)	2.8	3.4
I have felt discriminated against at this institution because of my race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation (agree strongly or agree)	35%	10%
Ethnic Experiences – Have had tense, somewhat hostile interactions with a different race (often or very often)	19%	4%

Select 2011 HEDS Senior Survey Satisfaction Ratings

	Students of Color	All other
Social life on campus (mean)	2.8	3.1
Ethnic/racial diversity	2.4	2.7
Climate for minority on campus (mean)	2.3	2.7
Sense of community on campus	2.9	3.1

Data also suggests that there are differences across racial/ethnic groups. Black and Native American students – and to some extent also Asian students – express much lower levels of satisfaction than Hispanics who mirror more closely White students in their survey responses. This might be because the group of Hispanics serves as an umbrella for multiple different racial/ethnic groups (including those who affiliate themselves mostly with white students). The same might be true for multi-racial students whose level of satisfaction varies from survey to survey.

2011 HEDS Senior Survey Satisfaction Ratings by Race/Ethnicity



II. Interactions across Race/Ethnicity

As a residential college, students have plenty of informal opportunities to encounter difference outside of the classroom. Yet, we know from NSSE that these ‘voluntary’ exchanges occur much less frequently than we would like to see, and St. Lawrence is not unique in this experience: according to 2011 NSSE data, 40% of SLU’s FY students and 48% of SLU’s Seniors reported either *never* or only *sometimes* serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity over the course of the year. (Peer data is 38% for FY/39% for Seniors at the NCG and 41% for both FY students and Seniors at Liberal Arts schools.) From our 4 NSSE administrations since 2002 we see that improvements by 15% for First-Year students. Much of this can be contributed to the diversity goals of the First-Year program. On the other hand, Seniors have remained unchanged – falling below the national experience comparison and perhaps more disturbingly, below SLU’s First-Year students.

Focus Group conversations with over 50 students across all 4 class years in February 2011 tried to explore in greater depth where student conversations with someone of a different race/ethnicity happen outside of the classroom. Overall, these conversations confirmed what we know from surveys: that the most meaningful exchanges across racial/ethnic lines occur in the classroom or when students work outside of class on class assignments. One exception might be Athletics. However, few teams are racially diverse and, where teams include only few members of color, those students often feel marginalized and therefore form their own support groups rather than interacting with others. Also, student organizations such as the BSU regularly sponsor programs to bridge the divide. However, BSU members also expressed great disappointment that few white students are drawn to these functions. Most frequently, white students cited relatively shallow interactions with students of a different race – such as casual conversations when waiting in the food line in the dining hall.

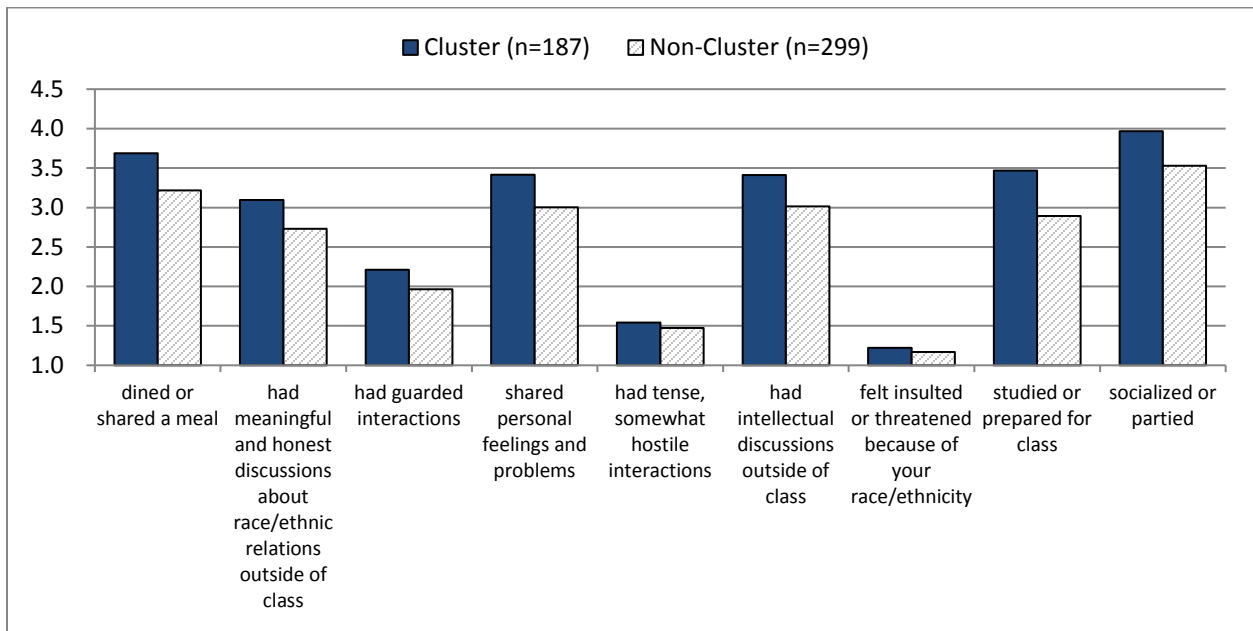
Focus group interviews also revealed that Students of Color felt very isolated in their FYP College, when there were only one or two Students of Color working with upwards of 30 white students. As a result, beginning in 2011, the Associate Dean of the First-Year agreed to change the FYP Placement procedures and try to “cluster” Students of Color in a single FYP, whenever possible. In Fall 2011, 7 of the 18 First-Year Colleges of the Class of 2015 consisted of “clusters” of 5 to 10 Students of Color in a single FYP.

Assessment of the Impact of the FYP Placement Change

However, data from the 2012 FY College Success Questionnaire does not clearly indicate that clusters have led to increased “*satisfaction*” for Students of Color. FYP Colleges vary considerably with regard to satisfaction, regardless whether or not they are cluster FYPs. Some of the variation might be related to the experience level of the faculty teaching in the FYPs, and some due to specific circumstances. It is difficult to pinpoint. However, survey responses suggest that the clusters enabled Students of Color to find smaller, close friendship support groups within their FYP College. Perhaps as a result of this, this year, 94% of all Students of Color were retained (as compared to a 93% retention rate overall.)

Interestingly, survey data do show a significant increase of cross-racial/cross-cultural interaction in those cluster colleges as compared to non-cluster colleges. The table below compares responses from US white students who were placed into First-Year Colleges with 5 or more Students of Color vs. those who were not:

Interactions with Different Racial Groups – Mean Ratings for US White First-Year Students by Type of FYP



Scale: 1=never, 5=very frequently; source: FY CSQ 2012

National research shows that meaningful voluntary interactions across race typically don't happen until a critical mass of about 25% minority participation is reached. The clustering of FYPs created such sub-environments where diversity was brought to a meaningful level. All-in-all, the outcomes of the clustering have been positive and St. Lawrence University may wish to pursue this practice for now. Hopefully, in a few years our incoming classes will be sufficiently diverse and not require any more the intentional clustering.