Preface
The purpose of this short report is to provide an overview of the 2002-2004 Campus Climate Study conducted at Texas A&M University, which focused on perceptions of racial and ethnic diversity. The complete report contains information on sample and methodology, quantitative and qualitative data, and appendices for survey and focus group questions as well as data tables (n’s, percentages, means, and standard deviations). The complete report can be accessed in pdf format on the Student Life Studies website (studentlifestudies.tamu.edu).

This study validated previous research across the country concerning Non-White students on predominantly White college campuses. Texas A&M was similar to other institutions in how White and Non-White students perceived the campus environment as it related to issues of diversity and racism. Non-White students reported being “glad” to be at Texas A&M and agreed that they would “recommend it to others” even though many expressed that they might have been treated differently because of their race or ethnicity. White students also reported being “glad” to be on campus and would also “recommend it to others.” And while some White students did express concern for the climate for Non-White students, most did not seem to observe any differences in the campus environment for Non-White students. There were also differences in opinion between Non-White race and ethnic groups. More African American students agreed that racism is a problem on campus than did Asian American or Hispanic students.

This report provides an overview of these main points and offers comments obtained through focus groups and a qualitative web survey to help explain students’ perspectives. The comments were chosen by the primary writer on the basis of reflecting more than half of student opinion and being well written and easy to comprehend. [Note: All qualitative data is available for review in the Department of Student Life Studies.]

Introduction
The Campus Climate Study was initiated in September 2002 with a telephone survey to assess undergraduate students’ perception of the Texas A&M University environment. Only sophomores, juniors—referred to as “underclassmen” in this report—and seniors were asked to participate. The telephone survey was initially based upon a similar study conducted at Texas A&M during the 1997-1998 school year by an independent team from the University of Michigan. Due to changes in methodology and slight changes in the wording of survey questions, the results of this study were not directly compared to the results from the 1998 study. [The 1998 study can be accessed on the Division of Student Affairs website: studentaffairs.tamu.edu/DiversityConnection/CampusClimate.]

When the telephone survey results were reviewed, several findings seemed contradictory within the Non-White student population. As illustrated in Table 1, almost all students agreed they were “glad” to be at Texas A&M, agreed they were treated with respect, and would recommend the institution to others. However, when it came to being “treated fairly here regardless of their racial or ethnic background” Non-White students agreed less than White students. Responses were again divided between White and Non-White students for agreement to the statement “racism is a problem at Texas A&M.”
Based on the contradictory nature of some responses for Non-White students and the differences between White and Non-White students, a qualitative study (focus groups and a web survey) was conducted to clarify why students responded the way they did in the telephone survey.

**Major Themes**

Several major themes emerged from the additional feedback students provided including differences in definitions, an incomplete understanding of racism, differences in agreement between classifications for the problem of racism, the presence of cultural encapsulation, diversity issues within the student-to-student interactions, and the existence of shared experiences and views.

**Theme 1: Definitions**

When asked to define terms and phrases such as “respect,” “accepted and welcomed,” and “being a member of the community,” White students described feeling valued and part of something bigger than themselves while Non-White students mostly defined the phrases as the absence of negative circumstances such as discriminatory acts. They also preferred terms which were not used in the survey such as “politeness”, “common courtesy”, and “tolerance” to define how they were treated on campus. The student quotes below are representative of the definitions Non-White students offered.

**African American students**

- “When someone differs from you entirely, it’s hard to open your arms to them when you differ so much. It’s hard to find things in common. You never know what’s going to be a touchy subject, you never know if a question is going to be offensive and hurtful. Many people don’t take the risk of trying to get to know someone different from them, therefore it is easier to just hold the door open and go on with your business.”--African American senior
- “I don’t think that accepted is as good a word as tolerated. I think that racially diverse students are tolerated.”--African American underclassman
Asian American students
- “Being treated with respect goes hand in hand with tolerance. As students of higher education, we should be able to treat everyone with much respect. However, treating someone with respect does not necessarily mean that we like and accept that person. We may treat professors we don’t necessarily like or accept with respect simply because they deserve it and that is the way we have been brought up.”—Asian American underclassman
- “Respect entails a ‘politeness’ that is due to everyone—a certain way of behavior that says ‘greet others, smile, don’t take their things’, etc.—that we all have learned since children...But many times we are taught to be polite regardless of how we truly feel. It connotes ‘putting up with’ or ‘tolerating’ by putting on a ‘nice’ facade.”—Asian American senior

Hispanic students
- “You feel welcome because, you know, you haven’t had anything bad happen to you and that’s it. No one’s broken into your car, no one’s done anything, everyone smiles, and that’s about it.”—Hispanic senior
- “Being accepted means you don’t receive any kind of aggression.”—Hispanic underclassman

Theme 2: Understanding of Racism
When students were asked to share experiences they had heard about, observed, and experienced, some students reported incidents they had observed happening to their group of friends or to themselves but did not seem to perceive the incidents as discriminatory in nature. Other students said they knew people who were racist but because it was not shown publicly, racism was not seen as a problem. The quotes below help explain the viewpoints the students shared.

African American student
- “African Americans deal with racism and ignorance on a daily basis. We’re accustomed to making ourselves feel alright in the midst of hate.”—African American senior

Asian American student
- “An establishment wouldn’t serve my Columbian friend and was told to ‘go back where he came from.’”—Asian American senior

Hispanic students
- “In the Corps... like my buddies would just kind of play around with us and be like yeah, yeah, Spic-this and what’s up, Spic, and you know, look-Spic just go here...I never really thought bad of it because they were my friends and I knew they loved me because, I mean, they did so many things for me, and you know, we did so many things together.”—Hispanic senior
- “Racism is everywhere. Just because I hear the occasional racial slur I wouldn’t say that racism is a problem.”—Hispanic senior

White students
- “I know some people that are very racist, but they don’t act like it around other people of different races. They act completely normal, so I haven’t seen a problem.”—White senior
- “If you are going to whine about it and not stand up for yourself then you deserved to be called [names].”—White senior

Theme 3: Classification and Feelings of Racism
The percentage of Non-White students who agreed that racism was a problem at A&M increased with each classification; 33% of sophomores, 43% of juniors, and 50% of seniors agreed that racism was a
The same trend was not observed for White students (24% of sophomores, 25% of juniors, and 34% of seniors). Non-White students revealed a variety of reasons for the increased agreement such as increased personal awareness of the issues, smaller class sizes in the upper levels, and more interaction with the same students. The student quotes below illustrate why Non-White seniors may agree more than Non-White sophomores that racism is a problem.

African American student

- “I think that as we get older we’re exposed to new ideas and thoughts, we tend to see things differently and understand things differently.” — African American senior

Asian American student

- “Seniors have been here longer and as they progress, their classes get smaller, and they encounter the same people, some of whom may have racist tendencies, and seniors will feel that more.” — Asian American senior

Hispanic student

- “We are forced to acknowledge racism as a threat because we are constantly bombarded with material that brings racism into the spotlight, just when we think it is about to fade away.” — Hispanic senior

Theme 4: Cultural Encapsulation

*Cultural encapsulation* is the practice of defining reality according to one set of assumptions and stereotypes. People recognize their personal assumptions and stereotypes as legitimate and do not readily recognize alternative methods for achieving similar purposes. This view results in people who are confident that the rest of the world agrees with them and do not find it necessary to explore other practices (Pedersen, 1994). In this study, when White students were asked to explain what being a member of the community meant to them, they mostly focused on the commonalities within the campus culture, such as traditions and athletic events, and embraced the viewpoint that all students should feel like they belong to the community because everyone shares the culture. As one student, a White underclassman, explained: “Howdy is another great example of feeling like you belong. No matter who this person is walking toward you, you still just smile and say ‘Howdy’. It is a great way to feel accepted when a stranger you have never met and may never see again took time to say ‘Howdy’ to you.” In contrast, one African American undergraduate described feeling isolated when s/he was “walking to class and smiling and saying ‘hi’ to people and getting no response.” The White student believed that because s/he had positive experiences with the traditional greeting on campus that all students shared the same experience while the African American student’s reality was very different.

Most White students did not mention a need to look beyond what the campus culture offers for new ideas and experiences nor did they understand what they could gain from increased diversity on campus. In fact, when White students were asked to explain why they did not put a priority on hiring more racially diverse faculty, staff, and administrators, some of them equated racial and ethnic diversity with language barriers they encountered in classes with international instructors. As illustrated in their comments below, they perceived that their academic performance was negatively impacted by a language barrier and therefore responded negatively to the suggestion of racially diversifying the campus, possibly reinforcing the idea that other viewpoints do not need to be explored.

- “This is American [sic] where English is the official language. Students who attend here need to know how to speak it and professors here need to know how to teach their course speaking it. I
am sick and tired of paying the amount of tuition I pay each year and ending up in a class with a heavy accented professor that speaks Arabic!”--White underclassman

- “I wouldn’t have a problem with hiring more minority staff if the university would make sure that they were completely understandable when they speak! It is so incredibly frustrating to not be able to understand your prof [professor] or TA [teaching assistant]. That is why I disagree with hiring more minority staff.”--White senior

- “I have had so many racial minority staff that I couldn’t understand, why do I want more? If I can’t communicate with the professor, TA, or other staff member how do you expect me to learn the material? I think having professors that can’t speak the native language that it will ultimately reflect poorly on the school because the students are not receiving the education they deserve”--White senior

**Theme 5: Student-to-Student Interactions**

This study found that the diversity issues on campus seem to exist mainly on the student-to student level. The majority of negative experiences cited by students centered on social interactions, or lack thereof, with fellow students rather than with faculty, staff, or administrators. The overwhelming majority of comments highlighted problems within the student body. For example, an Asian American student had this experience on campus: “When the spy plane went down in China, [a friend] and I were walking around campus. He’s Asian. So, we’re walking down and these people are reading the article in the Battalion [the campus newspaper] that said the spy plane went down in China...As we walked by we hear them say, ‘You know, I wish they’d just go home.’ So [my friend] and I turned around and were like, ‘From North Carolina? ’cause that’s where I’m from’...I mean, what are you talking about ‘go home?’”

Another student, an African American underclassman, explained “sometimes you will sit in a class of 400 and no one will speak to you.” As these examples illustrate, the main source of frustration seemed to be in the interaction among peers, both in and out of class.

**Theme 6: Shared Experiences and Views**

White and Non-White students did not differ in all of their experiences and views, however. In the telephone survey, all groups of students responded positively when asked if faculty were interested in their personal and academic problems, if faculty were good teachers, and if at least one faculty member had a strong influence on their intellectual development. In addition, when students were asked to explain whether or not faculty members were sensitive to the issues of minorities, their responses were comparable:

**African American student**

- “Every teacher I’ve had has treated me no different than they have any other member of my class.”
  --African American senior

**Asian American student**

- “One of my professors this past semester took an avid interest in talking with me about my religion and culture and sharing that with the class. He worked very hard to make students realize that ignorance and hatred has been a problem on campus and in the world especially in this time of war.” --Asian American underclassman

**Hispanic student**

- “Teachers that I have spoken with or known outside of the classroom seem to genuinely care about diversity and the education of all people. They treat everyone equally, but offer help to whoever needs it.” --Hispanic senior
White student
- “I have had many great professors, and the best of them always concern themselves with their students needs first, regardless of ethnicity.” --White senior

In addition to their views of faculty, students also found similar ways to create a sense of belonging for themselves within the campus community. When students were asked to share experiences they had with being a member of the community, identity groups emerged as powerful tools all students used to help them feel accepted and welcomed on campus. The identity groups mentioned by students included close friends, student organizations, residence halls and other living environments, and academic study groups. Students of all ethnicities also mentioned the benefits of the “Aggie network” of current and former students and described several situations in which they made connections with former students that yielded positive results for career planning or other personal needs.

Discussion
The results of this study are consistent with existing literature on the topic of campus climate in higher education. For instance, according to Woodard and Sims (2000), “the level of comfort a student feels is critical to satisfaction with college life” (p. 540). Furthermore, “while a comfortable campus climate is important for all students, it may be even more crucial to the success of [Non-White students]” (p. 548). When Non-White students do not feel they are fully part of the campus community, “feelings of discrimination and alienation were more common” (p. 540).

Other findings suggest that the experiences of White and Non-White students vary widely. The following points seem to be validated by this study and suggest that Texas A&M is consistent with other predominantly White institutions:
- Non-White students are more likely to perceive racial and ethnic discrimination as a problem and report being uncomfortable in class than White students. (Woodard & Sims, 2000)
- Non-White students report higher levels of prejudice than White students. (Eimers, 2001)
- Non-White students express more feelings of isolation than White students. (Loo & Rolison, 1986)
- The longer some Non-White students are on campus, the more dissatisfied they are with their college experience. (Bennett & Okinaka, 1990)
- White students assume racism exists but have no personal experiences with it or believe that all ethnic groups discriminate against each other. (Radloff & Evans, 2003)

As Echols, Hwang, and Nobles (2002) found, “The manner in which universities create an environment for racial and cultural understanding can hinder or stimulate student’s’ attitudes about diversity. White and ethnic minority students hold vastly different views about how the university supports ethnic minority students” (p. 171).

As with previous research on the topic, this study found that White and Non-White students at Texas A&M viewed the campus climate differently. For instance, language was used in different manners for the two groups. White students defined phrases such as “accepted and welcomed” in language that emphasized fitting into the community while Non-White students used language that reflected individual differences. Non-White students also introduced the word “tolerance” into their definitions and explained that they were treated with common courtesy and did not necessarily feel welcomed and accepted. Some of the reasons they gave for not feeling part of the community were the lack of previous generations who attended Texas A&M and could pass along historical and cultural knowledge of the campus, the absence...
of social opportunities on campus and in the community that matched their interests, and the isolation they felt as a small population, all of which were different than the responses offered by White students.

On the topic of racism, White students mainly expressed positive views about the campus environment and shared very few incidents of racism they had either observed or heard about (but not experienced). Non-White students, however, cited a number of incidents such as stereotypical comments, slurs, and derogatory statements made to them or about them. Other incidents they shared included isolation in the academic classroom when no one would sit next to them and seeing confederate flags on vehicles or in windows around campus. Overall, the racist incidents the Non-White students cited were mostly verbal in nature but seemed to have a cumulative effect over time because Non-White seniors reported more agreement that racism was a problem on campus than Non-White sophomores. In contrast, the cumulative effect of racism did not seem to exist for White students.

Non-White students wanted to improve the campus climate and recommended changes such as admitting more under-represented students, incorporating multicultural perspectives into classroom material, and facilitating more interactions between students of different cultures. In contrast, White students generally did not support the diversification of campus and did not understand how they would benefit from it. They also tended to be the group which expressed the idea of individual effort. In their view, belonging to the campus community was easy if an individual participated in the major events. Their comments rarely addressed learning new things or expressing individual differences.

Based on the results of this study, several strategies are suggested to further explore and engage the campus community on the issue of diversity. Since the completion of data collection, some of these recommendations have been implemented in part and progress has been made in some areas. Nevertheless, persistence is needed to pursue the foundations already set.

First, it may be important for administrators, faculty, and staff to further engage students in a more direct dialogue about why increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of the student body, faculty, staff, and administrators is an important goal. Some students do not readily see the benefits that can come from interacting with people from different backgrounds. Addressing the benefits of interacting with and learning from a variety of people could assist students in understanding the importance of diversity to them personally and to the university and community as a whole.

Second, a common language could be developed for the campus so all students, faculty, staff, and administrators are clear about the meaning of climate-related terms and what behavior expectations go along with the definitions. For instance, while the terms “accepted” and “welcomed” may be used to describe a warm environment where all individuals are recognized and embraced based on specific talents and gifts, some Non-White students clearly view the meaning of these terms as “tolerance” and “politeness.” In addition, as discovered through the writing of this report, terms used to describe ethnic groups (“White,” “Non-White,” “Majority,” “Minority,” etc.) also have different meanings for individuals. Generating a shared language could help direct future efforts to improve the campus climate.

Third, further assessment could be conducted on perceived classroom language barriers discussed by some White students. Over half of the White students participating in the web survey equated racial and ethnic diversity with language barriers they encountered in classes led by international instructors. It is interesting to note that no Non-White students raised the issue of international faculty and dealing with differences in language. It is not clear from this study whether the language barriers expressed by the White students were a result of instructors’ skills or the students’ challenge of trying to understand
someone with a language different from their own. Identifying and addressing any real or perceived barriers could help White students become more open to a broader concept of increased diversity.

Fourth, the impact of identity groups and the positive view of faculty shared by most students could be combined through the formation of more learning communities or through a common first-year experience. Bringing students of all backgrounds together into small groups could greatly increase their interactions. In addition, if the communities were associated with academic studies and faculty members facilitated the groups, a synergy could be created that would allow students to experience common academic pursuits and explore their individual differences in a supportive environment.

Fifth, several strategies could be implemented to combat feelings of isolation and help all students feel like members of the campus community. For instance, several Non-White students commented on not understanding specific activities unique to Texas A&M such as campus traditions. Efforts could be made to ensure all students are introduced to the campus culture during the required new student orientation. Another issue mentioned by Non-White students was their lack of interest in activities outside of academic pursuits. Texas A&M can help combat the idea that all students participate in the campus culture by reviewing how it promotes this image to new and current students. For instance, a recent Minority Recruitment Leadership Team (MRLT) campaign for the institution called “I Am A&M” includes a website [iam.tamu.edu] that profiles several students chosen to represent the institution as “ambassadors.” All of the profiled students are undergraduates of traditional college age, have lived on campus, are involved in student organizations and have favorite traditions. While all of these students are wonderful representatives of part of the student body, many types of individuals are not included such as the mother of two who is returning to school and barely has time to study and attend class, the international graduate student who came to campus for a specific field of study and does not wish to be involved in campus life because it would take away from his research, or the undergraduate student who has to work many hours to pay her tuition and cannot be involved due to her schedule. These students are also part of the A&M community but do not find themselves represented in the campus literature. By ensuring that all types of students are represented in recruitment campaigns, the institution can send a message that all students are part of the community even if their needs and expectations do not fit the norm.

Sixth, the Aggie network of current and former students could be utilized more in recruiting Non-White students to campus. The students offered positive comments about the potential of the network in their career development and the ability to have something in common with anyone who wears the Aggie Ring. Emphasizing and utilizing the Aggie network in recruiting could present Texas A&M in a more attractive manner to students who might not otherwise consider attending.

Seventh, staff, faculty, and administrators could review current diversity practices and determine whether or not adjustments are necessary. For instance, Texas A&M has taken pride in the amount of responsibility that is granted and/or expected of student leaders within student organizations. One of the responsibilities held by student leaders is recruiting new members into their organizations. Often times, student organizations utilize recruiting plans which have been passed down from previous leaders. These plans could unintentionally exclude groups of students who would be interested in the opportunities the organizations offer. Staff and faculty advisors could review the recruiting strategies student leaders use and suggest improvements so students from diverse backgrounds are aware of and have the opportunity to join an organization that fits their interests and needs.

Eighth, the campus climate at Texas A&M should be assessed longitudinally and any strategies that are implemented for improving campus diversity should be tracked and assessed for effectiveness. A
comprehensive assessment plan for diversity—beyond the current recruitment efforts—would assist all members of the campus community in coordinating effort and sharing outcomes.

Finally, as one student, a White underclassman, explained: “The problem is within the student body and how students deal with differences.” As Tatum (1992) describes, “It has become painfully clear on many college campuses across the United States that we cannot have successfully multiracial campuses without talking about race and learning about racism. Providing a forum where this discussion can take place safely over a semester, a time period that allows personal and group development to unfold in ways that day-long or weekend programs do not, may be among the most proactive learning opportunities an institution can provide” (p. 23). This study has demonstrated that the main issue for the campus climate at Texas A&M is student-to-student interactions. Finding opportunities to facilitate continued dialogue between students could be the main focus of future diversity efforts at Texas A&M. For instance, diversity discussions could be embedded within a common first-year experience. All students would then have the same opportunity to become acquainted with one another’s backgrounds and views, continue their individual development, and build the skills necessary to function successfully in a multicultural world.

References


