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Addressing Discrimination at West Chester University: A Battle at all Levels

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Cover Page Footnote

Special thanks to Dr. Michael Di Giovine, PhD.

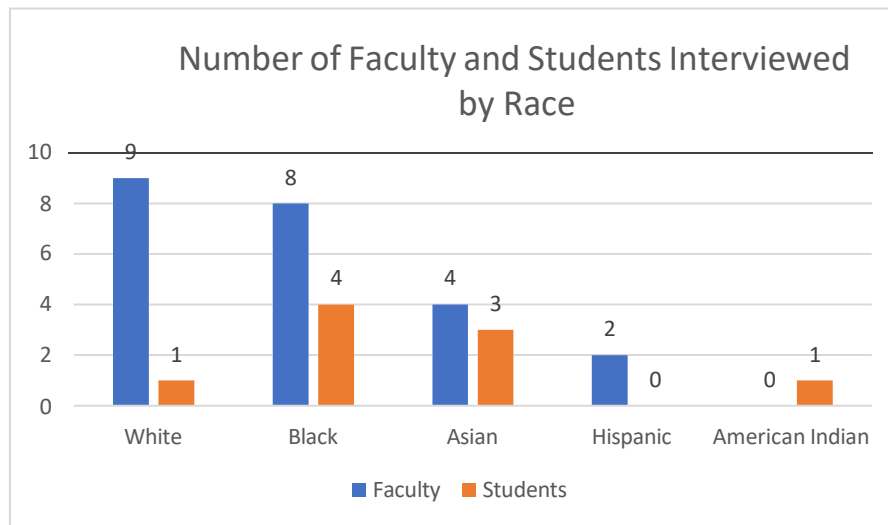
Addressing Discrimination at West Chester University: A Battle at all Levels

Every member of an institution possesses a unique and valuable life experience and perspective which they should feel comfortable sharing. Too often their stories are silenced, or they choose to continue their education elsewhere. Low rates of retention persist among minority undergraduates at West Chester University. This school contains representatives from a variety of heritages and identities, yet they can feel unwelcome and have to perform self-advocacy in order to be accepted. Acceptance in and outside of the classroom is built on the progress made through an institution's history, so past and present change makers should have their viewpoints highlighted as the school looks to the future. By listening to the experiences of those belonging to groups whose voices have historically been underemphasized, one finds methods to create a tolerant campus environment. It also becomes clear that change must come from a variety of levels in order to be effective. Worthwhile measures include administrator accountability, engagement with the community, assignments in class, and support for student organizations focused toward minoritized populations.

Oral histories provide first-hand accounts from narrators who have lived through influential events, relating how certain initiatives have catalyzed campus change. This past summer, I conducted grant-funded research in order to elicit oral histories from twenty-nine faculty and students (including alumni) of different genders, races, ethnicities, religions, and sexual orientations. Their institutional memories and involvement span the 1960s to the present day. These sessions lasted an hour each and discussed problems of diversity and inclusion as well as potential solutions. Participants

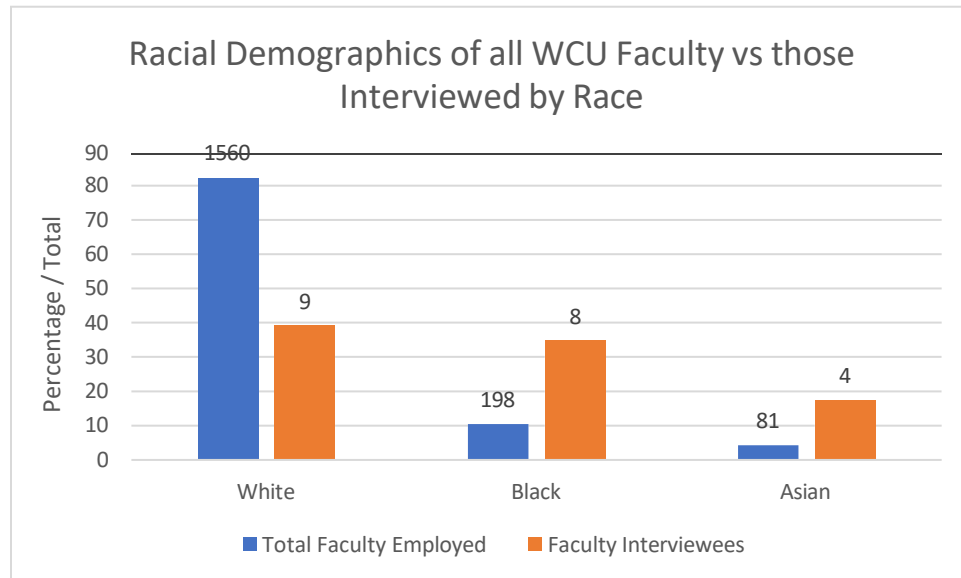
offered their thoughts in the context of providing content for the *WCU at 150: History and Heritage* exhibition, which includes short excerpts of their interviews on an interactive touch-screen in the exhibition room, as well as in an interactive virtual tour.

Demographic information pertaining to the narrator’s race and relationship to the university is as follows. The total sample size was twenty-nine. Although some faculty were formerly students at West Chester, they are counted by their current position.



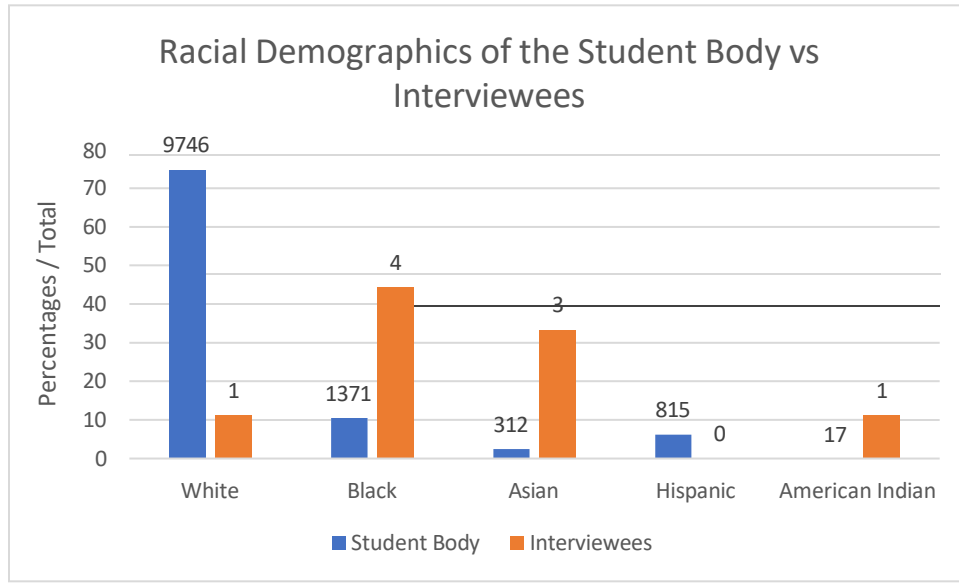
Graph 1 shows the race and position of the entire sample

Despite the focus on minority populations, a plurality of the faculty interviewees were white. However, this narrow majority was predominantly composed of faculty members who were advancing progressive initiatives within the school and community. One would expect a higher ratio, as at WCU, 82.2% of faculty identify as white, 10.4% as African American and 4.3% Asian (CollegeFactual 2021). The ethnic composition of the faculty participants was 39.1% white, 34.7% black, and 17.4% Asian. Although no statistics are published for faculty possessing Hispanic heritage, 8.7% were White Hispanic.



Graph 2 shows the racial demographics of WCU faculty members as a whole compared to those interviewed

Although the student and alumni sample size of 9 is considerably smaller, it is still more equitably representative than the University at large. Undergraduate enrollment currently sits at 74.7% white, 10.5% black, 6.2% Hispanic, and 0.1% American Indian (CollegeFactual 2021 “WCUPA...”). Pardoning the absence of Hispanic student participants, the students and alumni were 44.4% black, followed by 33.3% percent Asian, and 11.1% white with the same ratio of American Indians.



Graph 3 shows the racial demographics of the student body as a whole compared to those interviewed

The University has struggled with racialized violence throughout nearly the entirety of its one hundred-fifty-year history. Lawrence Dowdy, who entered his freshman year in 1969 and ended his career as Chief of Staff to several WCU Presidents, recalled pushes to hold perpetrators of violence responsible for their actions causing tension with the administration (Dowdy, Interview, 6/29/2021). Dowdy remembered perhaps one of the most egregious acts ever perpetrated on campus in the form of a cross burning conducted on October 20th, 1971. A cross, draped in a white sheet, with the letters “W.C.S.C.-KKK” painted on it, was lit aflame in the early morning hours. Dowdy, then-President of the Black Student Union, mentioned this was the culmination of a month of similar attacks, including a water ballooning from a dorm, an attempt at running over two black girls, and a brawl in the dining hall. He and a group of black students met with West Chester State

College President Paul Rossey and administrators who vowed to find the perpetrators (Anon, 1971:1). Unfortunately, this was not the only cross burning to occur on campus during the 1970s, with at least one other occurring within the same decade (Morgan, 1979:4). The KKK itself held a march within the town of West Chester as recently as 1991 (Hinton, 1991:2). Although these actions were likely not performed by the organization itself, their presence within the region at the time doubtlessly influenced the prejudices of some members of the student body.

While many public instances of racism were largely stamped out, these acts persisted through time. Nearly two decades later, Lisa Wright Bryant, '87, also encountered overt intolerance directed towards minority students individually and as a group. As a member of the Black Student Union, she helped to organize protests over the performance of *In the Boom-Boom Room* by an outside theater troupe and their funding by the Intracollegiate Governmental Association. BSU President Keith Cook claimed it was “distasteful, humiliating, and degrading towards blacks.” Its performance during the American College Theatre Festival was nevertheless upheld by the IGA for copyright and first amendment reasons (Miyakawa, 1984:1). These were sentiments echoed by some of the play’s critics who outlined sexism, homophobia, and usage of racial slurs throughout the play (Mason, 1990). Bryant observed similar issues today of those facing discrimination struggling to maintain their academic performance (Wright Bryant, Interview, 6/29/2021). Sedy Alcidonis, Class of 2003, remembers a pervasive feeling of isolation. A relative absence of ethnic organizations and lack of cohesion from institutional offices and programs left many underrepresented students lacking a cohesive support system (Interview, 9/8/2021). Other interviewees offered ways in which these

issues were alleviated, which can be used to guide future policies.

Minority students not only enroll, but also graduate at statistically lower rates than the general population. As such, schools have an obligation to address enrollment and retention gaps to combat inequality (Koelhoffer 2016). Although the university has increased its enrollment of under-represented groups from 12% in 1999 (Fact Book 2003) to 24.5% in 2020 (Fact Book 2020), keeping them at West Chester remains a challenge. Hiram Martínez, Coordinator of Diversity Initiatives often is tasked with increasing retention:

It's one thing to bring all these diverse communities to the institution...how many of those students actually are able to successfully matriculate and so looking forward that's probably where a lot of the resources need to go into those retention programs, those remediation programs...we need to make sure that they have the tools so they can be successful here within some of our classes and to kind of grapple with the West Chester curriculum. (Interview, 7/9/2021)

At WCU, African American and multiracial students currently graduate at rates twenty percent less than their white counterparts, regardless of gender (UnivStats 2021). The battle for retention takes place on all fronts, and students who lack a sense of belonging at the school will be unable to devote their energy to academics and may wish not to continue their tenure at the University. Angela Howard, Associate Provost for Global Engagement, remarked that her mother raised her in a “village”, made up of the school, church, and community center. Howard mentioned that many American blacks are brought up in similar ways, and each aspect of campus from residence life to student

affairs programs can be thought of as their own sections of the village. According to her, students of color need support structures and role models in many different areas to keep them engaged and active and to help them succeed (Interview, 7/20/2021). Several interviewees argued that providing a support structure in many different institutional levels is key to retention of marginalized groups.

The need for inclusion at the administrative level is projected to skyrocket in the coming years with demographic shifts in the United States, as minorities are projected to become more than one-half of the U.S. population by 2050 (Betts et al, 2009: 3, 6). Institutional efforts to promote inclusivity and tolerance at West Chester have become more frequent. Engagement with the larger community outside of the university can drive enrollment and retention alike. For example, Idna Corbett, former Dean of Undergraduate Studies, helped in the creation of both the Latino Students Conference and Latino Communities Conference. The former brought prospective Latino high school students to shadow undergraduate Latinos for a day and helped them to see WCU and higher education in general as an option for them. The Latino Communities Conference, established in 2008, was an annual event in part organized by members of the Latin American Student Organization and brought people of Hispanic heritage to campus to celebrate and educate about their culture (Corbett, Interview, 9/8/2021). This conference is in its 14th year and is sponsored by the College of Arts and Humanities, Latin American Studies program, and Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (West Chester University 2021).

Ethnocentrism is judging other cultures by the standards of the viewer's own culture. Students may feel as though their own heritage practices are the "norm" and do

not recognize others' cultures in the same way. Professor of Health, Debra Bill, discussed an assignment she gives students in her Transcultural Health class in which they are supposed to describe their family's traditional practices in regard to birth, illness, and death. She noticed that "lots of times students would draw a blank and say, 'I don't have culture, I don't know how to celebrate' so I would give them examples of it" (Interview, 9/2/2021). Students should recognize that "others" are not the only ones who possess culture. White Americanism is not the default and from the student perspective is too often regarded as such. As Mildred Joyner, Emerita Director of Social Work mentioned, any discussion about race in an academic session is too often labeled as critical race theory and then dismissed as partisan division (Interview, 7/12/2021). We need to break this narrow viewpoint, but many recoil when this is brought up, as Associate Professor of Languages, Cristobal Cardemil-Krause found out. Rather than directly confronting this in the classroom, he would ask his class to talk about issues such as gender, race, or class in Latin America. Through this defamiliarization process, students would be happy to share their thoughts. Subsequently, he would flip the question back to issues in the United States. In this manner, students seem to be more apt to make connections and formulate introspective responses (Interview, 7/22/2021). The classroom is a place to confront stereotypes in an intellectual way, but the subject must be approached in a knowledgeable and palatable manner so that students will take these lessons into the world at large.

Classroom assignments and community engaged projects help but attempts to foster inclusion must begin by the administrations' acknowledgement of past injustices. James Trotman, Professor Emeritus of English, was foundational in bringing African American graduates to campus for the issuance of an institutional apology extending to all

black alumni. On February 20th, 2008, then-President Madeline Wing Adler issued a formal apology in a “Reaffirmation of Civility and Equality” (WCU Magazine 2020: 22). Trotman mentioned that there were even more people in the audience at the closing of the event than at the start. Concerning the potential repetition of a similar event today he remarked, “I think that the best way to avert the damage done to an earlier generation is to keep the dialogue going between those who are graduating or have graduated within the recent past and the experiences that they can now look back on with some objectivity...it’s probably more fruitful for people in this generation to hear what the most recent graduates have had to say” (Interview, 7/1/2021). Programs such as this can serve to let current university members know that the institution strives to be different than that of the past.

The student body has also combatted stereotyping through the formation of organizations relating to certain cultural groups. Studies have shown that participation in a club with members of the same ethnicity aids academic performance, potentially through the provision of support systems (Baker, 2008: 8, 20). WCU has thirteen student groups officially listed under Social Equity/Diversity (West Chester University 2021). In the experience of West Chester students, this trend seems to hold even if the organizations themselves are small. Safoora Saddiqui is currently the Co-President of the Muslim Student Association. Concerning its relatively small size, she offered: “Maybe the Muslim Student Association only has three or four kids that come to a meeting, but you become friends with those kids, you foster this relationship that otherwise might not be created if you never attend” (Interview, 7/23/2021). Contrary to certain misconceptions, those who belong to ethnic clubs do not have any fewer friends of other

racess. Rather, minority students are more likely to possess interracial friendships (Park, Kim; 2009: 13, 20). Cross-cultural events between different student groups can help students whose experiences do not necessarily fit into any one organization. Breanne Canedo, President of the Sexuality and Gender Alliance, listed several collaborations between LGBTQIA+ student groups such as Shades of the Rainbow and T Time. Shades of the Rainbow concerns the intersection of BIPOC and gay identity. T Time likewise deals with those who are not cis het and offers a place to share one's unique experiences (7/20/2021). Events such as these allow intermingling of students who belong to different organizations, but nevertheless share similar backgrounds. Students with intersectional identities can benefit from networking with others with whom they have similarities. This way, students can encounter others with comparative experiences and become introduced to other groups, possibly even creating new groups. A singular organization cannot provide all the offerings any group may desire, and different identities may need specific events or experiences.

Universities are, ideally, open forums for people of all backgrounds and perspectives to share ideas and thus help each other learn. Through a series of interviews with traditionally underrepresented students and faculty, it is apparent that this is too often far from the truth. Like many institutions, West Chester University has had a history of intolerance, yet over the last three decades has developed a commitment to addressing inequities. Nevertheless, retention rates for racial minorities is behind that of white students by a significant margin (UnivStats 2021). Student organizations act as advocates and meeting areas for various groups and through focused strategies can continue to benefit their members and the community at large. Despite this, a plurality of

students seems to possess an ethnocentric worldview. Some faculty members have adopted strategies in the classroom to combat this form of thinking. Having significant representation and inclusion for members of all social groups is necessary for a university of the twenty-first century. The experiences of these interviewees offer a first-person look at how to go about creating a tolerant and equitable campus climate for all.

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