

The Importance of Student Cross-Racial Interactions as Part of College Education: Perceptions of Faculty

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In light of Supreme Court decisions limiting diversity-related admissions processes, a growing body of research has been conducted to ascertain academic benefits that come from cross-racial interactions (CRIs) that can occur only when there is diversity in the student body. The majority of this research has focused on student CRIs that occur outside of the classroom. Few studies have focused on classroom CRIs. The current study sought to understand how faculty on a campus designated as a Hispanic-serving institution perceive CRIs in their classes. Five focus groups were conducted on a campus, which houses both a community college and a university. Four concepts emerged from these faculty conversations. Faculty spoke about the value of CRIs as well as challenges regarding CRIs in the classroom. They also spoke of their level of responsibility for fostering CRIs and explained that what is perceived as diverse depends on previous faculty experiences on other campuses in other regions of the country. These findings suggest that institutions need to consider faculty perceptions and concerns to foster a positive campus climate to support the full potential of student diversity.

Keywords: cross-racial interaction, faculty, diversity, perception, classroom

In the past 20 years, research on the value of student racial and ethnic diversity as a part of college education has explored the outcomes of having a diverse student body, one of which is cross-racial interactions (CRIs) among and between students. The research has demonstrated that such interactions contribute to social and intellectual benefits for all students (Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). The benefits associated with CRIs include openness to diversity and increased self-

confidence (Chang, Denson, Sáenz, & Misa, 2006) and openness to different ways of thinking and willingness to challenge one's own beliefs (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996). In addition, CRIs contribute to students learning more about their own attitudes about race and ethnicity and about these issues in society (Alimo, Kelly, & Clark, 2002; Lopez, 2004). CRIs contribute to students' intellectual engagement and development, including problem solving, critical thinking, and writing (Gurin et al., 2002). Summing up the trajectory of the research in a meta-analysis, Bowman (2010) concluded that "interpersonal interactions with racial diversity are the most strongly related to cognitive growth" in comparison to other diversity experiences (p. 20).

Most recently, the research on CRIs has been extended to include investigation of how such cross-racial engagement, both in and out of the classroom, benefits all students on campus and contributes to a positive institutional climate regarding diversity. In the CRI research most relevant to our project, studies have concluded that students do not even have to engage in CRIs to accrue their benefits. Even when they

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personally are not part of a CRI, they gain the benefits just by being on a campus where, on average, students have higher levels of CRIs (Denson & Chang, 2009). However, Denson and Chang (2009) caution that campus personnel must be intentional in increasing the levels of student body cross-racial engagement in order to increase the value of the education being provided. They conclude that “it is becoming increasingly clear that the quality of undergraduate education is appreciably enhanced by diversity-related efforts on colleges and universities” (pp. 346–347). With the educational benefit from CRIs, increasing the opportunity for interactions would appear to be one of those diversity efforts.

As stated, the CRI research to date supports the idea that interactions among students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds are beneficial. For the most part, however, this research has excluded studying the impact of CRIs in the classroom, focusing instead on the nonclassroom, “informal spaces” of the institution (Jamieson, 2009, p. 120). Although the majority of a student’s day may be spent within “informal” learning spaces, the classroom is perhaps the most obviously officially sanctioned space in education. Jamieson (2009), in arguing that space is not neutral, refers to the perception that space is always “an instrument of the political” (p. 121). In the formal space of the classroom, such politics may be seen in the “dominant, Euro American, Western cultural norms” that imbue U.S. educational institutions (Hirschy & Wilson, 2002, p. 91). The classroom is, at its essence, the space created by those in power to facilitate student learning (Maila, 2010). If the classroom is indeed conveying or at least operating according to norms determined by those who have held and still hold power, then interactions across races and ethnicities that occur in the sanctioned classroom space may impact the social and cognitive development of students in ways not yet investigated.

By viewing the classroom as political space, and by viewing the instructor as an agent in the type and amount of interactions students have in class, the research on the faculty role in classroom CRIs seems important. The research that has been conducted with faculty most often, however, comes from multi-institutional data sets at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and has drawn on quantitative approaches. To

address the gap in the literature, this study used a qualitative inquiry to explore faculty perspectives on the importance of CRIs as part of college education on a campus with greater racial and ethnic diversity than PWIs. Specifically, we addressed the following research question: How do faculty on a southwestern border campus (home to a community college and university) perceive cross-racial interactions, particularly in the context of their teaching?

Conceptual Framework

To understand the formal space of the classroom, many lenses are available through which to look. Sociology is one such lens, as its purpose is to understand social institutions or societal segments as a self-contained entity. Hirschy and Wilson (2002) posited that in classrooms, sociological elements of a group are present. Classrooms, therefore, may be viewed as one type of societal segment. Relationships among and between group members develop over time, role relationships develop, and “norms of discourse” (p. 87) influence interactions among group participants. Hirschy and Wilson argued, therefore, that what occurs within a classroom can be understood through the “sociology of the classroom” (p. 87).

Viewed as such, classrooms are spaces that can be altered by group members. Because the Western dominant culture norm of the classroom is that the instructor holds an “asymmetrical power position” (Hirschy & Wilson, 2002, p. 87), understanding the instructor as a group member is important. Commenting on the role of the instructor in facilitating or inhibiting classroom interactions, Hirschy and Wilson (2002) suggested that “informed instructors can make intentional pedagogical choices that positively affect student learning” (p. 91). “Teaching norms” (p. 88) influence how faculty interact with students and how students interact with each other. Faculty make pedagogical choices that create the learning environment of the classroom; however, it remains unclear whether faculty are making choices that lead to classroom CRIs.

Indeed, our own experiences as faculty members in the classroom led us to investigate this question on our own campus. Specifically, we, individually and in conversations, grappled with how to define the diversity of students on this

campus and how to best make use of that diversity in our teaching. Although we shared similar concerns, we also had different backgrounds that we drew on to make sense of those concerns: Three of us are female faculty members, one a male faculty member; two of us identify as Chicano/a, two of us as White; three of us grew up in the region, one of us in another state. In addition, we have all taught 10 years or more in a variety of settings from community colleges to research universities.

Literature Review

Clearly, the research literature indicates that students have much to gain from interacting across race and ethnicity as part of their college experiences. However, not as much is known about the role faculty play in facilitating such interactions, and what is known has come from the study of institutional or multi-institutional data sets. In general, studies in this arena have mixed results, with researchers finding that some faculty support and value a racially and ethnically diverse student body and other faculty express ambivalence about the educational value of a diverse student body or about the efforts taken to ensure and support a diverse student body. Based on their review of a national survey of faculty conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), [Milem and Hakuta \(2000\)](#) noted that although there was agreement about the value of diversity, there was notably less agreement about the admissions process that led to this diverse student body. Over 90% of those surveyed agreed that “a racially/ethnically diverse student body enhances the educational experience of all students,” yet 30% reported that “promoting diversity leads to the admission of too many underrepresented students” ([Milem & Hakuta, 2000, p. 48](#)).

Almost 10 years later, in the most recently available HERI faculty survey (2007–2008), [DeAngelo, Hurtado, Pryor, Kelly, and Santos \(2009\)](#) found that over 75% of faculty participants reported working to “enhance students’ knowledge of and appreciation for other racial/ethnic groups” (Goals for Undergraduate Education, para. 1) and that over 90% believed that “a racially/ethnically diverse student body enhances the educational experience of all students” (Attitudes and Views on Diversity, para.

1). Thus, it appears that faculty have continued to value a diverse student body and have worked to enhance student knowledge about racial and ethnic others.

Although faculty may support the idea of a diverse campus, additional research suggests that they do not always see such diversity affecting or accounted for in their approach to teaching. In a study focused specifically on faculty views about the value of diversity, [Maruyama and Moreno \(2000\)](#) found that faculty they surveyed (1,210 full-time faculty) tended to believe that their institutions value diversity, with approximately 60% confirming that a diverse environment was a campus priority. Although faculty may have perceived that the campus administration valued diversity, faculty themselves varied in their beliefs that diversity helped students achieve their educational goals, with less than half the faculty (42%) reporting that diversity supported the development of critical thinking but over two thirds of faculty (70%) reporting that diversity helped expose students to new perspectives. Faculty also reported that diversity had little effect on their teaching, with only 25% of responses indicating that they changed class discussions (among other items) in response to diversity ([Maruyama & Moreno, 2000](#)). In addition, faculty reported being comfortable with teaching diverse classes, but less than one third of participants reported initiating discussions of race in class or having students work in diverse groups.

More recently, three studies found similar variations among faculty regarding their attitudes toward supporting diverse groups of students within the university. The findings of [Flores and Rodriguez \(2006\)](#) indicated that almost two thirds of faculty supported diversity, specifically in terms of attitudes related to affirmative action principles, but that, as with faculty in the 2000 HERI survey, their support was lower and varied, depending on which group of students was being supported. In a survey of 428 university faculty, [Flores and Rodriguez](#) found that although faculty were supportive of affirmative action principles in general, opinions varied on which groups were most acceptable for receiving affirmative action benefits. Specifically, 65% of participants supported increasing financial support for students of color to attend a university, whereas 84% supported a similar increase for students of lower socioeco-

conomic standing. Denson and Park (2009) also investigated faculty attitudes toward diversity, drawing on the HERI faculty survey conducted in 2004–2005. In particular, they analyzed the likelihood of faculty to advocate for the importance of diversity to learning environments and found that a variety of traits, backgrounds, and values influences how or whether faculty would advocate for diversity. Specifically, Park and Denson found that women, faculty of color, and faculty in the humanities and social sciences were more likely to be “diversity advocates” (p. 426).

Results from a third study also revealed variation in faculty attitude, this time dependent on the home campus of the faculty. Hubbard and Stage (2009) examined the variations in faculty attitudes between PWIs and minority-serving institutions (MSIs). They found greater differences between PWIs and predominantly Black institutions (PBIs) than the differences between PWIs and Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs). Differences emerged in the areas of faculty attitudes, opinions about students, and career satisfaction. Hubbard and Stage suggested that their findings indicate that PBIs have benefited from the cultural and historical attention to serving student populations through their institutions, whereas other MSIs that do not share this history may need to do more to achieve similar benefits.

Quantitatively, the research on CRIs and faculty suggests that faculty support diversity on campus, but have had conflicting feelings about the methods used to achieve this diversity. What is missing in these studies, however, is the voice of faculty themselves. In the review of literature, one such qualitative study was found. In a case study of three college classrooms, Patricia Marin (2000) explored the educational benefits of CRIs. Most relevant to our purposes are her findings related to faculty: “Faculty participants indicated that a multiracial/multiethnic classroom enhances the success of their teaching methods” (p. 62). In addition, both faculty participants and students underscored the importance of emphasizing interaction in the classroom, and Marin’s observations confirmed the importance of using experiential learning methods, such as small-group discussions, debates, role-playing, and student paper exchanges. Marin concluded with a working hypothesis that suggested that the educational benefits of a racially and ethnically diverse classroom are linked to faculty members’ rec-

ognition and use of diversity as an educational tool, including the need for faculty members to incorporate content related to diversity in their courses, to employ active learning techniques, and to create supportive and inclusive classroom environments.

Given the connection between faculty members’ recognition of the educational benefits of CRIs and their likelihood to facilitate interactions as part of their students’ learning experience, it is important to know more about faculty perceptions of diversity and of CRIs. The aim of this study was to provide a more detailed understanding of faculty perceptions as a means of supporting faculty in achieving the educational benefits of a diverse student population. Therefore, this study builds on the efforts of quantitative approaches to understand faculty attitudes by offering a more in-depth qualitative approach that allows for exploring how faculty think about and facilitate CRIs in their classrooms.

Method

To achieve this aim, we present a single instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) based on five focus group interviews with faculty from one community college and one university both located on a single campus. This campus was selected because it allowed us to pursue a concern we had not only as researchers but also as teachers as discussed in the conceptual framework. In addition, we selected this site because it builds on our previous research (not reported here) in which we investigated students’ experiences with CRIs.

Research Site

Both the community college and the university are designated as HSIs with full-time student enrollments of approximately 7,000 and 18,000, respectively. Both institutions are located on the same campus in a small- to mid-sized border city in the Southwest. The city has large Hispanic and White populations with both English and Spanish commonly spoken in the area.

To understand the composition of the campus, we ascertained demographics for students at each institution, along with the demographics for faculty at each institution. Although the gender demographics are similar, the racial demographics of students differ at each of the

institutions on the selected campus (see Table 1). At the community college, slightly more than half the students identify as female and slightly less than half identify as male. Students identifying as Hispanic make up the largest ethnic group (approximately 60%). The second largest ethnic group is made up of students identifying as White (approximately 25%). At the university, slightly more than half the students identify as female and slightly less than half identify as male. Students identifying as Hispanic and students identifying as White make up the two largest ethnic groups (approximately 40% for each group).

Demographics of the faculty also differ between the two institutions (see Table 2). The faculty at the community college are made up of approximately equal numbers of men and women. In terms of ethnicity, 40% of the faculty identify as a member of a minority group. The faculty at the university are made up of slightly less than two thirds men and one third women. In terms of ethnicity, 20% of the faculty identify as a member of a minority group.

Participants

In total, we interviewed 27 faculty members, with approximately half the participants working at the community college and half at the university. The gender and racial composition of the focus groups differed from the overall faculty demographics for each institution. The focus group comprised more female faculty, and although it appears that the focus group comprised fewer White and minority faculty than listed in the demographics of faculty at this campus, the fact that some members of the focus groups opted not to answer the race/

Table 2
*Faculty and Focus Group
Participants Demographics*

Demographic	Community college faculty (%)	University faculty (%)	Focus group participants (%)
Female	50	31	59
Male	50	68	41
Minority	40	20	33
White	60	80	56
No answer	—	—	11

ethnicity question prevents a direct comparison of the racial/ethnic backgrounds of the focus groups as compared with the overall faculty demographics (see Table 2). In addition, focus group faculty self-reported on their faculty rank and years of teaching at the institution. The majority of participants were either tenured or in a tenure-track position. Almost one third (30%) indicated that they were full-time, assistant professors on tenure track, and 34% indicated that they were tenured, full-time, associate professors or full professors. Almost a third had been teaching on campus between 1 to 5 years (37%), a quarter had been teaching on campus between 6 and 10 years, and slightly more than a third had been teaching on campus 11 years or more (34%). See Table 2 for a comparison of gender and race/ethnicity breakdowns for faculty at each of the institutions on the campus and for focus group participants specifically.

Data Collection and Analysis

Initially, we recruited participants by e-mailing a letter describing the study to all faculty on both campuses. Faculty who responded to the letter were then invited to participate; a small number of those responding were unable to attend a focus group because of scheduling conflicts. To have enough participants for the final focus group, we recruited additional participants using “snowball sampling” based on suggestions from faculty who had attended previous focus groups. Using this approach, we invited an additional five participants. As stated above, a total of 27 faculty participated in the study.

Each focus group was conducted by at least two researchers, one who facilitated and one who assisted and took notes. There was always

Table 1
Student Demographics at Each Institution

Demographic	Community college students (%)	University students (%)
Female	55	56
Male	45	44
Hispanic	60	40
White	25	40
Black	3	3
American Indian	3	3
International	8	8

a Chicano/a researcher and a White researcher; in addition, in all but one focus group, the researchers were male and female. The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 60 to 90 min and ranged in size from four to seven participants. During the interview, we asked participants about their experiences with student interactions across race and ethnicity with a particular focus on their perceptions of what happens in their classrooms. Examples of questions asked of the participants include the following: How do you characterize the racial or ethnic diversity of students on this campus? Do students commonly interact across race or ethnicity in your class? What do you think students are learning, if anything, from cross-racial or cross-ethnic interactions? Each interview was audio recorded and the recordings were transcribed. Each participant received a \$50 gift card to a bookstore on completion of the focus group.

Data analysis focused on explicating the key perceptions that characterized participants' understanding of and experience with CRIs. After the use of questioning, memoing, and reading the transcripts as a whole, the entire research team identified eight descriptive categories. Any divergent codes were reconciled through discussion among the research team, and throughout the rest of the analysis process, the team was in agreement on the findings that emerged. The lead researcher (a White, female, composition professor) then coded all the transcripts, totaling 144 single-spaced pages, using these categories. This initial round of coding focused on descriptive coding to identify topics of interest based on the study's focus on CRIs (Saldaña, 2009). After the research team wrote about the study and received feedback on the findings based on the initial coding, the second round of coding focused on identifying perceptions related to the topic of interest. The lead researcher used focused coding to identify perceptions of the participants and to group those perceptions into four categories (Charmaz, 2006). She then recoded the transcripts with this focus. Two other members of the research team (one Chicano, education professor, and one Chicana, cultural studies professor) then reread the transcripts to verify the analysis of the lead researcher. The findings report on these four categories of perception.

Trustworthiness

A number of strategies are commonly used in qualitative research to help establish the trustworthiness of a research project. For this study, we used two of those strategies to ensure the credibility of our inquiry. First, the inquiry was triangulated through the use of multiple investigators (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This also allowed for a form of peer debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2000) in that one researcher (as noted above) took the lead on designing the study and analyzing data while the other members of the research team reviewed the study design and process and confirmed the data analysis. Second, member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were conducted with two participants, a university professor who identifies as White and a community college professor who identifies as Indian. Another participant, a Hispanic professor, who was asked to conduct a member check declined our request. These individuals were asked to review the findings and comment on whether they were representative of their perspectives and what they heard of other participants' perspectives in order to ensure that the researcher interpretation was valid from the view of those studied. The participants who conducted the member checks found the findings consistent with what they recalled from the focus groups they attended.

Findings

Faculty we interviewed had a variety of perspectives on CRIs but four categories seemed the most salient in terms of understanding their perception of the role of CRIs in higher education. These four categories include how faculty perceived the value of CRIs; how they perceived the challenges of supporting CRIs; how they perceived their responsibility in facilitating CRIs, including what goals they had, if any, in such facilitation; and finally, how they perceived the diversity of the student body in light of having previously lived in different areas of the country.

Perceptions of the Value of CRIs

The finding that was most striking to us was that the faculty we interviewed seemed to strongly value CRIs as an aspect of college

education. The general perspective was that participants felt such interactions contributed a great deal to student learning. More specifically, participants shared their views that CRIs help students gain different perspectives, prepare for life after college, engage in critical thinking, and reflect on their own positions and assumptions. As noted, for some participants, CRIs helped students gain different perspectives. For example, a community college professor described this as a benefit in terms of learning to solve problems in new ways:

I think we can get into a kind of a narrow mindset. And if you are working with people of different cultures, somebody else is going to look at a problem in a different way and see it differently. And so then that's going to get you to thinking, "Oh, wow! Maybe I'm making these assumptions."

Another participant, also a community college professor, felt that learning about different perspectives supported students learning about the subject matter he teaches:

If I had to think from a pedagogical point of view, from the students learning the subject matter, what gives the most payback? I would have to say that, you know, interacting with others who are different from themselves. And I . . . and it's always overwhelmingly positive. And usually, unfortunately, because we live in an oppressively racist environment and culture, more than many places, it has to be initiated or primed or something.

Here, we also see that this participant values CRIs in the classroom in connection with his belief that such interaction must be "initiated" in a racist culture and the classroom presents one context in which to facilitate such interaction.

Another value that a number of participants spoke about was the way CRIs prepare students for life after college. For example, the view of a university professor was that such interactions would enhance students' lives in general:

I view it as one of the great things that the students get [at this school], in terms of their learning background, something that [happens because] it's a very ethnically diverse campus—learning to work with others. And I think that that's a very strong selling point when they're going out in the job market. And I also think it makes them be better educated. And I think they'll live their lives better for having experienced it.

Another university professor also noted how CRIs prepare students to work in her field: "[E]specially in my field [. . .] I think it's essential that students have some experience of work-

ing with people that aren't like the ones they grew up with or went to high school with."

Another area of value that participants perceived was related to critical thinking. Speaking of this, a university professor stated the following:

I think working in ethnically diverse or racially diverse environment is really an excellent way to promote critical thinking—where you . . . you shake people up about what their assumptions are and force them to think them through carefully. And I think that's the main benefit they get from working with ethnically diverse groups.

A community college professor shared this perspective, underscoring her belief that CRIs contribute to critical thinking: "And I think that cultural diversity and interaction, I believe, helps with critical thinking skills and our ability to think in different ways and to help solve problems and stuff. I just believe that that's very important."

Finally, a number of participants saw value in the way that CRIs could contribute to students critically reflecting on their own viewpoints and assumptions. However, of the value that participants perceived CRIs to hold, this one seemed also to be the most confusing in that participants spoke to their uncertainty that students were actually valuing this kind of critical reflection. For example, a university professor shared the following about what he thought students were learning compared with his perspective on what he thought students might say they were learning:

What I think they're learning because of things that I'm observing is at least there's an exposure to and an awareness of ethnicity besides Caucasian/Hispanic. I think that they are not taking for granted that their viewpoint represents an entire group. I think what they think they're learning is stuff that they feel like they already know, which is more based on, "I understand that I'm supposed to, you know, accept other people's differences." And I'm not really sure that the impact of efforts that I may have in certain classes really shows in the class. And I hope it shows after the class. Like all education, I hope that if it doesn't make sense now, if it doesn't change them now, that sometime in the future it will when they encounter it again.

Following up on this participant's response, a community college professor also spoke to his belief that students were learning to engage in critical reflection but at the same time expressed his uncertainty about whether they connected this learning with CRIs:

You know, whether they're getting this new-found consciousness because of a discussion they had with

another student in class—I'm not so sure, as [the previous participant] was saying, who knows what they're getting . . . learning from this. But what they're writing, what they're turning in does demonstrate that, you know, there is a hammering away at this world view that they have been raised with. So they are challenged to take a look at their own belief systems.

These perceptions of the values associated with CRIs highlight the importance of viewing the classroom as a space of social interaction (Hirschy & Wilson, 2002). Indeed, if CRI is present and effective in the classroom, our participants suggest that students are learning much more than the course content. Specifically, they see students using the social space of the classroom to engage in critical thinking, self-reflection, and perspective taking, and they see students being prepared to benefit from future interactions because of what students learn about social and cultural dynamics. This view of interactions in the classroom highlights the important role faculty can play in making the most of CRIs and in working to support CRIs as part of their instructional responsibilities.

Perceptions of Challenges in Supporting CRIs

Along with the perception that CRIs are quite valuable, a number of participants also spoke of the challenges they experienced in working to make the most of diversity in the classroom and to support students' interactions across race and ethnicity (with a little more than a third of the faculty we interviewed speaking to these challenges or concerns directly). The most prevalent area in terms of faculty perceptions of challenges was the idea that faculty were unprepared or uncertain about what to do as instructors. A university professor described her sense of the difficulty of working with diversity and the questions that diversity raises for her in terms of how faculty are supported to work with diversity as part of college-level instruction:

That we're supposed to think diversity and think rainbows and unicorns and there's supposed to be lovely background music. But, you know, the truth is it's complicated. It's weird. It's dangerous. It's confusing. It's foreign. And so, you know, as faculty I think: Can we support faculty in managing the complexity that comes with a diverse student population, a diverse idea, a diverse curriculum?

Related to this sense of not knowing what to do in regards to supporting CRIs, a community

college professor described his experience of working with students who made racially biased statements in the classroom:

And I had had early on some students that came in—and White students as well as Hispanic students—came in with a preconceived notion about the other group. This is the way a White student is supposed to be acting or should act or do. And White students would think a Hispanic student would act in a certain way, in a certain fashion. And, you know, some students have . . . made rather derogatory comments about a particular ethnic group. And I didn't . . . I was a new teacher back then, so I really didn't understand how to handle such comments. And, so now-a-days I kind of make it known . . . I don't know somehow or other, that kind of thing has . . . has gone down. I haven't seen that kind of activity yet.

A university professor spoke of making a mistake in how she was assigning groups, which she later realized limited students' ability to engage in CRIs. Importantly, she also describes how she learned something from this mistake:

And that is that I made a mistake one year when I was putting folks into permanent work groups for the semester. I usually ask what people's first language is. I usually have a demographic sheet, information sheet about students just so that I get to know them. And one of the things I would ask . . . I asked at the time was, "What is your first language?" And so when I was determining groups, I tried to make certain that folks had at least somebody else with their first language in their group, maybe two other people. And at one point a group asked me, "How did you decide who went in what group?" And I mentioned that to them. And they got upset with me. And they said, "We don't. Why would you do that? You know, it's important that everybody interact with everybody, and that you have experiences with people who are very different from your background." And they were absolutely right, you know. So they were . . . they were concerned not to be limited in that way. Not to be . . . I mean, they saw that group sort of as a ghetto in some sense, I guess. So that was very . . . that was something they definitely taught me about that.

Another challenge that a few participants spoke of was when White students in their classrooms positioned themselves as being a minority group. This perception was unique to our campus context in that White individuals can more frequently be in the numerical minority (on campus and off campus) as compared with other areas of the United States. However, what challenged participants who discussed this perception was the idea that White students did not recognize Whiteness as a form of privilege or power. A community college professor described this as follows:

One of the other things that I find unique in this area is that the Anglos are not the majority in number usually in our classes at the community college. And so when we get to talking about race, prejudice, discrimination . . . the conversation just kind of somehow turns upside down. Because when I, you know . . . of course, from a sociological standpoint, you know, White is power. And, you know, other ethnic groups are less power. And the White students just jump all over that because they feel that they are in the minority in this area. And they often will share experiences where they feel like they've been discriminated against or oppressed. And so it's a challenge to really help students see, "Well, if that may be your experience, that may be the case in this particular area, but this is part of a larger society—part of a larger country." So it's just . . . it's just different when you have the majority group in your society posing as a minority member in your classroom. Does that make any sense?

This concern suggests how powerfully larger social forces can come into play in our classrooms and influence how students act and interact. It connects with the larger theme of not knowing how to best support CRIs in the classroom that participants expressed and that we, as both researchers and teachers, have experienced in our own work. Specifically, it helps us to appreciate that as teachers we will need to continually work to understand how students are experiencing our instructional designs and also how they are positioning themselves in relation to the larger identity politics of our society.

Perceptions of Responsibility and Goals Related to CRIs

About half of the participants spoke of how they perceived responsibilities and goals related to fostering CRIs. What stands out about this perception is that the faculty who discussed their goals or responsibility also seemed to feel a greater sense of efficacy in terms of their role as an instructor to meaningfully support CRIs. This perception ranged from those participants who had the general goal of ensuring interaction so that students worked across a number of differences, including race and ethnicity, to those participants who had more specific goals related to CRIs. Those more specific goals included promoting dialogue and listening, changing racialized power dynamics, and encouraging students to see each other as resources for learning. A university professor described her sense of responsibility as one of helping students make connections:

But within the context of [the courses she teaches], I believe the students can learn a lot from each other.

And what I have seen is sometimes they don't always connect. I think it's very important that they do. And, as you said, [refers to another participant], the onus is on us to try to make that connection if we feel like it's important that they have that for the benefit of what we're trying to instruct them in.

Similarly, another university professor described how she uses group work to fulfill this responsibility and how she perceives her use of group work to be effective:

I set up groups every day of class. And I mix. . . . Every day they never knew where they were going to be—they couldn't choose. And they had exercises. And a lot of the work was based on that. So by the time they got to the end of the semester, they had mixed all the . . . You know, I made sure that there was interaction throughout all ages, all ethnic and racial groups, everything. It was interesting to see the . . . how they weren't forming cliques like some of the other classes at that time. They were starting to develop an understanding.

A community college professor spoke of his specific goals of using CRIs to encourage dialogue and listening. Speaking of dialogue, he explained, "And I engineer interracial dialogue all the time. And, you know, if I stop doing that, after a certain point it continues on its own. But if I don't keep it up at the beginning, it doesn't happen on its own." He also described his efforts to teach students how to learn to listen to each other:

But when you can enforce them to listen across those lines, so they know they're responsible. You know, this person said it—whoever she is. And then that picks up. And then they start interacting spontaneously, asking questions—even asking someone to repeat something or explain something. Because, of course, it's basic language skills. So to articulate your ideas, speak in full sentences, it's kind of a new experience for a lot of them. And they find they can . . . they can do that as group with each other. And it's even a little more interesting, you know. How about this, you know, gang-banger type personality with the tattoos and everything, you know. Can you really understand what they're saying? And say it back to them? Or, you know, explain what they're . . . what they're doing? And that also has its own momentum. It picks up very, very often.

Another participant, also a community college professor, who was concerned about her perception that White students dominated class discussions even when they were in the numerical minority, had the goal of using CRIs to shift the power dynamics between White students and other racial or ethnic groups. Specifically, she perceived her responsibility as being, at

least in part, to empower minority students to participate more fully:

So when I'm doing group work, one of the things I'm trying to get people to do is I want the minority students—Hispanic students—to learn to speak up. And so I'm really hands-on to the groups. I walk around and say, "You seem to be doing all the talking. How are we going to share this?" Or the . . . the Anglo person will say, "Okay. I'll be the . . . I'll do all the writing. And I'll be the recorder." And I'll say, "No, no, no. We're . . . you know, let's move, change these roles around." So I feel like I'm . . . I want them to be friends. I want them to be comfortable. I want them to function in the world. But I want the dynamics to change, that are so established when people come into class. And that doesn't, you know, if they were all Hispanics in the class, then the . . . it would be different, if people would step up—unless they're terribly shy. But as soon as I, as soon as we have Anglo students, things change. And that's what I want to break up by using groups.

Finally, a third participant, also a community college professor, spoke of her specific goal of encouraging interaction so that students see each other as resources for learning the course material. She described this process as follows:

Like I said earlier, I do a lot of group work. I always tell them, you know, one of the biggest resources—the best resource you have is each other. So in classroom I really encourage them to, before class, talk to each other. And sometimes when they come to ask me a question, I'll say, "Well, what does so-and-so think? Ask them." And so, I make them rely on each other. For the beginning of class, I'll put something up on the board. "I didn't get this problem." "You come over here." And, "How did you do this?" And just really encourage them to just use each other. That helps them a lot, too, to interact. And I know they're interacting because they'll tell me, "Oh, I called so-and-so last night, and this is the way they were doing it." And it's across . . . across age, across racial, across every kind of barrier imaginable.

What is striking about these three participants is that their strategies for supporting CRIs are directly tied to specific benefits they associate with such interaction. For example, if an instructor believes CRIs can help students learn to listen, these participants suggest that using teaching strategies that support such listening will have the twin goal of encouraging interaction while at the same time teaching students how to listen across difference. And these instructors seemed to have a greater sense of efficacy in their roles than other participants who did not seem to have as clear goals.

Notably, about half of the participants did not have any goals or feel a responsibility to support

CRIs even though it was of value to them. Largely this was because they perceived that students interact across racial and/or ethnic differences without the instructor needing to facilitate such interaction. However, of these participants, many of them still made use of group work in their courses and found group work to be an effective way to support interaction. One community college instructor described this perspective as follows:

I don't make a conscious effort in the classroom to have them interact cross-culturally. I just think it happens. And in some cases it doesn't because you have all Hispanic students. So [. . .] I don't think I make a conscious effort, "I need to put this person. . . ." You know, I don't think I do that—ever.

Our premise—that participants' feelings of efficacy are greater when they, as instructors, have specific goals for supporting CRIs—points to the role that faculty can play in making interactions effective in the classroom. As [Hirschy and Wilson \(2002\)](#) suggest, "[b]y anticipating and attending to the social forces that occur in the classroom, faculty better foster student learning . . ." (p. 97). If faculty reinforce behaviors that support and value CRIs, then students will be more likely to benefit from them.

Perceptions of Student Diversity and Participants' Background Experience

One finding that emerged from our study that we did not anticipate was the extent to which current perceptions of student diversity are related to participants' background experiences with diversity. For example, about half of our participants spoke about the campus as a place of limited diversity; at the same time, about half of the participants spoke about it as a place of great diversity. What emerged was that individuals often were drawing on their background experience, specifically their experiences in other parts of the country and, if they had been on campus for a number of years (generally at least 5 years), then how they had come to see the campus over time. In part, what was striking to us about this finding was that it mirrored our own perspectives and was part of what had initially prompted us to undertake this research—that is, we wanted to have a better understanding of how to make sense of CRIs in the context of our campus because, as faculty ourselves, we grappled with how to make sense of the interactions stu-

dents were experiencing and how to define or understand the diversity of students based on race and ethnicity.

As noted, one issue that a number of participants discussed was their perception that this campus was located in a less diverse area than where they previously lived or taught. For example, one community college professor discussed his perspective that this campus had a less culturally diverse student population and therefore was more challenging to work with in terms of CRIs:

I come from [a southern state], which is very different in terms of cultural groups. So I kind of see this place as not homogenous, but kind of limited to two groups—Mexican American and White or Caucasian. And sometimes in my classrooms I find it difficult to bring in different kinds of cultural viewpoints because the students don't exist. You know, I don't have any African Americans. I don't have Puerto Ricans. I don't have Cuban Americans, you know. So it's kind of hard to give them that . . . that full experience.

Along the same lines, a university professor struggled with characterizing the campus as diverse because of her experience living in another area of the country:

I mean, I . . . it's funny. I don't know if I would use the word *diversity*. I mean, what I see is . . . there seem to be students that are Mexican American or Chicano or Chicana or however they might self-identify. But from an outsider's view, I would say Mexican Americans and then there's Anglos. I mean, I come from [an East Coast city], so I wouldn't even use the word *diversity*. So I think it's interesting that the word *diversity*—and what it means here. But it seems to me that there's two . . . two ethnic identities.

However, a number of other participants felt the area was diverse, and they were grappling with what it meant that some people did not perceive it that way. For example, a university professor who was new to the area discussed how she was surprised that people who grew up in the area or had lived there some time took the cultural diversity for granted. This was in response in part to other participants' discussion of the student population but also her perception of students. It also was related to a challenge she felt in making the most of diversity in the area. Early on she spoke about this challenge:

And I think it's a challenge because students here take for granted the cultural heterogeneity that exists. And if this is where . . . you know, so many of them have. . . . It's been my experience thus far that, you know, not very many of them have left [this area]. And so, I think

that perhaps, this is pure conjecture on my part, that they take the heterogeneity here for granted. And it kind of makes me a little bit worried if they were to go see another part of the country. And, you know, maybe a little bit larger reality check for them, if you will.

And later she discussed feeling like a newcomer and being surprised at others' perceptions of the student population:

And I feel like the "newcomer/outsider" here because people keep talking about the homogeneity of the student population. It's all, you know, White or Mexican American. And like, you know, I came from [a northwestern state]. It was very White. We had a few Black students, and then we had a few Asian students. So I come here, and I think this is just a very culturally diverse population. But apparently I need to live here for a couple more years. Because I'm thinking, "Oh, my god! You know, we have Mexican Americans. We have Whites. We have, you know, we have the Mexican, you know, Mexicans. And this is great." This is so different than what I was used to up in [my previous] state.

This participant's perception can be contrasted with another participant's perception, also a university professor who has been in the area for a much longer time and who has shifted her perspective in terms of how she identifies racial or ethnic diversity and how she perceives student diversity on campus:

I came here 12 years ago from [a northeastern state]. And I really noticed a lack of darker-skinned students. And it seemed like most students looked sort of White. And it took a while for me to recognize the Hispanic students and Native American students. And so now my view is very different than it was from when I first came.

In addition, she discusses perceiving greater diversity now than when she first came to the campus and how sometimes that diversity is not visible:

So, I think there's a lot more diversity than is first visible to the outsider. And I think, now that I've been here for 12 years, I see a lot more diversity that I'm aware of, but I think there's even more that's hidden because it's . . . my experience has been that students don't want to be identified as different.

Again, we see how the classroom as a community—one that is influenced by the social forces of the larger communities or contexts around it—comes to the fore in helping us understand how faculty conceptualize diversity on a specific campus. In particular, it encourages us to consider how the social forces of the local context are not the only ones at play in

making sense of CRIs. As our participants suggest, where we come from and how long we have been in the local context add texture and nuances to how we define and conceptualize diversity. It also suggests that faculty are not only negotiating the local context in addressing diversity but also their experiences in past contexts.

Discussion

We initiated this study to understand faculty perceptions of CRIs in the courses they teach on a particular campus. By listening to faculty, we now have a more developed picture of the complexities they are negotiating. Our study was specifically situated on a campus where the enrollment of Hispanic/Latino(a) students is high enough to qualify it as an HSI. As student body diversity is higher on this campus than on the PWIs included in previous studies, the perceptions of faculty about students' classroom interactions across race and ethnicity are enlightening.

The four categories that emerged from our conversations with faculty regarding their perceptions of CRIs reflected findings from past research while revealing new issues to consider. Faculty in our study concurred with [Marin's \(2000\)](#) earlier qualitative findings regarding the value that faculty perceive in classroom CRIs and the benefits of using diversity pedagogically. The faculty in [Marin's](#) study reported that their teaching was enhanced when they taught classes composed of students with various racial and ethnic backgrounds. As reported by participants in our study, faculty can decide to purposefully leverage classroom diversity to enhance student learning. By paying attention to faculty's understanding of the social forces in the classroom, we can begin to expand our understanding of the pivotal role faculty have to play in further promoting educational achievement in the context of a diverse student population. Faculty in our study were also similar to faculty in previous studies in not knowing how to handle classroom discussions centered on race. [Alvarez McHatton, Keller, Shircliffe, and Zalaquett \(2009\)](#), at the end of their study on preparation of elementary and secondary educators for classroom diversity, suggested that faculty be offered professional development that includes skills training in areas such as facilitating "dangerous discussions" (p. 134). A

number of our participants discussed their desire for more support with working with a diverse student population, with a few even noting they had participated in our study because of this desire.

Although faculty corroborated previous research findings, they also spoke of perceptions that had not been mentioned in other studies. For us, the most informative finding was about views of diversity. When we began this research, our assumption was that the student body on the selected campus was diverse. Certainly, to be designated as an HSI, over a quarter of the student body self-identified as Hispanic/Latino(a). We were thus intrigued when faculty led us to see that the same student body can be viewed as more diverse or less diverse depending on the perceptions each faculty brought with him or her from previous institutions in other regions of the country. [Mayhew, Grunwald, and Dey \(2005\)](#) foreshadowed the impact of previous experiences on shaping the campus climate with their finding that the previous experiences students brought with them to campus were found to be important in shaping the dynamics of that specific institution. We thus began to understand that efforts to create a more diverse student body need to be localized and defined by individual institutions and not according to an external measure of what achieving diversity looks like applied uniformly to all of higher education. In our study, faculty did not have a common perception that the campus had a diverse student body. How their previous experiences interacted with this campus's particular mix of students was enlightening. Some faculty perceived the student body to be richly diverse compared with past institutions, and others perceived the same student body as being dominated by only two racial/ethnic groups, unlike their experiences at institutions with students of many races and ethnicities.

Another finding that seemed unique to us was the way in which our participants' sense of efficacy as instructors seemed to be related to the specificity of the goals they held in facilitating CRIs. Our research has helped us understand that making the most of student diversity in the classroom is closely tied to the intentions of the instructor. As [Hirschy and Wilson \(2002\)](#) pointed out, "Teachers structure the learning environment by making pedagogical choices" (p. 88). Importantly, what emerged was that the

clearer instructors are on how and why to facilitate CRIs, the more they perceive the importance of doing so in the classroom. Although this is based on perceptions, it does suggest that diversity efforts on campuses can be strengthened by attention to how faculty perceive their roles in the classroom.

Limitations of the Study

Before discussing the implications of the findings, it is important to note a few limitations of the current study. First, our study is based on a unique but limited context in terms of the transferability of our findings to other campuses or contexts. In particular, because our research focuses on an HSI and a single campus, it likely reflects the idiosyncrasies of that campus and context. Although we tried to capture this with a focus on perspectives or perceptions, we speculate that faculty teaching at PWIs would have quite different perspectives on CRIs and grapple with quite different challenges and responsibilities in regards to supporting CRIs. Second, another limitation of our study is that we defined the case by campus as opposed to institutions and therefore cannot make comparisons across the two institutions. We made the decision to define the case by the campus because the two institutions are located on the same campus and share many of the same resources, including support for teaching and faculty governance. However, future studies could explore the difference in setting by interviewing faculty at more distinct institutions. Finally, a third limitation of our study was selection bias. Although we invited all faculty and instructors on campus to participate in our study, those who chose to participate did so on a voluntary basis and likely had a preexisting interest in CRIs. In addition, participants who chose to participate may have been more likely to view CRIs as important and valuable.

Implications and Conclusion

Although the findings themselves are intriguing, understanding what they suggest for educational practice is essential. Echoing previous studies (Chang et al., 2004; Gurin et al., 2002), participants in our study noted the benefits of having diversity in the classroom, such as allowing students to learn about other ways to approach and solve problems, other ways of seeing the

world, and possibly new ways of seeing themselves. Faculty saw the value of CRIs, and even when faculty reported not being entirely sure what the students were taking away from classroom CRIs, there was hope that even if the interactions did not have an immediate effect, they would have an impact on these students in the future. At the same time, faculty who reported having a more specific goal in fostering CRIs also spoke of a greater sense of efficacy in terms of their impact on student learning. From this, one implication for faculty seems clear. Faculty who want students to get the benefits that come from CRIs should be explicit about what classroom goals these CRIs are meant to achieve. As clarity of goals is a good pedagogical approach for any classroom strategy or method (Maila, 2010), faculty who view the facilitation of classroom CRIs as a tool with specific goals may find this to be a familiar process in their course design.

Although student CRIs were perceived as valuable, various faculty also mentioned the challenges they had faced when structuring classroom CRIs. Our participants reflected the primary challenge mentioned by faculty in the Alvarez McHatton et al. (2009) study regarding their self-perceived lack of skills in facilitating difficult discussions. At the heart of this challenge in both the Alvarez McHatton et al. study and our study was the perceived lack of training or guidance on how to handle potentially volatile classroom conversations about race, such as the conversation, described by one of our participants, involving White students who believe they are now a minority group that also faces discrimination. In the sociology of the classroom, “educators have a responsibility to address intentional inequities so all students can take advantage of its resources” (Hirschy & Wilson, 2002, p. 86), but this becomes difficult when faculty do not feel that they know how to address these inequities with their students. Here, the implication is unambiguous. For faculty to feel comfortable with purposely structuring student CRIs in class, they need, and in our study want, training, guidance, and mentoring. Faculty were clear when they described avoiding anything related to diversity in class because of fear of not knowing how to handle heated conversations. Such training is something that can be easily implemented by institutions as part of conveying the message that

CRI and diversity-related academic content are valued and expected.

The category of faculty responsibility in facilitating classroom CRIs also emerged from faculty perceptions. Opinions about level of responsibility ranged from none to complete. Those claiming no responsibility reflected previous quantitative research (Maruyama & Moreno, 2000) in which 25–30% of faculty reported that having student diversity in their classes had no impact on their teaching methods. This may have important implications for the entire institution as well as the individual classroom. Previous research has connected curriculum content and campus climate regarding diversity. Specifically, Mayhew et al. (2005) discovered that students' perceptions of the institution's ability to achieve a positive climate for diversity was related to the degree that diversity-related issues were incorporated into the curriculum.

In addition, the individual classroom implication is that faculty who perceive themselves as explicitly responsible for facilitating classroom CRIs are, in the sociology of the classroom, developing "reciprocity and cooperation among students" (Hirschy & Wilson, 2002, p. 96), which creates an environment that fosters learning. In light of the asymmetry of power in favor of the instructor, faculty hold the authority to "decide how to structure classroom interactions by reinforcing some behaviors and deterring others" (p. 87). In our study, the degree to which faculty perceive responsibility appears to be related to both the degree to which they feel competent to handle difficulties that arise as they structure these interactions into the class and how they conceptualize student diversity and the need for students to learn how to interact across different races and ethnicities. Although all of our participants found this to be valuable, where they varied the most was on whether or not students on the campus needed to learn this or had already learned this given the local demographics of the area.

These decisions about interactions around diversity determine the climate in the classroom, and thus a decision about what responsibility an instructor has regarding what students learn in class is not a neutral one. As the study by Bowman (2010) illustrated, because some types of diversity experiences appear to more effectively promote cognitive gains than others, and because interpersonal interactions with racial

diversity have been found to be the "most strongly related to cognitive development" (Bowman, 2010, p. 20), whether the instructor chooses to incorporate CRIs in his or her class would seem to have consequences regarding how much cognitive growth the instructor is able to facilitate in his or her students. As our study indicates, such decisions are informed by faculty background experiences and how they define diversity in the context of the campus.

In looking at both the desire of faculty for professional development and the varying levels of responsibility faculty feel they have for encouraging classroom CRIs, the implications from the findings of this study extend to the campus as well as the classroom. Administrators who have the larger goal of creating a positive campus climate regarding diversity should not overlook our study's findings regarding faculty willingness to encourage diversity-related occurrences in class. As part of developing the larger campus climate, administrators may need to send an unmistakable message about the value the college places on positive student experiences with diversity in the formal academic spaces of the institution by facilitating faculty discussions about defining and exploring the meaning and value of diversity within the campus context. This clear message of importance combined with practical training in how to facilitate these experiences may shift perceptions of some faculty about their role in facilitating students' experiences across diversity.

Certainly, to more completely address the implications from this study, we need to hear more faculty voices. We need to hear more about what they perceive as necessary regarding the institutional support and training they would need to feel comfortable in facilitating CRIs. In addition, we need research that sheds more light on the different and similar perspectives of faculty who teach at institutions with more and with less student diversity. Faculty's previous institutional experiences were central in shaping current perceptions of diversity.

The implications of this and previous studies on CRIs suggest that students' racial and ethnic diversity can have a comprehensive impact on education. This resonates with the current direction of CRIs research, which has discovered that CRIs have benefits for all students on campus, whether or not they participate in CRIs. We understand from previous research how valu-

able CRIs are in the informal settings of the campus, and we also believe that the experiences students have in the classroom help feed the campus climate. The research thus implies that student CRIs do not just impact student learning. They impact the campus environment as a whole regarding the value of diversity and education. As Mayhew et al. (2005) explain, “In terms of diversity, the magnitude of an institution’s commitment . . . is measured by its willingness to integrate different racial and ethnic perspectives into its curricular initiatives” (p. 408). Faculty commitment to incorporating diversity-related issues into academics impacts student learning, which in turn impacts the institution’s ability to develop a positive campus climate. In sum, CRIs simultaneously have an individual and an institutional impact. Supporting faculty to facilitate more of these interactions would appear to be beneficial to the entire institution as well as to individual students. Institutions should continue to explore and reflect on diversity while at the same time putting into practice an emphasis on interacting across difference and supporting such interaction at multiple levels of the institution.

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