

## Research Report No. 97-5

Washington State Board for Community and  
Technical Colleges; Education Division

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# THE EFFECT OF RACE AND ETHNIC BACKGROUND ON STUDENTS' COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE EXPERIENCES

November 1997

Does the experience of students at Washington Community and Technical colleges differ based on the race and ethnic background of the student? In fall 1996, individual colleges and the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges asked students about the quality of their college experience. The colleges administered an in-class survey called the Community College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CCSEQ) to approximately 13,000 students at 25 colleges. The survey asks students about their involvement in college courses and other campus activities and their perceptions of the institutional climate. The typical survey question presents a circumstance and asks the respondent whether they have done or experienced it never, occasionally, often, or very often.

The data suggest that students of all race and ethnic groups experience college alike in many regards. They do not devote much time to their education and to other campus activities, yet they find the college a positive environment. Students of color, however, were more likely to interact with faculty and other students and reported more academic gains or progress than their white counterparts. Some students of color also reported a less supportive institutional climate than whites experience. This "chilly climate" results in a decreased likelihood that students of color would re-enroll in their college if they had the opportunity to do so. This discomfort is most evident for African American and Asian American students.

The analysis is based on student self-reported race and ethnic identity. The possible responses to the CCSEQ question were: white (80 percent), Asian/Pacific Islander (7 percent), Hispanic (4 percent), African American (2 percent), Native American (2 percent), and "Other Race" (4 percent). Another question asked if English was the student's native language. Based on these responses, the Asian/Pacific

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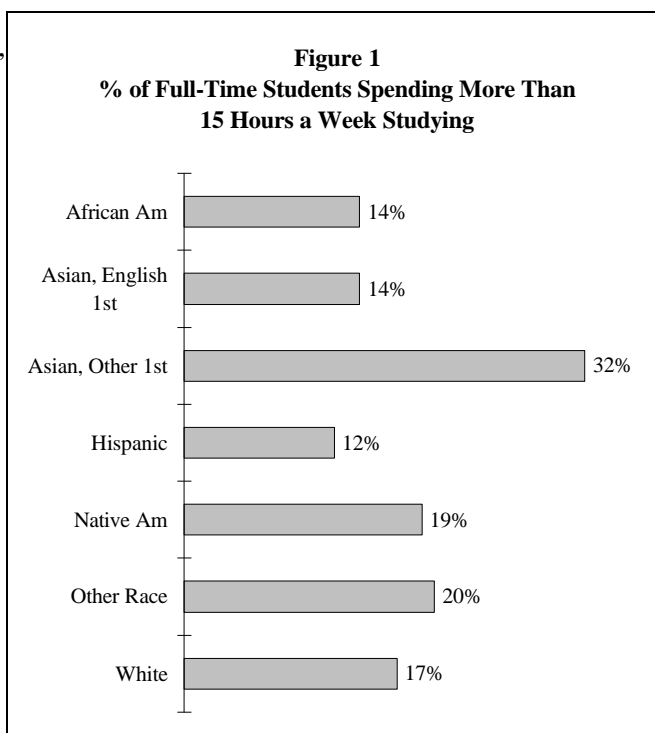
Islander group was further divided into those for whom English was their native language (Asian, English 1st Language, 2 percent) and those for whom another language was the student's first language (Asian, Other 1st Language, 5 percent). In most cases, these two groups responded differently to the questionnaire. A sizable minority of Hispanics also spoke English as a second language. The English as the first language and the other first language Hispanic students, however, had similar responses to most questions. Thus, the Hispanic responses are reported as a single group.

## STUDENT USE OF TIME AND INVOLVEMENT ON CAMPUS

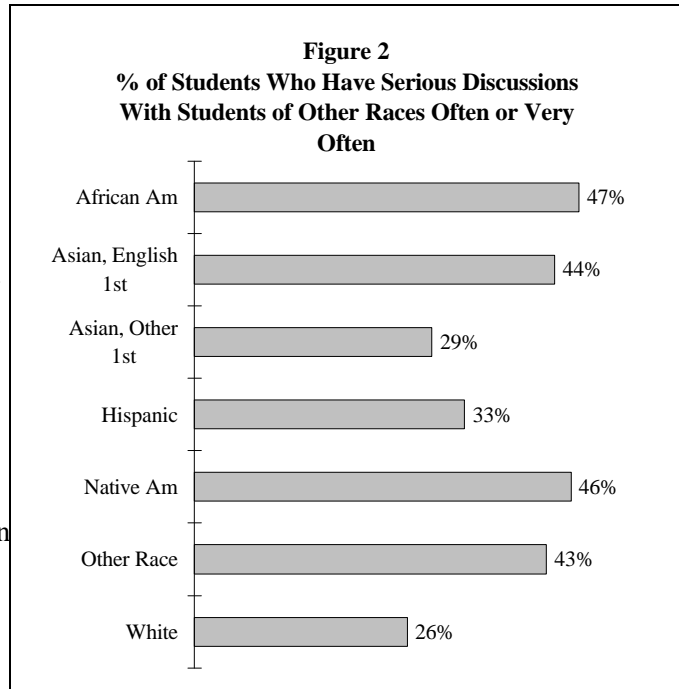
Students were asked a series of questions to gauge the amount of time they devote to their education, their involvement in classroom and extra-curricular activities, and the extent to which they interact with faculty and other students. Approximately three-quarters of the respondents were enrolled full-time, taking at least 12 credits at the time of the survey. The data indicate that few full-time students spend much time on campus or engage in extra-curricular activities. While spending about the same time on campus, students of color are more likely than whites to engage in serious conversations with people of other races, talk with advisors and counselors, and report greater academic gains.

Most students spend less time studying than they spend in class, despite the notion that each hour of lecture time requires two hours of outside preparation. Just 18 percent of full-time students spend more than 15 hours a week studying outside of classes. Asian students for whom a language other than English is their native language spend the most time. One-third of the students in that group studied over 15 hours a week.

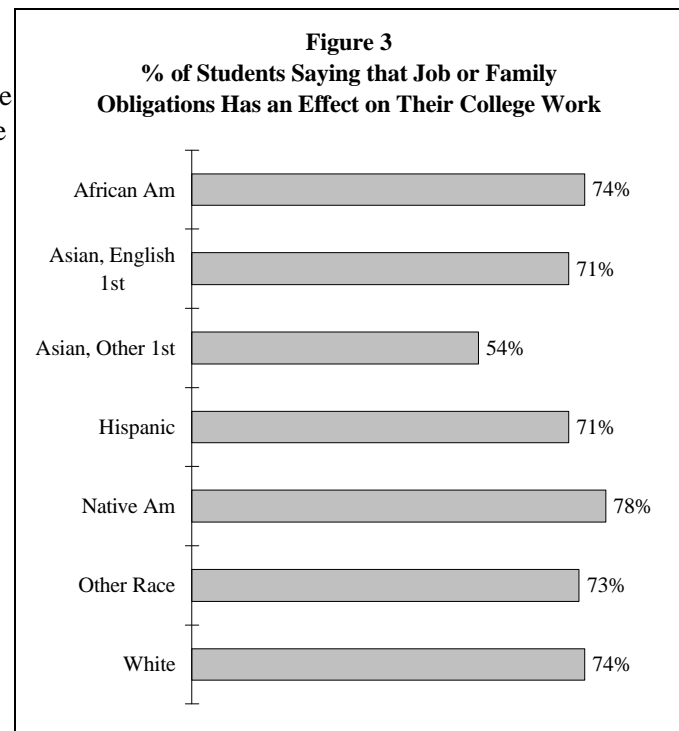
Most students spend little time in the library working with other students or attending club meetings because they spend little time on campus. The vast majority of full-time students (70-80 percent depending on the racial group) spend less than seven hours a week on campus outside of class. Less than one-quarter of full-time students have ever attended meetings of clubs or organizations on campus. Native American students are most likely to report attending meetings often or very often (23 percent).



The college experience assures that students have the opportunity to talk with others who are different from themselves in terms of age, race, religion, politics, or philosophy of life. Contrary to the popular notion that students of color isolate themselves from others on campus, the whitestudents were the least likely to report that they engage indiscussions with students of different racial background. In contrast, nearly half of all African American students had such discussions frequently. Students of color, with the exception of Asian students with other than English as first language, were also somewhat more likely than whites to frequently communicate across age boundaries.



Job and family responsibilities are often cited as the main reason that students do not have the amount of time that many educators would like them to commit to college. The CCSE data confirmed this assumption. Three-quarters of all full-time students said that their job, their family or both take at least some time from their school work. The exception was for Asian students with other than English as first language, where only 54 percent reported such a conflict with school.



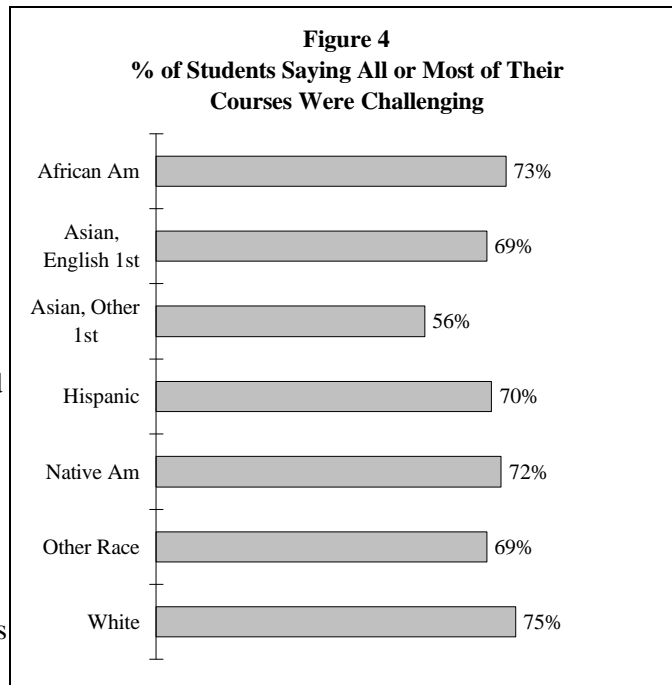
While most students reported a conflict with work or family obligations, a minority (23 percent) reported that a job or family responsibilities take “a lot of time from my school work.”

## INTERACTIONS WITH FACULTY AND OTHER STUDENTS

About three-quarters of the CCSEQ respondents reported that all or most of their courses were challenging, stimulating and worthwhile. Students of color, however, were less challenged than white students. Of all groups, Asian American students were least likely to report that their classes were challenging.

In classes, between one-third and one-half of students claim they ask questions in class “often” or “very often”. African American and “Other Race” students participated most in classroom discussions. Asian and Hispanic students participated the least with one in eight claiming they never participate.

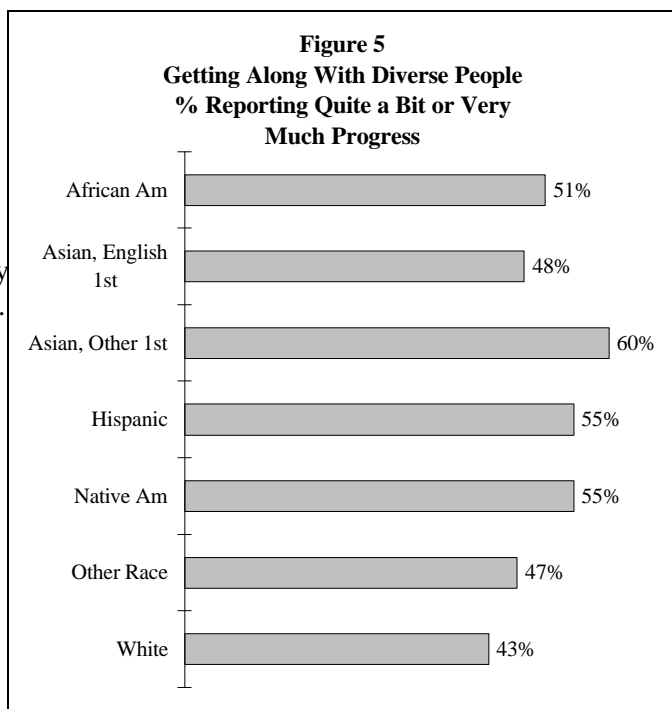
Outside of class, slightly less than one-half of all students talk informally about current events and two-thirds discussed their career and educational plans at least occasionally with instructors. Again, African American students were more likely than other groups to interact with faculty in this way.



## GAINS AND PROGRESS

Consistent with an earlier finding that white students do not interact with students from other racial groups, white students reported the least progress in "understanding and getting along with other people". While the majority of students of color (54 percent) reported developing an understanding about and ability to get along with different kinds of people, only 43 percent of whites reported gains in that area.

Possibly because of their time commitment to college activities and their greater contact with faculty and other students, students of color also reported greater gains or more progress in a variety of areas covered by the CCSEQ than did whites. Table I provides a summary of gains in five key areas. Native American students reported the most gains, with a consistently high percentage reporting learning “quite a bit” or “very much” in their classes.



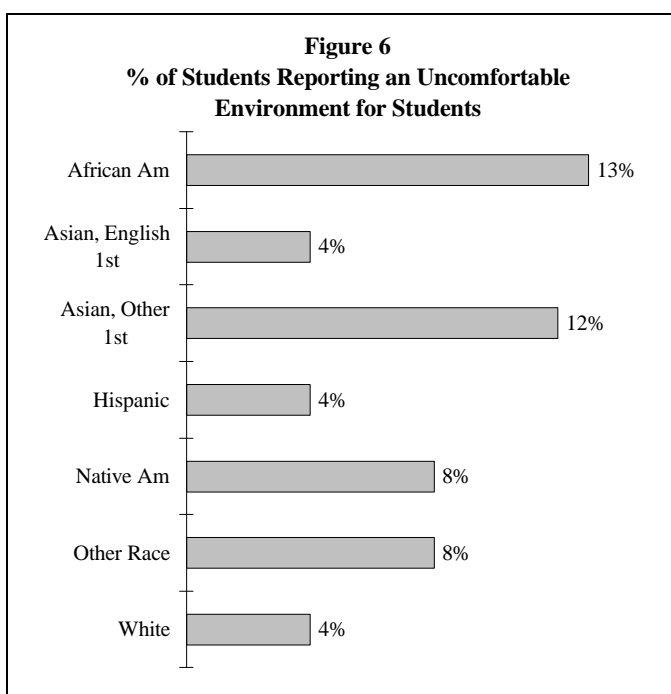
**Table I**  
**Percent Reporting That They Gained Quite a Bit or Very Much**

	<b>Writing Skills</b>	<b>Computer Skills</b>	<b>Math Skills</b>	<b>Ability to Learn on Own</b>	<b>Clearer about Own Values</b>
<b>African American</b>	57%	46%	37%	59%	53%
<b>Asian, English 1st Language</b>	53%	44%	34%	51%	44%
<b>Asian, Other 1st Language</b>	49%	52%	43%	54%	47%
<b>Hispanic</b>	51%	47%	39%	57%	52%
<b>Native American</b>	55%	46%	42%	64%	50%
<b>White</b>	55%	42%	38%	60%	46%
<b>Other Race</b>	52%	41%	34%	54%	40%

**SUPPORTIVE VERSUS “CHILLY” CLIMATE**

Although findings suggest white students do not gain as much from their college education as students of color, they do appear to benefit from a more supportive campus climate. Students were asked whether their college provided a “comfortable environment free of harassment of any kind.” Most students (95 percent) rated their college as comfortable. Whites and Hispanics were more likely than any other group to rate their college as comfortable and African American students and Asian students with other than English as first language were the least likely.

Students were also asked how many instructors, support staff, and other students were friendly, supportive, approachable, or helpful. With the exception of Asian students with other than English as first language, the majority of all students, regardless of race, reported that most staff, students, and faculty were supportive. While the percentages that report “few or none” are generally very small, the race differences suggest that students of color feel less supported than do whites. The exception is for Native Americans who had ratings similar to white students.



**Table II**  
**Percent of Students Reporting All or Most Were Supportive**

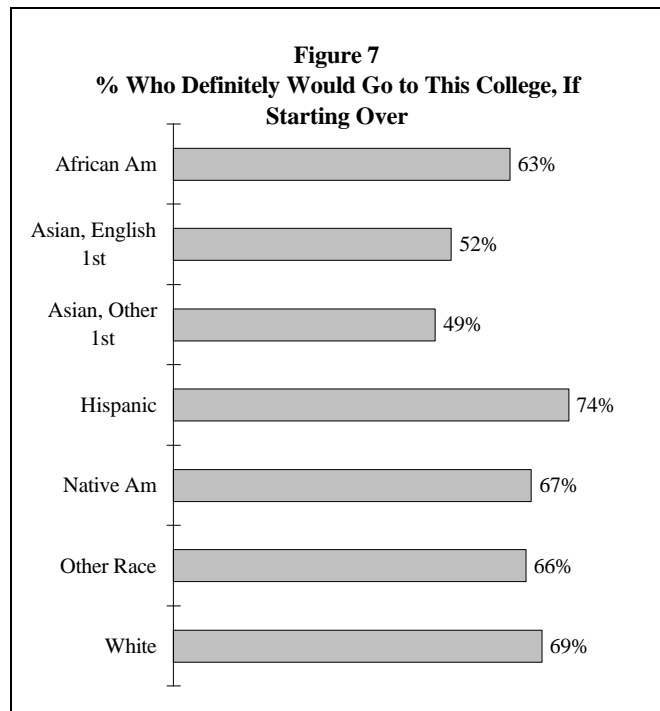
	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Staff</b>	<b>Students</b>
<b>African American</b>	68%	60%	70%
<b>Asian, English 1st Language</b>	69%	59%	79%
<b>Asian, Other 1st Language</b>	62%	45%	46%
<b>Hispanic</b>	73%	64%	74%
<b>Native American</b>	75%	66%	77%
<b>Other Race</b>	70%	57%	72%
<b>White</b>	77%	67%	79%

In spite of these high ratings, there were still more than 1,800 students who reported that “few or none” of the other students, faculty, or staff were supportive. Some 14 to 17 percent of the Asian American, African American, and “other race” students reported that “few or none” of the staff were helpful, considerate, or knowledgeable.

The group with exceptionally poor ratings is the Asian students with other than English as first language as shown in Table II. Whereas 65 percent of all respondents said most or all counselors were helpful and considerate, only 45 percent of Asian students with other than English as first language concurred. Similarly, three quarters of all students said that most or all of their faculty and fellow students were friendly and supportive while Asian students with other than English as first language had much lower ratings (62 percent reporting faculty as helpful and 46 percent reporting fellow students as helpful).

When students were asked if they would attend this college if they could start over again, two-thirds reported they would. However, less than half of the Asian students with other than English as first language gave this positive response. Whites (69 percent) and Hispanics (74 percent) were most likely to respond affirmatively to this question.

These findings suggest that while a large majority of students find the campus to be a comfortable and helpful place, approximately twice as many students of color were likely to view their college negatively than were white students. This contributes, at least in part to the decreased willingness on the part of many students of color, and especially Asian students with other than English as first language to repeat their college experience if given the opportunity. While those who found mostly unhelpful staff and an environment of harassment were few in number, the rate is large enough to warrant further attention.



## CONCLUSION

For the most part, students in Washington's community and technical colleges have a positive educational experience regardless of race or ethnic background. Areas for concern across all groups include the small amount of time students devote to their studies and to other opportunities on campus to grow and learn, and to the limited extent that they interact with faculty outside of class. Compared to whites, students of color engage slightly more in their education and they report greater academic progress. On the other hand, a greater proportion of students of color experience a "chilly" climate than their white classmates, leading to a lower overall level of satisfaction. In this area, particular attention needs to be focused on the experience of Asian students with other than English as their first language.