Does Openness to Diversity Influence College Learning and Adjustment?

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Abstract

First-generation freshmen’s’ openness to diversity was directly related to their learning experiences and interpersonal interactions during their first semester in college. Students who were more open at the beginning of the first semester tended to develop more interpersonal interactions with faculty and other students throughout the semester. Additionally, students whose openness to diversity increased during the course of their first semester tended to have more positive changes in several areas of learning and achievement.

Assessment Evidence

To assess changes from high school to college in learning/achievement and openness to diversity, students completed The Measuring Learning Community Effectiveness Scale (Chesbro, et. al., 1999) and the Openness to Diversity Scale (Pascarella, et. al., 1996) at the beginning and end of their first college semester: Pearson Correlations were calculated.

Summary

Does openness to diversity influence students’ experiences in college? First-generation college freshmen, in learning communities or a control group, completed scales at the beginning and end of their first semester. Students’ learning experiences and interpersonal interactions changed significantly during the semester, regardless of group assignment. Openness to diversity was directly related to these changes.

Results indicated that on average, students reported having more interaction with other students in college than in high school, but less interaction with faculty. Openness to diversity influenced these interactions. The more open students were at the beginning of college the more they tended to increase their interactions with students and faculty, when compared to high school.

Change in openness also influenced learning experiences. Students who became more open during the semester tended to increase more in: (1) cooperative learning, defined as positive interdependence among learners; (2) interdisciplinary learning, defined as the examination of ideas and issues from the perspective of different disciplines; and (3) knowledge constructivism, defined as the creation of new understandings. Additionally, students who became more open tended to increase more in their learning via the cognitive domain, which includes comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation skills, and via the affective domain, which refers to students’ internalization of values that guide the utilization of future information.

Does openness to diversity influence students’ learning experiences, and/or do learning experiences influence openness to diversity? Further research is needed to understand the causal pathways among these variables, but these correlational data are provocative. As educators we want students to do more in college than just learn facts; we want them to learn to work with others, think critically, and begin to develop their own value system. These data suggest that tolerance of diverse points of view may play some role in the development of these capacities.

References

