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Encouraging Perspective-Taking among College Students

Robert D. Reason

Iowa State University, rreason@iastate.edu

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Encouraging Perspective-Taking among College Students

Abstract

One need only watch the nightly news to understand why greater attention to taking others' perspectives seriously might be needed in the United States. Signs of disrespect and intolerance abound across the ideological spectrum: in Representative Joe Wilson yelling "You lie!" at President Obama last year, in Harry Reid comparing opponents of health care reform to supporters of slavery, in Tea Partiers likening President Obama to Hitler. In modern political discourse, open-minded discussions are few and far between, and leaders who carefully weigh the evidence and change their minds in response are even rarer.

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Home > Publications Research > Periodicals > [Encouraging Perspective-Taking among College Students](#)



Winter 2011, Vol. 14, No. 1

Current Issue

Search Periodicals

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- [Overview](#)
- [Personal and Social Responsibility for a World Lived in Common](#)
- [Education for Personal and Social Responsibility: Applying the Life of the Mind to the Work of the World](#)
- [Perspective-Taking as a Tool for Building Democratic Societies](#)
- [Encouraging Perspective-Taking among College Students](#)
- [Improving Civic Engagement by Assessing Students' Needs](#)
- [Fatoumata](#)
- [Another Kind of College Lesson](#)
- [Institutionalizing Core Values: Diversity, Ethics, and Civic Responsibility in the Curriculum](#)
- [Seeking a Good Society at University of the Pacific](#)
- [Business Ethics in Undergraduate Education](#)
- [In Print](#)
- [Opportunities](#)
- [Resources](#)

Diversity and Democracy

Encouraging Perspective-Taking among College Students

By: Robert D. Reason

One need only watch the nightly news to understand why greater attention to taking others' perspectives seriously might be needed in the United States. Signs of disrespect and intolerance abound across the ideological spectrum: in Representative Joe Wilson yelling "You lie!" at President Obama last year, in Harry Reid comparing opponents of health care reform to supporters of slavery, in Tea Partiers likening President Obama to Hitler. In modern political discourse, open-minded discussions are few and far between, and leaders who carefully weigh the evidence and change their minds in response are even rarer.

If we hope to alter this situation, we need leaders who can engage across difference and learn from others' perspectives. College is one obvious place where those leaders are created, and the diversity many campuses enjoy is no small contributor to this process. Research shows that structural diversity gives college students opportunities to encounter, interact with, and engage with people and ideas different from themselves (Hurtado et al. 1998). But it does not guarantee that such engagement--or the learning it might generate--will occur. In order for students to benefit from diversity, they must be prepared to engage with and learn from perspectives and experiences different from their own. That is, they must intentionally develop the capacity for perspective-taking, as I will call it in this article.

Perspective-taking is one of five outcomes measured by the Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory (PSRI), developed as part of AAC&U's Core Commitments Project. The Core Commitments project aims to reclaim and revitalize the academy's role in fostering students' development of personal and social responsibility. The initiative "help[s] campuses create learning environments in which all students reach for excellence in the use of their talents, take responsibility for the integrity and quality of their work, and engage in meaningful practices"--including perspective-taking--"that prepare them to fulfill their obligations" as students and citizens in their academic, local, and global communities (Dey and Associates 2010, 1).

Perspective-Taking as an Outcome of College

Twenty-three participating campuses administered the PSRI to over 23,000 students and 8,000 professionals (faculty, student affairs personnel, and academic administrators) in 2007. AAC&U has published three monographs drawing upon PSRI data, most recently *Engaging Diverse Viewpoints: What is the Campus*

Climate for Perspective-Taking?, the findings of which I describe here.

The good news is that college students believe that perspective-taking should be part of their higher education experience. Approximately 93 percent of student respondents to the PSRI indicate that they "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree" that preparing students to take seriously the perspectives of others should be an "essential goal" of college. Higher education professionals stand ready as well, with 97 percent of faculty members, academic administrators, and student affairs professionals agreeing that perspective-taking should be an essential goal of a college education.

An objective reader might call this a mandate to include perspective-taking among expected outcomes for college students. Given that demand, the next finding is surprising: When asked if perspective-taking *is* a goal of their current institution, only 86 percent of both students and professionals "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree." Thus there is a gap between the belief that perspective-taking *should* be an outcome of higher education and the reality that it *is* an outcome. Colleges and universities must make greater strides if they hope to meet the mandate to include perspective-taking among higher education goals.

Students' Development of Perspective-Taking Skills

Given the gap between whether perspective-taking should be and is a goal of higher education, it's not surprising to learn that only slightly over half of all students "strongly agree" that they acquired perspective-taking skills over the course of their college careers. PSRI data reveal that approximately 53 percent of students "strongly agree" that they "developed an increased ability to learn from diverse perspectives" while in college. Slightly higher percentages of students "strongly agree" that they "developed an increased ability to gather and thoughtfully use evidence to support [their] own ideas" and "developed an increased ability to understand the evidence, analysis, and perspectives of others, even when [they] disagree with [those perspectives]." Approximately 56 percent of students "strongly agree" with these two statements.

Digging deeper, the data show that women and students from traditionally underrepresented racial and ethnic populations report that they have developed perspective-taking skills at higher rates than reported by men or white students, respectively. A higher percent of women than men "strongly agree" with each of these three statements. And generally speaking, students from African American and Latino backgrounds were more likely to "strongly agree" with these statements than were white students (see table 1).

Table 1. Percentage of Students Who "Strongly Agree" with Selected Statements, by Gender and Race or Ethnicity

	All Students	Women	Men	White Students	African American Students	Latino/Latina Students*	Asian American Students
I have developed an increased ability to learn from diverse perspectives during the time I have been in college	52.6	56.6	48.1	50.0	63.4	62.0	58.9
I have developed an increased ability to gather and thoughtfully use evidence to support my own ideas during the time I have been in college	56.1	58.0	54.0	54.9	67.8	61.8	51.8
I have developed an increased ability during college to understand the evidence, analysis, and perspectives of others, even when I disagree with them	56.1	57.8	54.2	54.6	63.3	64.0	56.8

*Latino/Latina students category includes respondents who indicated Mexican American/Chicano, Puerto Rican, or "Other Latino" on the PSRI

The finding that white students and men report less growth in perspective-taking skills during college runs counter to both common sense and some empirical findings. Given that the high degree of racial segregation in the United States allows majority groups in particular to avoid interacting with diverse others, it makes sense that white students would have the most to gain from structural diversity on campus. Similarly, it makes intuitive sense that men, starting from relatively privileged positions, would stand to benefit most from the opportunities to explore topics related to sex and gender that most colleges provide. Empirical evidence supports these assumptions. Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin (2002) found white students had the largest gains of any racial group in several learning and democracy-related outcomes as a result of engaging with diverse others, either formally in the classroom or informally outside the classroom. Empirical evidence of the effect that diverse college experiences have on men's learning and development is somewhat more mixed (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005).

Despite mixed conclusions, the research does provide some basis for understanding the PSRI's findings. The empirical literature on student outcomes consistently finds that *engagement* with diverse others is a requisite for learning from diversity (Milem 2003; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Unfortunately, white students--in particular, white men--consistently report less engagement with diverse others than do women and students of color (Chang, Astin, and Kim 2004).

How Campuses Can Influence Students' Perspective-Taking Skills

The major challenge for colleges and universities is thus to find ways to intentionally engage students with diversity. In doing so, they stand to improve students' diversity-related outcomes, including students' capacity for perspective-taking.

Higher education professionals have long assumed that faculty members and peers are the major socialization agents acting on college students (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Together, these groups convey content knowledge as well as attitudes and behaviors. The PSRI data highlight the relationship between engaging with faculty and student peers and the development of perspective-taking skills.

Students who engaged with faculty members, both during and outside of office hours, "strongly agree" that they developed perspective-taking skills at higher rates than reported by students who had little or no engagement with faculty

members. Faculty-student interaction has long been known to induce academic and cognitive growth in college students, with some evidence also suggesting that faculty-student interactions can correlate to attitudinal changes in students. Unfortunately, these interactions are infrequent (Cox et al. 2010). The substantial research linking faculty-student interactions with positive outcomes, along with PSRI findings linking such interactions to perspective-taking, suggests that institutions should encourage increased interaction between faculty and students.

Community service has long been lauded as a means to expose students to diverse others and diverse situations. Indeed, students who report participating in community service "strongly agree" that they developed perspective-taking skills at higher rates than reported by students who did not participate in service. In contrast, participating in Greek-letter organizations, an activity that tends to allow students to engage with homogeneous groups, had mixed influence on the three perspective-taking items the PSRI measured. Notably, however, the effect of participation in Greek-letter organizations was generally not deleterious, suggesting that engagement even in relatively homogeneous groups can be beneficial (see table 2).

Table 2. Percentage of Students Who "Strongly Agree" with Selected Statements, by Reported Activities

	All Students	Engage with faculty during office hours	Engage with faculty outside of office hours	Participate in community service	Participate in clubs/ organizations	Participate in Greek organizations
I have developed an increased ability to learn from diverse perspectives during the time I have been in college	52.6	55.8	57.8	57.2	55.5	55.4
I have developed an increased ability to gather and thoughtfully use evidence to support my own ideas during the time I have been in college	56.1	59.4	60.6	61.0	58.2	54.5
I have developed an increased ability during college to understand the evidence, analysis, and perspectives of others, even when I disagree with them	56.1	59.4	60.2	61.3	57.5	56.9

Summary

The overwhelming majority of respondents to the PSRI, both students and campus professionals, indicated strong agreement that perspective-taking should be an essential goal of a college education. This bodes well for projects like Core Commitments that focus on the development of personal and social responsibility during college and perspective-taking's role in those outcomes. Unfortunately, respondents showed less agreement about whether perspective-taking was an essential goal of higher education at the time of the survey. In sum, there was a disconnect between aspiration and reality.

There is good news, however, for those who wish to see perspective-taking infused across higher education. Students who engaged with faculty and diverse peers report improvement in perspective-taking skills during college, a finding that provides guidance for institutional leaders hoping to influence this outcome. Higher education administrators, faculty members, and student affairs professionals can design experiences that require students to engage with diverse others, including formal activities like service-learning projects or

informal opportunities like faculty-student interaction outside the classroom.

Manifold connections exist between higher education, structural diversity, and the civic good. Bowen (1977) and later Hurtado (2007) have argued convincingly that higher education is responsible for educating and training civic leaders who will advance social progress. To be effective future leaders who move beyond the name-calling and vitriol currently common in the public square, students must develop the capacity to engage with and learn from perspectives and experiences different from their own. Students, faculty, and administrators are calling for an infusion of perspective-taking across higher education. It's time for higher education to deliver.

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Robert D. Reason is an associate professor of education and senior research associate at the Center for the Study of Higher Education, Penn State University; and director of research and assessment for AAC&U's Core Commitments project.

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