

Minority Student Clubs: Segregation or Integration?

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MINORITY REPRESENTATION on US college campuses has increased significantly in recent years, and many schools have made it a priority to increase diversity on their campuses in order to prepare students for a culturally diverse US democratic society (Hurtado and Ruiz 3-4). To complement this increase, many schools have implemented minority student clubs to provide safe and comfortable environments where minority students can thrive academically and socially with peers from similar backgrounds. However, do these minority groups amplify students' tendency to interact only with those who are similar to themselves? Put another way, do these groups inhibit students from engaging in diverse relationships?

Many view such programs to be positive and integral to minority students' college experience; some, however, feel that

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these clubs are not productive for promoting cross-cultural interaction. While minority clubs have proven to be beneficial to minority students in some cases, particularly on campuses that are not very diverse, my research suggests that colleges would enrich the educational experience for all students by introducing multicultural clubs as well.

To frame my discussion, I will use an article from *College Student Journal* that distinguishes between two types of students: one who believes minority clubs are essential for helping minority students stay connected with their cultures, and another who believes these clubs isolate minorities and work against diverse interaction among students. To pursue the question of whether or not such groups segregate minorities from the rest of the student body and even discourage cultural awareness, I will use perspectives from minority students to show that these programs are especially helpful for first-year students. I will also use other student testimonials to show that when taken too far, minority groups can lead to self-segregation and defy what most universities claim to be their diversity goals. Findings from research will contribute to a better understanding of the role minority clubs play on college campuses and offer a complete answer to my question about the importance of minority programs.

Before I go further, I would like to differentiate among three kinds of diversity that Patricia Gurin and colleagues identify in their article "Diversity and Higher Education: Theory and Impact on Educational Outcomes." The first type is *structural diversity*, "the numerical representation of diverse [racial and ethnic] groups." The existence of structural diversity alone does not assure that students will develop valuable intergroup relationships. *Classroom diversity*, the second type, involves gaining "content knowledge" or a better understanding about

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diverse peers and their backgrounds by doing so in the classroom. The third type of diversity, *informal interactional diversity*, refers to "both the frequency and the quality of intergroup interaction as keys to meaningful diversity experiences during college." Students often encounter this kind of diversity in social settings outside the classroom (Gurin et al. 332–33). Informal interactional diversity is the focus of my research, since it is the concept that leads colleges to establish social events and organizations that allow all students to experience and appreciate the variety of cultures present in a student body.

In a study published in *College Student Journal*, three administrators at Pennsylvania State University explore how biracial students interact with others on a college campus. The authors conclude that views of minority clubs and related programs, which the authors call race-oriented student services, tend to fall into two groups: "Although some argue that these race-oriented student services are divisive and damage white-minority relations, others support these services as providing a safe place and meeting the needs of minority students to develop a sense of racial pride, community and importance" (Ingram et al. 298). I will start by examining the point of view of those who associate minority clubs with positive outcomes.

A study by Samuel Museus in the *Journal of College Student Development* finds that minority student programs help students to stay connected with their culture in college and help ease first-year minority students' transition into the college environment. The study also shows that ethnic student organizations help students adjust and find their place at universities that have a predominantly white student body (584). Museus concludes that universities should stress the importance of racial and ethnic groups and develop more opportunities for

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minority students to make connections with them. This way, students can find support from their minority peers as they work together to face academic and social challenges. Museus's findings suggest that minority student groups are essential for allowing these students to preserve and foster connections to their own cultures.

In another study, Wendell Hall and colleagues evaluate how minority and non-minority students differ in their inclinations to take part in diversity activities and to communicate with racially and ethnically diverse peers at a predominantly white university. These scholars conclude that "engagement [with diverse peers] is learned" (434). Students who engaged with diverse students before going to college were more likely to interact with diverse peers by the end of their sophomore year. Minority students were more predisposed than their white peers to interact with diverse peers during their freshman year (435). These findings indicate that minority student clubs can be helpful for first-year minority students who have not previously engaged with other minority students, especially if the university has a predominantly white student body.

Professors and scholars are not the only ones who strongly support minority clubs. For example, three students at Harvard College—Andrea Delgado, Denzel (no last name given), and Kimi Fafowora—give their perspective on student life and multicultural identity on campus to incoming students via *YouTube* ("Student Voices"). The students explain how minority programs on campus have helped them adjust to a new college environment as first-year students. As Delgado puts it:

I thought [cultural clubs were] something I maybe didn't need, but come November, I missed speaking Spanish and I missed having tacos,

and other things like that. That's the reason why I started attending meetings more regularly. Latinas Unidas has been a great intersection of my cultural background and my political views. (00:12:30-12:56)

The experiences these minority students shared support the scholarly evidence that minority clubs help incoming students transition into a new and often intimidating environment.

While the benefits of these clubs are quite evident, several problems can also arise from them. The most widely recognized is self-segregation. Self-segregating tendencies are not exclusive to minority students: college students in general tend to self-segregate as they enter an unfamiliar environment. As a study by Nathan Martin and colleagues finds, "Today, the student bodies of our leading colleges and universities are more diverse than ever. However, college students are increasingly self-segregating by race or ethnicity" (720). Several studies as well as interviews with students suggest that minority clubs exacerbate students' inclination to self-segregate. And as students become comfortable with their minority peers, they may no longer desire or feel the need to branch out of their comfort zone.

In another study, Julie Park, a professor at the University of Maryland, examines the relationship between participation in college student organizations and the development of interracial friendships. Park suggests that "if students spend the majority of time in such groups [Greek, ethnic, and religious student organizations], participation may affect student involvement in the broader diversity of the institution" (642). In other words, if minority students form all of their social and academic ties within their minority group, the desired cultural exchange among the student body could suffer.

So what can be done? In the Penn State study mentioned earlier, in which data were collected by an online survey,

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participants were asked to respond to an open-ended question about what they think universities should do to create a more inviting environment for biracial students (Ingram et al. 303). On one hand, multiple students responded with opinions opposing the formation of both biracial and multiracial clubs: "I feel instead of having biracial and multiracial clubs the colleges should have diversity clubs and just allow everyone to get together. All these 'separate' categorizing of clubs, isn't that just separation of groups?" "Having a ton of clubs that are for specific races is counter-productive. It creates segregation and lack of communication across cultures" (304-05).

On the other hand, students offered suggestions for the formation of multicultural activities: "Encourage more racial integration to show students races aren't so different from each other and to lessen stereotypes" (305). "Hold cultural events that allow students of different races to express/share their heritage" (306). Parrese Ingram and colleagues conclude that while biracial and multiracial student organizations are helpful in establishing an inviting college environment for minority students,

creating a truly inclusive environment... requires additional efforts: these include multicultural awareness training for faculty, staff, and students, and incorporation of multicultural issues into the curriculum. In addition to the creation of biracial/multiracial clubs and organization, the students in this study want to increase awareness of the mixed heritage population among others on college campuses. (308)

The two very different opinions reported in this study not only point to the challenges minority student programs can create but also suggest ways to resolve these challenges. Now that evidence from both research studies and student perspectives confirms that these clubs, while beneficial to minority students'

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For tips on clarifying where you have been and where you are going, see p. 144.

experiences, can inhibit cultural immersion, I will continue with my original argument that the entire student body would benefit if campuses also implemented multicultural advocacy clubs, rather than just selective minority clubs. Gurin and colleagues, the researchers who identify the three types of diversity in higher education, contend that even with the presence of diverse racial and ethnic groups and regular communication among students formally and informally, a greater push from educators is needed:

In order to foster citizenship for a diverse democracy, educators must intentionally structure opportunities for students to leave the comfort of their homogenous peer group and build relationships across racially/ethnically diverse student communities on campus. (363)

This suggestion implies that participation from students and faculty is needed to foster cultural immersion in higher education.

Another way to improve cross-cultural exchange is by developing a diverse curriculum. An article on multiculturalism in higher education by Alma Clayton-Pedersen and Caryn McTighe Musil in the *Encyclopedia of Education* review the ways in which universities have incorporated diversity studies into their core curriculum over the last several decades. The authors found that the numbers of courses that seek to prepare students for a democratic society rich in diversity have increased (1711, 1714). However, they recommend that institutions need to take a more holistic approach to their academic curricula in order to pursue higher education programs that prepare students to face "complex and demanding questions" and to "use their new knowledge and civic, intercultural capacities to address real-world problems" (1714). My research suggests

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that a more holistic approach to the importance of diversity studies in the college curriculum, as well as multicultural advocacy clubs, are necessary in order to prepare all students, not just minority students, for the diverse world and society ahead of them.

Thus, even though minority student clubs can lead to self-segregation among students and result in less cross-cultural interaction, their benefits to minority students suggest that a balance needs to be found between providing support for minorities and avoiding segregation of these groups from the rest of the student body. Besides sponsoring minority student programs, colleges and universities can implement multicultural events and activities for all students to participate in, especially during the freshman year. An initiative like this would enhance the diverse interactions that occur on campuses, promote cultural immersion, and garner support for minority student clubs.

Beyond the reach of this evaluation, further research should be conducted, specifically on the types of cultural events that are most effective in promoting cultural awareness and meaningful diverse interactions among the student body. By examining different multicultural organizations from both public and private institutions, and comparing student experiences and participation in those programs, researchers can suggest an ideal multicultural program to provide an optimal student experience.

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Joining the Conversation

1. What larger conversation is Gabriela Moro responding to in this essay?
2. What are some of the connecting words, phrases, and sentences Moro uses to transition from one paragraph to another? (See pp. 111–12 for a list of commonly used transitions.)
3. Notice how many direct quotations Moro includes. Why do you think she includes so many? What do the quotations contribute that a summary or paraphrase would not?
4. Writer danah boyd (pp. 387–96) criticizes the many ways in which Americans are now self-segregating. How might she respond to Moro's description of Notre Dame's campus and to Moro's proposal to support minority clubs and multiculturalism?
5. Develop an argument of your own that responds to Moro's proposal, agreeing, disagreeing, or both. However you choose to argue, be sure to consider other positions in addition to your own, including other authors in this chapter.