



Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) – Diverse Learning Environments Survey 2021 Results for UW-Whitewater

Executive Summary

Introduction

This report provides a brief overview of the results of the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey, in which UW-Whitewater participated in Spring 2021. This represents the second time that UW-Whitewater participated in this survey. In 2018, the DLE survey was sent to degree-seeking undergraduates with sophomore and junior status on the main UW-Whitewater campus. In 2021, the DLE survey was administered to all degree-seeking undergraduates at both the Main and Rock County campuses, as part of a University of Wisconsin System Administration initiative, in which the DLE survey was used as a campus climate survey.¹ As in 2018, the 2021 results of the survey provide helpful insights into how students perceive UW-Whitewater (and their place at the university) in terms of the educational and social climate, as well as on issues related to bias, discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual abuse/assault.

Methods of Analysis

The DLE survey contains fifty-five (55) questions; twenty-five (25) of these questions ask students to provide either demographic or academic information about themselves, which can be used to contextualize responses and/or better understand the composition of the respondent population. The remaining thirty (30) questions (many of which are multi-fold and are associated with follow-up sub-questions) ask students to share their perceptions of the social and educational climate at UW-Whitewater and to describe their experiences with discrimination and sexual harassment, abuse and assault on campus. These questions are grouped into fifteen (15) ‘factor’ categories.² In addition, UW-Whitewater students were asked to participate in two additional survey modules: the first posed three (3) additional questions on classroom climate³ and the second asked six (6) questions regarding intergroup relations. Students were also asked to comment on their institution’s response to COVID-19.

The survey was administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA on behalf of UW-Whitewater. HERI has designed this survey to be administered to second- and third-year students at both two-

¹ Note that for the 2021 administration of the survey, the names of students that completed the survey were placed in raffle for \$25 Amazon gift cards (funded by UWSA); the survey was administered during a period of COVID restrictions on campus.

² These categories include: Sense of Belonging, General Interpersonal Validation, Academic Validation in the Classroom, Institutional Commitment to Diversity, Critical Consciousness and Action, Harassment, Discrimination and Bias, Conversations Across Difference, Curriculum of Inclusion, Co-Curricular Diversity Activities (Campus-facilitated), Habits of Mind, Pluralistic Orientation, Civic Engagement, Social Agency, and Academic Self-Concept.

³ This module focused on the student experience in the classroom and their involvement in educational activities as well as respondent’s perceptions regarding the pedagogical practices of instructors.

and four-year institutions. The University of Wisconsin System Administration (UWSA) determined that the HERI DLE survey would be used as a systemwide campus climate survey during this Spring 2021 administration.⁴ At UW-Whitewater, the survey population consisted of all undergraduate degree-seeking students on both campuses as of the 10th day of classes in 2020 Spring term.⁵ Initial invitations were sent on 1 March 2021. The survey was open until 1 April 2021, during which time multiple reminder emails were sent to the survey population. Overall, 1,408 students from the survey population completed the survey, resulting in a 16.1% response rate. The majority of respondents were full-time students who had started at UW-Whitewater as a first-time undergraduate student.⁶ That said, a disproportionate number of survey respondents identified themselves as women, and students who identify themselves as persons of color⁷ are slightly overrepresented in the respondent population.⁸ These demographic factors should be considered when interpreting the survey results.

Findings

Generally speaking, UW-Whitewater respondents reported their perceptions of campus climate as being on par with respondents at other four-year public institutions⁹ participating in the 2021 survey. However, there were several notable exceptions to this observation, in terms of both UW-Whitewater students in comparison with other students surveyed in 2021, as well as UW-Whitewater responses in 2021 in comparison with responses to this same survey in 2018.

In the fifteen (15) grouped categories of questions, UW-Whitewater students responded more positively to questions in five (5) categories than their counterparts, to a statistically significant degree. Particularly noteworthy, 51.3 % of UW-Whitewater students responded positively to questions measuring the extent to which the number of courses taken by students includes materials and pedagogy addressing diversity; and 50.8% of UW-Whitewater students responded positively to questions measuring student's perception of the campus' commitment to diversity.¹⁰ However, it should be noted that these aggregated percentages of positive responses were down slightly in comparison to UW-Whitewater responses to the same questions in 2018.

This pattern is reflected in many of the responses to individual questions in the survey. For example, on several questions measuring the students' sense of belonging on campus, UW-Whitewater students respond more positively to these questions than the comparison groups, but the percentage of positive responses is smaller than in 2018. In addition, respondents indicate that UW-Whitewater promotes appreciation of cultures of difference¹¹ and have a campus administration that speaks about the value of diversity. However, while the

⁴ Except UW-Madison, which conducted their own campus climate survey.

⁵ The survey population included 8,721 undergraduate students.

⁶ This included 1,337 full-time respondents from UW-Whitewater. The distribution of respondents among undergraduate student classifications (freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors) was relatively proportionate.

⁷ Defined in this survey as Native American/Alaska Native, Asian, Black, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latinx or Middle Eastern. The survey also contained racial/ethnic categories of White and Other.

⁸ 65.6% of full-time respondents identified themselves as women (in comparison, only 48.5% of the Fall 2020 undergraduate population at UW-Whitewater identified themselves as women); conversely, 80.3% of full-time respondents identified their racial/ethnic identity as 'White' (in comparison, 81.7% of the Fall 2020 undergraduate population at UW-Whitewater identified themselves as 'White/Caucasian').

⁹ In order to determine whether the responses of UW-Whitewater students varied to a statistically significant degree from their peers, HERI compared and tested UW-Whitewater responses against responses submitted by other public 4-year colleges of medium/high selectivity (comparison group 1, 8118 respondents) as well as all other public 4-year colleges (comparison group 2, 15, 939 respondents) who participated in the Spring 2021 administration of the DLE. This population includes other UW system schools.

¹⁰ In comparison to 50.5% and 50.0% of respondents from other four-year public institutions, respectively. The difference in the positive response rates for both these questions achieved a high-level of statistical ($p < .001$) and substantive significance, according to the HERI analysis.

¹¹ To a statistically significant degree.

percentage of respondents that indicate that UW-Whitewater helps to promote racial understanding is higher than in 2018 at 73.8%, this is lower to a statistically significant degree from the comparison population. Similarly, the number of respondents who indicate that UW-Whitewater has a lot of racial tension is down to 16.3% (from 22.7% in 2018) but this percentage is still higher than the comparison population in 2021 to a statistically significant degree. Moreover, respondent's self-perceptions regarding their own tolerance to others and ability to see the world from someone else's perspective has declined since 2018.

Responses to many sections of the survey indicate desirable shifts in campus climate at UW-Whitewater. For example, respondents in 2021 indicate that faculty and staff mentoring of students remains strong at UW-Whitewater,¹² and access to education has increased on campus, especially in terms of students' ability to enroll in the classes that they need to graduate on time.¹³ UW-Whitewater respondents indicate higher levels of satisfaction with the racial/ethnic diversity of the faculty and the student body at UW-Whitewater than those respondents at the comparison institutions, as well as a higher level of satisfaction with the overall sense of community among students (at 60.9%).¹⁴ In addition, UW-Whitewater respondents indicated that the number of professors that have discussions about privilege, power and oppression is higher than in 2018 at 64.9 % (up from 61.7%). On issues of social justice, 86.1% of UW-Whitewater respondents agreed or strongly agreed that students at UW-Whitewater are willing to talk about equity, injustice and group differences,¹⁵ and fewer respondents indicate that they have been in situations where they were the only person in their racial/ethnic group on campus, when compared to respondents from the comparison institutions.¹⁶

In other sections of the survey, results were mixed. In terms of personal and financial security, for example, a slightly larger number of respondents reported feeling unsafe on campus, up to 3 percentage points from 2018 and to a statistically significant higher degree than respondents at peer institutions. At the same time, the percentage of UW-Whitewater respondents who report that it will take them longer to graduate than planned has decreased significantly, down to 32.4% in 2021 from 48.0% in 2018. Similarly, on the issue of discrimination, UW-Whitewater respondents report higher frequency of experiencing most forms of bias/harassment/discrimination queried in the survey, in comparison to respondents at similar institutions, most to a statistically significant degree.¹⁷ However, respondent satisfaction with the administration's response to these incidents is significantly higher than the comparison group in 2021 at 51.1%.

With regard to student interactions and advocacy, UW-Whitewater respondents report fewer interactions with international students and students with a different sexual orientation than their own. The reported percentages are lower than both the comparison population in 2021, and the UW-Whitewater respondent population in 2018. Of note, UW-Whitewater respondents indicated frequency of interaction with students with a disability is down to 28.9% in 2021. While this is still higher than the comparison population,¹⁸ it is quite a bit lower than the 40.4% reported in 2018. Similarly, a lower percentage of UW-Whitewater respondents appear to recognize their own bias, critically evaluate their own privilege, or discuss issues related to sexism, gender differences or gender equality than the comparison population in 2021. Moreover, while the percentage of UW-

¹² To a statistically significant degree.

¹³ Specifically, the percentage of respondents reporting that they unable to enroll in classes because class enrollment was full was down from 25.8% in 2018 to 14.7% in 2021.

¹⁴ However, this is down from 68.6% in 2018.

¹⁵ A slightly larger percentage than the comparison population, to a statistically significant degree.

¹⁶ 13.5% at UW-Whitewater in comparison to 17.4% at the comparison institutions.

¹⁷ UW-Whitewater respondents also report higher frequencies of sexual harassment/abuse/assault than respondents at similar institutions, often to a statistically significant degree.

¹⁸ To a statistically significant degree.

Whitewater respondents who report frequently challenging others on discrimination is up to 35.0% in 2021 (from 32.5% in 2018), this percentage still lags behind the comparison group to a statistically significant degree.

It is notable that in some sections of the DLE survey, UW-Whitewater respondents were consistent between 2018 and 2021. This is particularly evident in student study habits. Students at UW-Whitewater have consistently reported low use of campus academic support services – in particular, Financial Aid advising. Reported use of Tutoring Services has dropped from 53.4% in 2018 to 38.0% in 2021. That said, UW-Whitewater respondents also consistently report more frequent use of the Disability Resource Center, Student Health Services and Academic Advising than respondents at the comparison institutions. UW-Whitewater respondents also continue to indicate a slightly better than average frequency of attending professor’s office hours.¹⁹ Moreover, UW-Whitewater respondents continue to report a higher number of courses that consist mainly of lecture and a higher number of courses that involve group work, while simultaneously reporting a lower number of courses that include research papers, as well as a lower number of courses that require reflective writing or journaling.

In many cases, shifts in the percentages of responses to questions that should theoretically be correlated appear to have flipped but remained in tandem between 2018 and 2021. For example, the percentage of UW-Whitewater respondents who indicated that they had major concerns about their ability to finance their college education was up slightly from 2018 at 12.3% of respondents, while the percentage of respondents who indicate that they might have to choose between financially supporting their family and going to college was down from 2018 at 18.4%.²⁰ Another example relates to respondent’s perceptions of instructor engagement. Across the board, UW-Whitewater respondents report lower levels of positive instructor engagement in promoting diversity since 2018; however, the overall levels of positive instructor engagement on diversity issues is often higher than the comparison group in 2021.

It is important to note some marked areas of concern. For example, percentage of UW-Whitewater respondents who indicate that they are not comfortable contributing to class discussions has increased from 18.9% in 2018 to 25.6% in 2021. While the higher number appears to be in line with the experience of respondents at comparison institutions, this statistic represents a worrying trend, possibly related to the impact of social isolation and remote learning during the COVID pandemic. In addition, number of UW-Whitewater respondents who indicate they studied or prepared for class often or very often was only 33.5% (in comparison with 40.8% of respondents in the comparison population).

More significantly, the Intergroup Relations module (administered for the first time in 2021) reveals some discrepancies between UW-Whitewater respondents and those at comparison institutions. A greater percentage of UW-Whitewater respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement “Most people of color are no longer discriminated against in this country,”²¹ and a smaller percentage of UW-Whitewater respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement “Inequalities in the education system limit the success of people of color” than the respondents at comparison institutions.²² These results are compounded by the fact that UW-Whitewater respondents were less likely to indicate that they had made efforts to educate themselves about their own or other identity groups while at UW-Whitewater. Levels of positive engagement with others of a different racial/ethnic group than their own was also consistently lower than the comparison population.

¹⁹ That said, almost 60% of respondents in 2021 indicate that they never participate in study groups – up from 37.3% in 2018.

²⁰ This was also lower to a statistically significant degree than the comparison population.

²¹ 28.8% at UW-Whitewater compared to 24.3% at comparison institutions.

²² 67.7% at UW-Whitewater compared to 70.3% at comparison institutions.

Conclusion

The results of the 2021 administration of HERI DLE survey suggest that student perceptions regarding the campus climate at UW-Whitewater continue to evolve. The larger number of respondents, higher participation rate, and more diverse survey pool in 2021 have arguably provided a more accurate picture of campus climate at UW-Whitewater than was available in 2018.²³ That said, the inclusion of so many first-year students in the survey – students with only a pandemic-restricted experience of campus climate at UW-Whitewater – many have skewed results in ways that are difficult to identify and correct.

Overall, the results of the survey appear to indicate that UW-Whitewater students generally perceive campus climate in a way that is on par with their counterparts at other four-year public institutions participating in the survey. Response rates to particular questions in the survey are helpful in identifying areas in which UW-Whitewater students are having particularly positive experiences on campus as well as areas in which UW-Whitewater may need to do more in order to provide students with a safe and inclusive campus experience.

Conclusions drawn from this survey must take into account both the response rate and the profile of the respondents. While the response rate for the 2021 administration of the DLE survey was significantly higher than in 2018 and in line with response rates at other UW system schools administering the survey this spring, the survey only represents the perspectives of one-sixth of the undergraduate population. The disproportionate number of women respondents to the survey²⁴ is not surprising in a voluntary survey. However, it is especially notable at UW-Whitewater, where women consistently constitute just less than half of degree-seeking undergraduates.

In addition, while respondents who identified with underrepresented minority groups appear to be adequately represented at just under 20% of the respondent population when examined in the aggregate, important discrepancies appear when the data on individual racial and ethnic identities is examined. In particular, Black/African American respondents constitute 2.8% of all survey respondents as opposed to 4.0% of the UW-Whitewater undergraduate population; similarly, Hispanic/Latinx respondents constitute 3.4% of all survey respondents, while 8.3% of the UW-Whitewater undergraduate population identify in this racial/ethnic group.²⁵ In other words, two of the largest underrepresented minority groups at UW-Whitewater are not adequately represented among the respondent population. Lower levels of participation among these segments of our student population must be considered given the nature of the survey, particularly its focus on bias and discrimination.

²³ Incentives (in the form of a random drawing for Amazon gift cards) are likely to have impacted the response rate to the 2021 survey.

²⁴ 64.8% in 2018 and 65.5% in 2021.

²⁵ Listed percentages are of the undergraduate population of the Fall 2020 UW-Whitewater population census.