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Perceptions of diversity among URI undergraduate students: An ethnographic study

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Perceptions of diversity among undergraduate students at URI

Emily Pitek, Anthropology and Psychology

Introduction

There is little research available regarding URI undergraduate student's experiences and perceptions of cultural and racial diversity on campus. This information is particularly important for two main reasons: 1) experiences of discrimination have been positively associated with negative psychological outcomes (Pieterse & Carter, 2010); and, 2) perceptions of racial/cultural climate on college campuses may be linked to persistence and degree completion (Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008). The present study aims to illustrate how students, in their own words, understand, experience, and describe diversity in their daily lives across campus. Using ethnographic methods, data was gathered from a total of 64 participants over the course of the Spring 2017 semester. The following findings aim to contribute to the growing literature about how students perceive and experience diversity on the college campus.

Methods

- Data was collected from February to April 2017 using the methods of participant-observation, visual documentation, semi-structured interviews, and on-line surveys. For the purposes of this poster, only the on-line survey results are presented; a complete dissemination of further results and conclusions will be presented in a full-length report.
- The on-line survey included 10 multiple-choice and short answer style questions. In order to participate in the survey, respondents had to be an undergraduate student at URI and at least 18 years of age. The survey was completely voluntary, and all respondents will remain anonymous.
- In order to recruit participants, I sent the survey via email to several student clubs and organizations, posted the link on Sakai and Facebook, and discussed my project during World Anthropology Day.

Participant Demographics

In total, 64 participants completed the survey.

Year in college		
	Frequency	Percent
Freshman	13	20.3
Sophomore	10	15.6
Junior	17	26.6
Senior	24	37.5
Total	64	100.0

Table 1: Participant year in college

Current type of housing		
	Frequency	Percent
On-Campus Housing	24	37.5
Greek Housing	3	4.7
Off-Campus Housing	34	53.1
Other	3	4.7
Total	64	100.0

Table 2: Participant housing

Description of gender		
	Frequency	Percent
Female	44	68.8
Male	19	29.7
Other	1	1.6
Total	64	100.0

Table 3: Participant gender

Race/ethnicity as categorized by the URI enrollment report		
id	Frequency	Percent
White, non-Hispanic	35	54.7
Black, non-Hispanic	14	21.9
Hispanic	8	12.5
Asian American/Pacific Islander	1	1.6
I do not identify with any of these options	6	9.4
Total	64	100.0

Table 4: Participant race/ethnicity

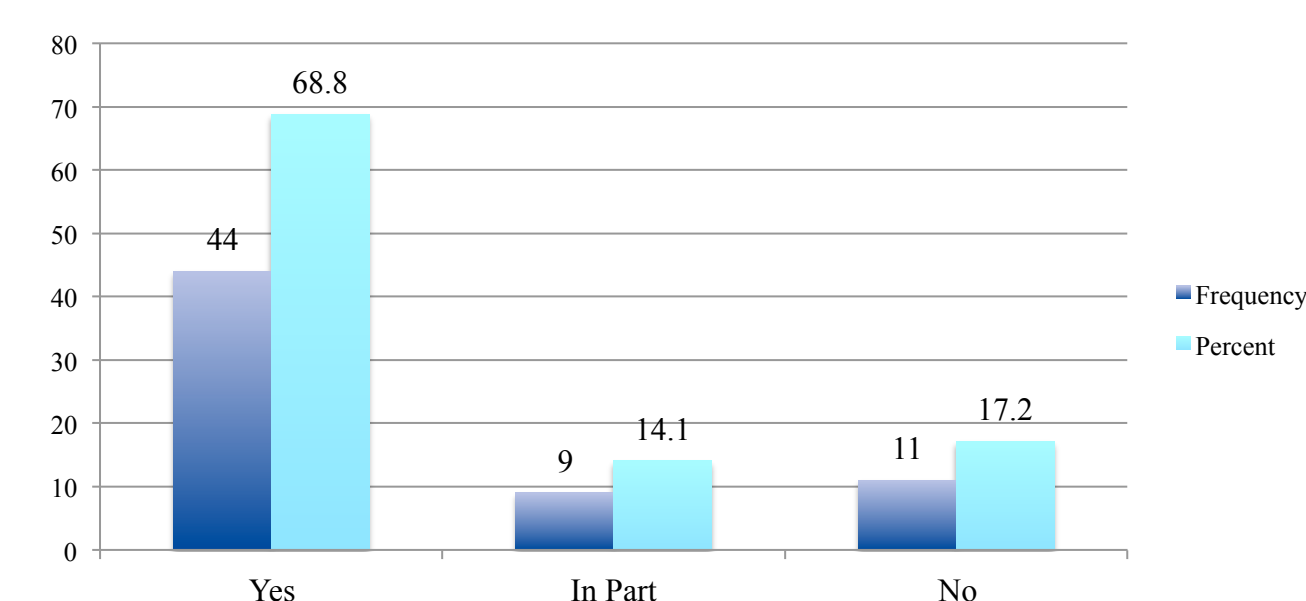
Compared to other members of your community, how do you see yourself economically		
	Frequency	Percent
Significantly below average	2	3.1
Below average	15	23.4
Average	31	48.4
Above average	15	23.4
Well above average	1	1.6
Total	64	100.0

Table 5: Participant socio-economic status

Results

Section 1: Representation

Do you feel that your cultural heritage is represented at URI?



Race/ethnicity * Do you feel that your cultural heritage is represented at URI Crosstabulation

Race/ethnicity as categorized by the URI enrollment report	Do you feel that your cultural heritage is represented at URI		
	yes	in part	no
White, non-Hispanic	30	1	4
Black, non-Hispanic	9	1	4
Hispanic	1	5	2
Asian American/Pacific Islander	0	1	0
I do not identify with any of these options	4	1	1
Total	44	9	11

Table 5: Perceived cultural representation at URI crosstabulation with race/ethnicity

Section 2: Perceptions

Is URI a diverse community?

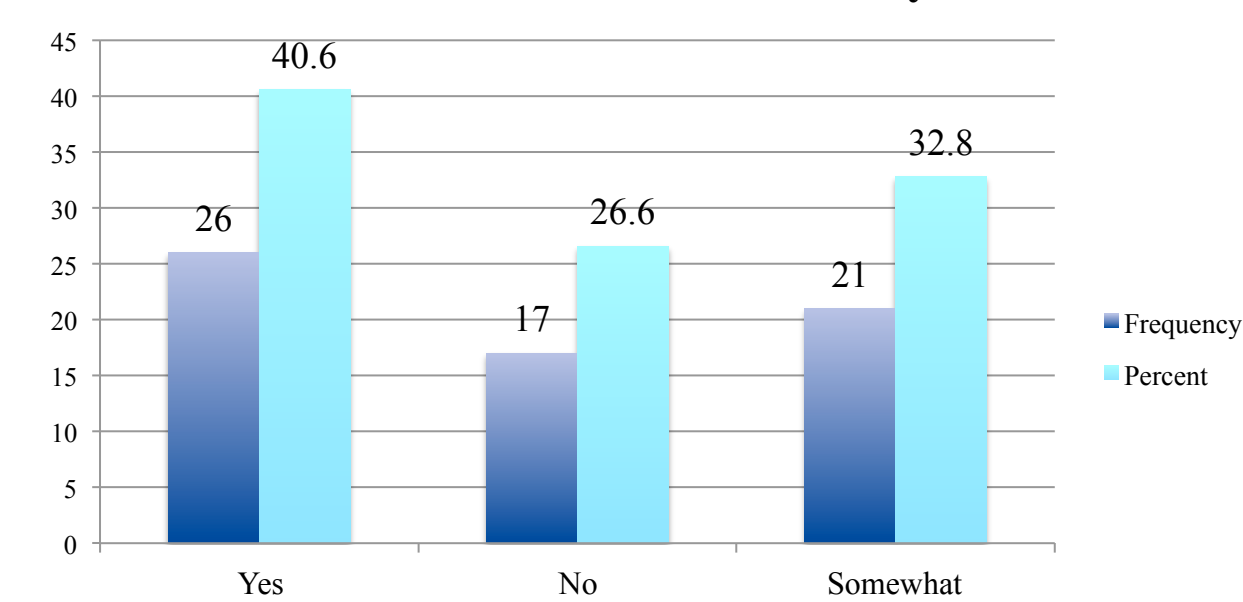


Figure 2: Participant's perceptions of URI diversity

Do you believe racism exists at URI

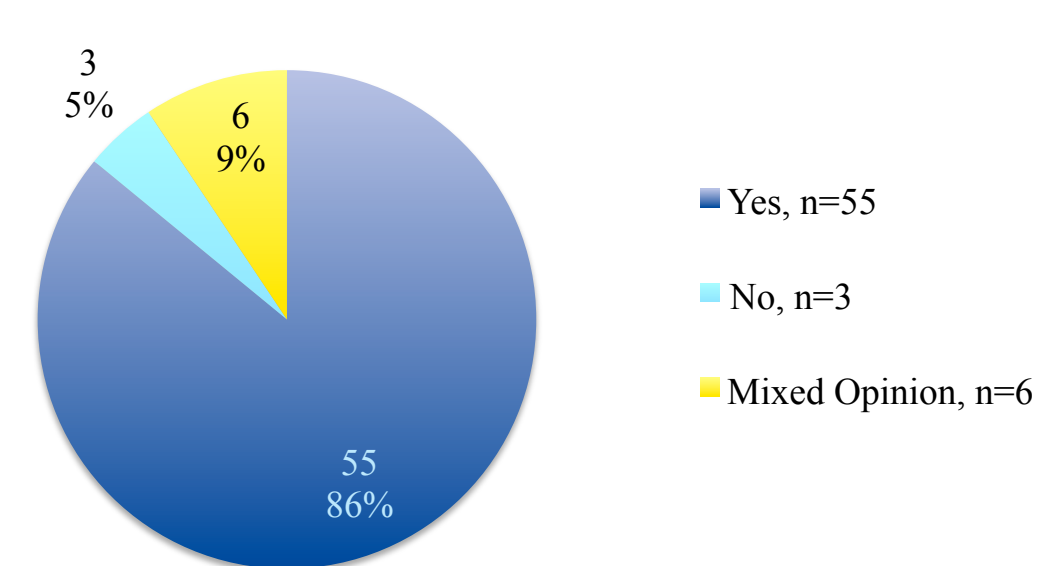


Figure 3: Perceived racism at URI

Race/ethnicity * Do you believe racism exists at URI Crosstabulation

Race/ethnicity as categorized by the URI enrollment report	Do you believe racism exists at URI		
	Yes	No	Mixed opinion
White, non-Hispanic	32	2	1
Black, non-Hispanic	11	1	2
Hispanic	5	0	3
Asian American/Pacific Islander	1	0	0
I do not identify with any of these options	6	0	0
Total	55	3	6

Table 6: Perceived racism at URI crosstabulation with race/ethnicity

Section 3: Experiences

Have you experienced racism at URI

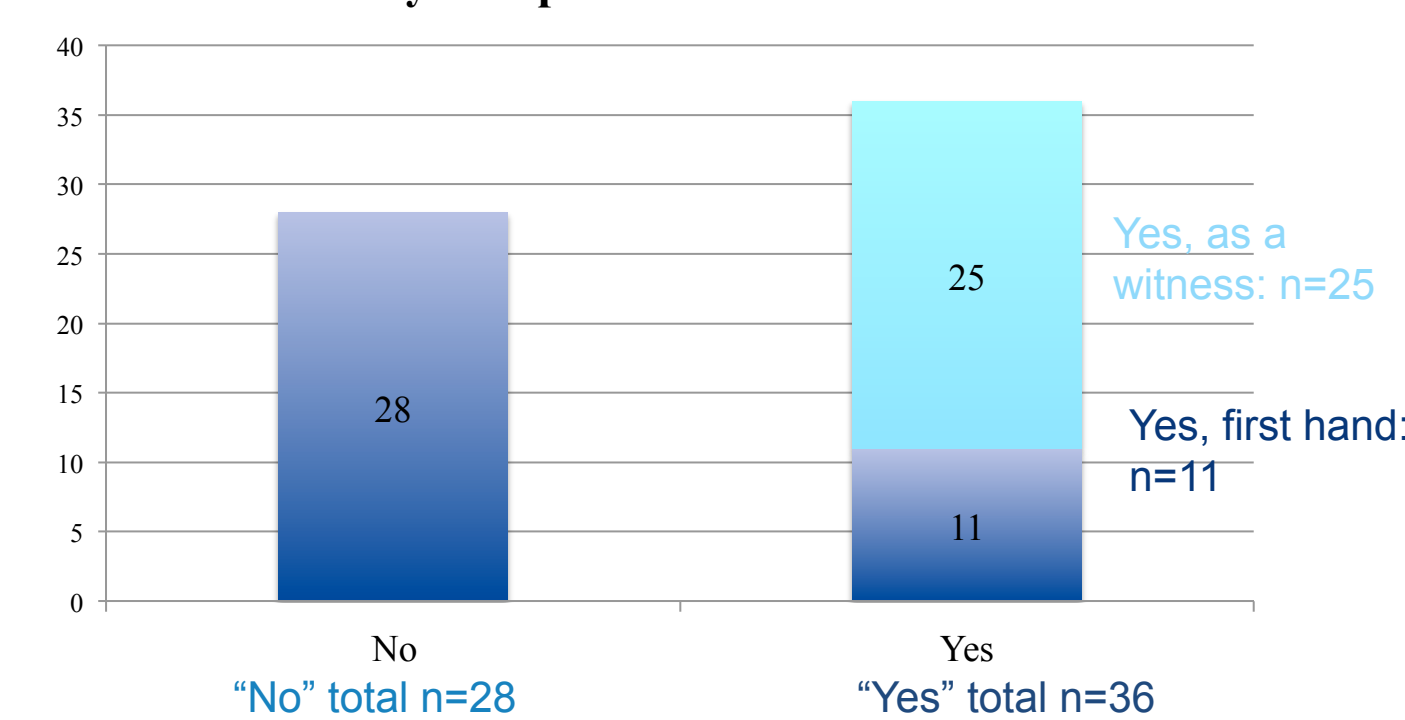


Figure 4: Experiences of racism at URI

Race/ethnicity * Have you experienced racism at URI Crosstabulation

Race/ethnicity as categorized by the URI enrollment report	Have you experienced racism at URI		
	No	Yes, as a witness	Yes, first hand
White, non-Hispanic	19	15	1
Black, non-Hispanic	5	4	5
Hispanic	3	3	2
Asian American/Pacific Islander	0	0	1
I do not identify with any of these options	1	3	2
Total	28	25	11

Table 7: Experiences of racism at URI crosstabulation with race/ethnicity

Locations Where Students Have Experienced or Witnessed Racism at URI

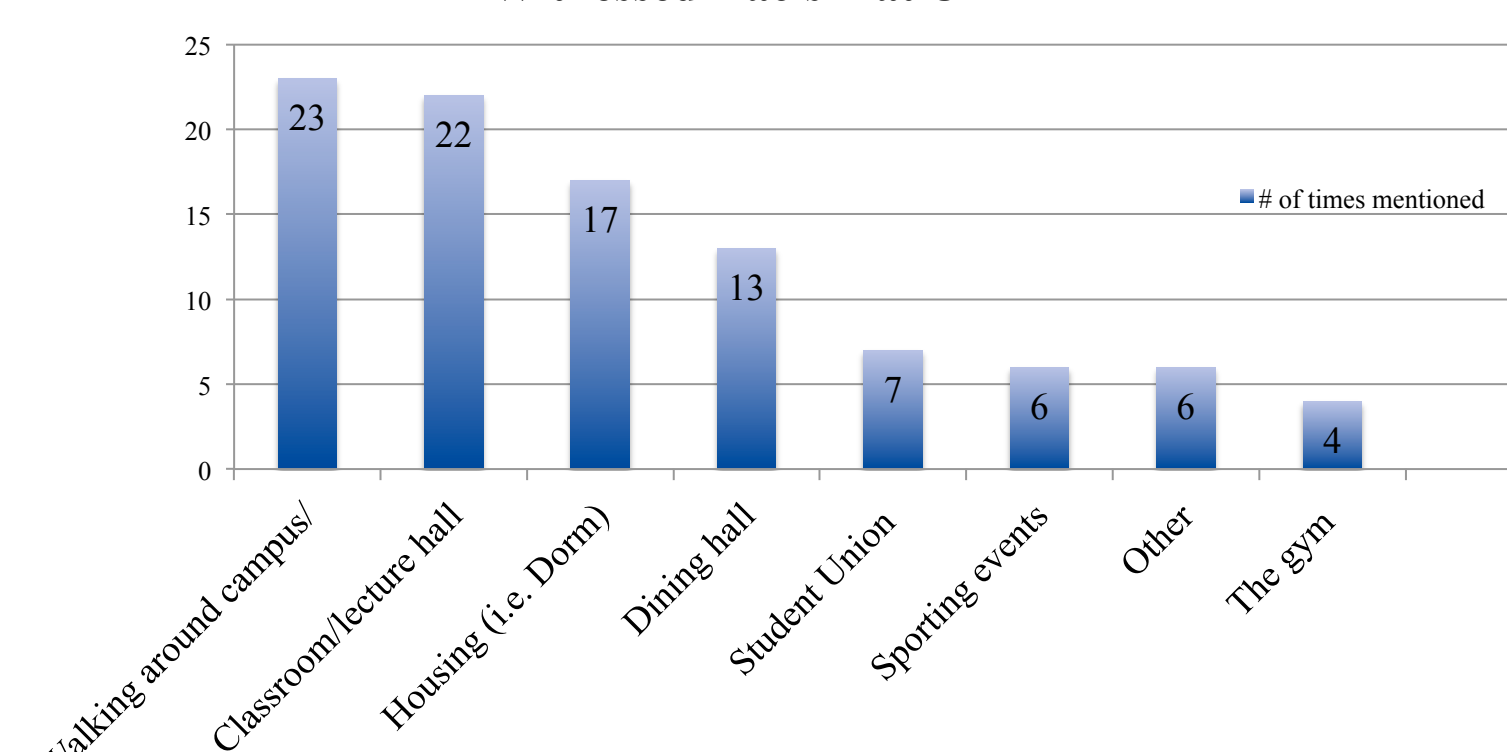


Figure 5: Locations of racism

Section 4: Selected Quotes

Some quotes have been altered to improve clarity or grammar

- "People here tend to judge you more on what's inside your head versus the color of your skin"
- "I feel judged by how I look or how I talk and not by my true character"
- "How many faculty of color are there? Why do white students look at me and not say hello, yet they say hello to other white people?"
- "The day after Trump was elected, I was walking to the library and two white male students behind me said, 'this is awesome; I can't wait for them to be our slaves again'"
- "Racism exists everywhere"
- "People assume that because you're a person of color, the only way you're here at URI is because of Talent Development"
- "Where there are white people, there is racism"
- "If I were white, I wouldn't be treated like a foreigner; I wouldn't be constantly questioned about my nationality, culture, even religion. I feel like I'd blend in more and not feel different from everyone else"

Discussion

- Students perceive diversity and racism differently from how they experience it. 86% of participants believe racism exists at URI (Figure 3), yet 56% of students have experienced racism (Figure 4). Additionally, the majority (68.8%) of respondents feel that their cultural heritage is represented at URI (Figure 1), but less than half (40.6) believe URI is a diverse community (Figure 2). It is important to note that each race/ethnicity category is not equally represented in the present study (Table 4).
- Location matters: 1. "Walking around campus" (n=23); 2. "the classroom" (n=22) is where students report to have experienced or witnessed racism most frequently (Figure 5). Because discrimination has been related to negative psychological and educational outcomes (Pieterse & Carter, 2010; Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Gurin, Matlock, Wade-Golden, & Gurin, 2004), it is paramount that the university community acknowledge these findings.
- What should we do as a URI community? Although URI has made great efforts to promote diversity, there is always room for improvement. Suggestions from students included holding "more events to celebrate diversity other than diversity week", and promoting a "more racially diverse faculty and staff". Students want to stop talking diversity and have more opportunities to do diversity, findings that support the conclusions of Gurin, Matlock, Wade-Golden, and Gurin, (2004). Hopefully, the results of this short study provide better insight into how students are perceiving and experiencing diversity at URI so that we can grow together as a community.
- Future research should explore more specific changes and actions that the URI community can take to "create an inclusive and supportive environment where each individual can thrive", which is the mission of the URI's office of Community, Equity, and Diversity. Additionally, a longitudinal study would be useful when examining how student's experiences and perceptions change over time, as well as to provide insight on how well the university is addressing these issues.

"Having a better understanding of climate and the personal experiences of students will help the higher education community to better articulate the goals of institutional diversity, provide a better understanding of the underlying issues, and improve our ability to provide effective course content, pedagogy and co-curricular programs that enhance the educational potential of diversity. Our students and our society expect that of higher education as we prepare students for the future"

(Gurin, Matlock, Wade-Golden, & Gurin, 2004)

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