

2018 Report on U-WSLO4

During the 2017-2018 academic year, the University-Wide Student Learning Outcome #4 was assessed. U-WSLO4 states: "Negotiate ethical relationships with people who have different backgrounds, life experiences, cultures, beliefs, and values."

Method.

Because no existing measure (LASC/WI nor program learning outcomes) specifically addresses U-WSLO4, an alternative assessment process was developed. Focus group interviews were chosen because they were both direct and open ended. Open ended assessments seemed advisable to gauge the full range of possible responses, since no previous assessment of this SLO had taken place. Similarly, since a new assessment needed to be created, it made sense to tailor it as much as possible directly to the SLO being assessed.

Existing data sources that could have addressed this SLO could include disciplinary actions from Office of Housing and Residential Life, Office of Student Conduct and Resolution, etc. Two problems with this approach would be:

1. We would be measuring the opposite of the SLO (instances of failure to negotiate an ethical relationship ...)
2. The sensitive nature of these complaints (a disagreement between people of different cultures, beliefs, etc.) might make good data collection very difficult.

Sample.

The sample consisted of seven groups of about 10 students each. This sample represents about 1% of the campus population. Two considerations in choosing the sample were convenience and broader campus involvement, so Resident Assistants, Student Senator, and CMU student workers were some of the groups targeted. Some groups were disproportionately (80%+) female, other groups were more evenly split by gender. The focus groups that I worked with appeared more diverse than typical groups of MSUM students that I have had experience with, for example, there appeared to be a high percent of LGBTQ (40%+) and/or minority (40%+) in some groups, which could lead to a potential bias to over/under estimate the true campus climate.

Problems with data quality/sources of bias.

Even when males were present, they tended not to speak much or even at all in some groups (my personal speculation is that males, particularly straight white males, often feel uncomfortable participating in diversity discussions).

Another potential source of bias occurred on the first night, where interviewers were not clear that we were interested in honest answers rather than self-confirmation that everything at MSUM is fine. For the last 4 groups we specifically stated that we wanted to hear the truth (i.e. if they felt the answer to "in what ways did MSUM classes prepare you to negotiate ethical relationships" was "They didn't" then please say so.)

Results:

Question 1, Experience prior to MSUM: Approximately half of the students reported coming from a homogenous (90%+ of one group) community with less diversity than MSUM, although a few students from the Twin Cities and other large metropolitan areas reported less diversity at MSUM than their hometown. Students tended to report that issues such as socioeconomic status, interests, morals/religion and language were bigger wedge issues between groups than race, although sometimes these were mentioned as overlapping with race. In some cases, the local schools seemed to exacerbate these divisions by pull-out programs for English Language Learners. Otherwise, examples of successful and unsuccessful relationships (“racist idiots”) were cited.

Question 2, Coursework at MSUM: With regards to their coursework at MSUM, students primarily reported two positive themes. First, it was often the diversity of the class, as opposed to the class content/design itself, which led to discussions of diversity within a given class. Second, there were a number of classes, departments and/or programs that were specifically mentioned as having rich discussions of diversity, chief among these were anthropology, psychology, education, communication, and business. In addition, history, political science, criminal justice, sociology, photography, first year experience, world music, philosophy, film, counseling and student affairs, social work, and foundations of university success all mentioned at least once. Conversely, other majors/departments were mentioned such as mathematics and English which were stated not to deal with diversity much at all and some students felt that you had to seek it out if you wanted a class in diversity. Finally, there was a concern within a given class that a language barrier could sometimes make partnering with diverse students on class projects difficult and therefore some students avoided diverse partnering unless the faculty arranged groups that forced these interactions.

Question 3, Co-curricular Experiences at MSUM: In contrast to coursework at MSUM, co-curricular experiences were overwhelming perceived as powerful opportunities to experience diverse relationships. From work on campus (such as at Sudexo, where Caucasian students are often the minority because of work rules for international students), to Greek Life, to student organizations, to support centers (Rainbow Dragon Center), to national organizations and celebrations (Nepali Night), to just living in the residence halls with other people for the first time, the whole MSUM experience was perceived as contributing to meaningful diverse relationships on campus. While this discussion was very positive, there were a few opportunities for improvement, for instance, groups are not themselves diverse in their membership – i.e. many groups self-segregate by identity. It was felt by some that MSUM should do more to push people outside of their comfort zone. Finally, one student pointed out that many diversity experiences tend towards the celebration/appreciation side as opposed to relationship/learning end of the spectrum, and it was felt that perhaps there is a better way to capitalize on these experiences, rather than just celebrations?

Question 4, Examples of specific effective diverse relationships on campus: Many students chose to incorporate the examples into the previous (curricular and co-curricular) questions. While several specific examples were given, this discussion did not generate broad themes like the previous questions did. One interesting comment was that one group felt this question was difficult because they don’t think about diversity in that way. It is just a part of life and they don’t think specifically in terms of their relationship with a “diverse” person ... just their relationships with “people.” This theme resurfaced in question 5, as again, some students reported a post-racial viewpoint, but faculty keep trying to bring up

differences and force the issue. One interviewer did ask a follow-up question – if student experience changed after the presidential election of 2018 and several comments about fear and polarization after Donald Trump was elected president were recorded.

Question 5, Overall growth while at MSUM: The final question generated themes consistent with questions 1-3. In general, the diversity present in all aspects of MSUM's culture, from courses, to work, to co-curricular experiences increases the likelihood of having meaningful relationships with diverse others. Particularly since so many of our students started in less diverse settings, we can say with some confidence that attendance at MSUM is positively related to increased experience and success at negotiating ethical relationships with diverse people. Open communication – the ability to talk about issues that may have been taboo at home – and the opportunity to try new things were also growth themes from this question. While a few comments suggested areas for improvement, the overall tone was very positive.

In conclusion, the MSUM experience contributes to growth in students' abilities to "Negotiate ethical relationships with people who have different backgrounds, life experiences, cultures, beliefs, and values," primarily through co-curricular experiences, but to a lesser extent through classes in multiple departments across campus.