

Grade Gap/Future Gap:

Addressing Racial Disparities In Letters & Science Introductory Courses



One decade into the 21st century, our college faces a serious gap in academic outcomes for targeted minority students and non-targeted students in introductory courses. We are, and must be, better than that. Two years ago, the Letters & Science Equity and Diversity Committee conducted a study to learn more about that gap and its relationship to classroom relationships and climate, and to recommend changes to help close the gap.

Some of the study's findings are surprising, others are not. Some recommendations will improve outcomes for all students, others will produce better outcomes for targeted minority students. In any case, one thing is clear: the results of this study give us an opportunity to learn and change in ways that achieve better outcomes for students in the earliest stages of their academic careers.

About The Grade Gap Survey:

WHAT: A study of relationships between disparities in grades and classroom climate for targeted minority students and non-targeted students in 5 key introductory courses, fall 2009.

HOW: Survey of 1700 first-year students and 75 instructors in 5 focal courses spanning multiple disciplines and teaching structures. Survey responses were linked to individual final grade. Findings were informed by supplemental analysis of ACT, grade, and other relevant data. Primary areas of focus: 1) significant differences in reported experience, and, 2) significant differences in climate ratings, for targeted and non-targeted students in all 5 classes.

COURSES: Chemistry 103, Communication Arts 100, English 100, Mathematics 112, and Psychology 202, which are large enrollment courses; some of the courses are gateways to significant numbers of majors and career paths.

WHO: "Targeted minority" refers to students from groups historically underrepresented in US higher education, including African Americans, Latino/a Americans, American Indians, and Southeast Asian Americans. Non-targeted minority refers to all others.

Key Recommendations appear on the reverse side of this document.

Key Findings Include:

- ❖ **There were significant differences in course grades for targeted minority students and non-targeted students in all five courses.** These differences occurred at both the bottom and the top ends of the grading scale, and at nearly every preparation level. Targeted minority students with the highest ACT scores experienced some of the widest grade disparities in relation to their majority counterparts.
- ❖ Differences in course grades cannot be explained by differences in hours spent working or studying.
- ❖ **Targeted minority students reported significantly higher rates of anxiety when they worked academically with peers of other races** and reported higher rates of unease in forming study groups outside of class.
- ❖ Both targeted and non-targeted students experienced some negative currents in peer relations and peer-to-peer learning. **Targeted minority students were significantly more likely to report negative peer-to-peer experiences** than non-targeted students.
- ❖ **Resources matter.** Course organized groups, learning centers and tutorials, small group activity, academic advisors, and tutors were ranked more highly as having a significantly higher impact on learning by targeted minority students.
- ❖ **People matter.** Targeted minority students reported a significantly higher impact of supportive relationships with Professors, TAs, and friends, than did their non-targeted counterparts.
- ❖ The five courses differed in pedagogical practices, priorities, and grade distributions. **Student ratings of climate differed significantly among the five courses. The grade gap was very similar in all five courses when differences in pedagogy and grade distributions were taken into account.**
- ❖ **Instructors in favorable-climate courses were significantly more likely to report making greater efforts around teaching than instructors in courses with lower climate ratings.**

Key Recommendations:

- 1) **Rank-and-file faculty and personnel in academic student services need to work more closely and knowledgeably together** to support the academic performance and achievement of targeted minority students and, by extension, all students. A Grade Gap Task Force will be convened and will model such collaboration by bringing together course leaders from the 5 courses at the heart of this study, leaders of other courses, and representatives of key student service programs to work collaboratively on understanding student experiences, academic outcome data, and devising best practices to improve student experiences and outcomes at all levels.
- 2) **Disseminate information about the grade gap to faculty and initiate discussions around student performance.** During 2010-11, Gary Sandefur, Dean of Letters & Science, and members of the college Equity and Diversity Committee will visit departments to share data and initiate discussions with faculty and staff about raising student performance and eliminating grade gaps. This visit will help departments to develop action plans and report yearly progress to the dean.
- 3) **Implement incentives for departments to innovate with curriculum and course structures** in order to raise student engagement and performance, and reduce grade gaps.
- 4) **Support the Department of Mathematics in improving grade outcomes for underrepresented students in lower division courses**, including Calculus.
- 5) **Focus more TA professional development on inclusive excellence.** Survey responses indicate a strong value for Teaching Assistant instructors among targeted and non-targeted students alike. And instructors report strong commitment to inclusion, diversity, and equal access. However, there are strategies that could be implemented, or implemented more comprehensively in ways that increase the TAs professional skills and produce better outcomes for students of color. A more focused effort within the existing strong professional development programs in partnership with the Delta program would create a win-win outcome for all.
- 6) Survey responses yielded numerous examples of individual teachers who routinely make outstanding efforts to practice inclusive teaching and who yield results. **Annual competitive awards for TAs, faculty, and course directors who work to reduce the grade gap** would serve to recognize and reward those efforts.
- 7) **Focus more instructional attention on peer relations in introductory courses.** Peer academic relations emerged as an important factor in student experiences, particularly for targeted minority students. The committee believes that student performance can be raised by increased attention to peer academic relations, both in introductory courses and more broadly in first-year education.
- 8) **Link the elimination of the grade gap in introductory courses to efforts to eliminate the broader achievement gap.**



The key findings and recommendations of “Grade Gap/ Future Gap: Addressing Racial Disparities in Letters & Science Introductory Courses,” are summarized in this document. A full copy of the report and recommendations is available at:

<http://www.ls.wisc.edu/publications/lscdc-report-0810.pdf>.