African-Americans at the University of Virginia:
A Comparative Overview of Survey Data

Recent news about race relations at the University warrants a look at the survey data IAS has collected on the topic. Data from a number of studies provides a broad overview of recent undergraduate student opinion, as well as how this opinion may have changed over time. The central question to be examined is: How do African-American students rate their academic, personal and extracurricular experiences at UVa, and how does their experience compare to other UVa students? Two Longitudinal Studies of Undergraduate Education, two National Surveys of Student Engagement (NSSE), and several alumni surveys of undergraduate degree holders indicate generally that the vast majority of African-Americans are satisfied with their undergraduate educations at UVa. However, there is a small but measurable pocket of dissatisfaction in UVa’s African-American community, and there are other areas of significant dissatisfaction for most African-Americans at UVa. This article attempts to gauge broadly the current state of affairs and does not offer detailed explanations for its findings. A future article will look into possible explanations for the findings.

A note about statistical significance: any differences between African-Americans and other students noted in this article are statistically significant at the .05 level or higher, unless otherwise noted. Statistical significance refers only to the likelihood that the differences measured in the survey sample could have occurred by chance. Small differences could be statistically significant but substantively unimportant, especially if the sample size was large. Descriptive terms used in this article, such as “small,” “somewhat,” and “much less,” are an attempt to put into words the substantive meaning of the observed differences.

Longitudinal Studies Indicate Some Racial Differences

The first Longitudinal Study of Undergraduate Education, conducted between 1989 and 1992, found that student attitudes varied somewhat according to race. African-American undergraduates as a whole were satisfied with UVa overall. Still, early longitudinal study findings showed that African-American students were somewhat less satisfied than other students with academic life (72% v. 85%), and much less satisfied with the honor system (36% v. 65%) and the treatment of minorities on-grounds (23% v. 51%). At the same time, African-American students were more satisfied with academic advising, student health (83% v. 68%), and career planning services (78% v. 64%).

More recent longitudinal data suggests similar patterns. Overall, African-Americans are satisfied with the university. In the 1996-99 study, 74% of African-Americans were satisfied with their academic life and the same number would choose UVa again for their undergraduate education. Still, these numbers are lower than for other students, of whom 89% are satisfied with their academic lives and 87% would choose UVa again. In other areas, there appears to be more widespread dissatisfaction within the African-American community. The honor system (only 24% satisfied), the treatment of minorities (20%), and the sense of community at UVa (32%) are areas where a significant majority of African-Americans are not satisfied. It is worth noting that other students are not very satisfied with these areas, either (42%, 55% and 57%, respectively) but these percentages are close to double the figures for African-Americans. See Fig. 1.
NSSE Data Offers Overview on Race Question

Data from two National Surveys of Student Engagement (NSSE) provides perhaps the best overview into the current state of African-American opinion at the University, which participated in NSSE in 2000 and 2002. UVa is one of only a handful of prestigious national institutions that participates in NSSE and one of an even smaller group that shares the results publicly. Examining the NSSE data with the following three questions in mind sheds some light on our central question:

1. How does the University compare to other major research universities (Carnegie classification “Doctoral Extensive”) on several questions that directly mention race?

2. How do African-American and other UVa students differ in their answers to these and other questions?

3. How do African-American and other UVa students differ on the five benchmark scores from NSSE, which have been shown to be important to undergraduate success?

For the first question, we will examine data from both 2000 and 2002 NSSE. Only data from NSSE 2002 will be used for the final two questions. The results offer some good news for the University and identify some problem areas where improvement may be needed.

Four NSSE questions about race relations: 2000-2002

The four questions (and their response scales) on NSSE that specifically mention race are:

1. In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs) in class discussions and assignments? 1-4 (Never, Sometimes, Often, Very Often)

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2. In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own? 1-4 (Never, Sometimes, Often, Very Often)

3. To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following area: understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds? 1-4 (Very little, Some, Quite a bit, Very much)

4. To what extent does your institution emphasize each of the following: encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds? 1-4 (Very little, Some, Quite a bit, Very much)

Comparatively speaking, there was no bad news for UVa on these four questions. In other words, UVa scored as high or higher than other major research universities on all four questions. The best news is that in 2002 UVa students, by a large majority of both first- and fourth-years, have had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than their own “often” or “very often” during the school year (73%). This compares to only 50% of students in other major research universities. This also represents a substantial increase for UVa over 2000, when 58% reported having serious conversations with other students “often” or “very often.” Nationally, there was no change between 2000 and 2002. See Fig. 2.

Similarly, in 2002 a substantial majority of UVa students, both first- and fourth-years, said that diverse perspectives were included in their class discussions and assignments (61% said this happened often or very often). This is a bit higher than other research institutions (52%).
When asked in 2002 “to what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds,” 58% of first- and fourth-year UVa students answered “very much” or “quite a bit.” Again, this is somewhat higher than other research universities (50%). There was little change at UVa or nationally between 2000 and 2002.

On the last question, the news for UVa is more mixed. In 2002, less than half (44%) responded “very much” or “quite a bit” when asked “to what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds?” While this is about the same as other major research universities (42%), there is a disturbing difference between the responses first- and fourth-year UVa students gave. That is, first-year students are more likely to report this than fourth-years (52% v. 36% responding experience “very much” or “quite a bit”). This is similar to the pattern at other research universities. A small piece of good news for UVa is that the numbers increased slightly between 2000 and 2002, both at UVa (39% in 2000 to 44% in 2002) and nationally (43% in 2000 and 47% in 2002). Still, on the question that might measure most directly an institution’s commitment to fostering diverse racial and ethnic experiences for their students, the news for UVa is less than positive. See Fig. 3.

This analysis of the four race-related NSSE survey questions suggests that the University is doing some things right in its attempt to offer a positive environment for African-Americans and increase its racial diversity. Only a few students never have serious conversations with students of another race or ethnicity (5%), or are not being exposed to diverse perspectives in classroom discussions and assignments (6%), or report that UVa contributes “very little” to helping them
understand racial and ethnic minorities (8%). Considering that other research universities are not doing as well in all three of these areas (especially the first), this is a hopeful sign for UVa. However, this good news is tempered somewhat by the results from the fourth question—how much the university is encouraging contact among students of different backgrounds. While 44% of students answered “quite a bit” or “very much,” the majority said “some” or “very little.” That fourth-years were less likely than first-years to credit the University in this area makes this finding even more troubling. Examining these questions and some others by race may shed additional light on the question of how African-American students are doing comparatively.

**NSSE 2002 by Race: A Pattern Suggested**

When breaking down responses to these four questions by race for the 2002 data set, no significant racial differences emerged. However, other questions that do not directly mention race but would seem to have some bearing on the state of race relations, show some interesting patterns emerging. We compared African-American responses to whites/others combined on five additional questions (response values in parentheses):

1. The quality of your relationships with other students. 1 (Unfriendly, unsupportive, sense of alienation) to 7 (Friendly, supportive, sense of belonging)
2. The quality of your relationships with faculty members. 1 (Unavailable, unhelpful, unsympathetic) to 7 (Available, helpful, sympathetic)
3. The quality of your relationships with administrative personnel and offices. 1 (Unhelpful, inconsiderate, rigid) to 7 (Helpful, considerate, flexible)
4. How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution? 1-4 (Poor, Fair, Good, Excellent)
5. If you could start over again, would you go to the same institution you are now attending? 1-4 (Definitely no, Probably no, Probably yes, Definitely yes)

On four of the five questions, we found statistically and substantively significant differences when comparing African-American student opinions to those of whites/others. The one question that did not yield racial differences was on the quality of students’ relationships with administrative personnel and offices. For the other four questions, some interesting findings emerge. First, the vast majority of African-Americans are satisfied with their experiences with students and faculty and the University as a whole. Second, African-Americans are somewhat less positive about these experiences than other students. Third, first-year African-Americans are more positive about their UVa experiences than fourth-years.

In terms of their relationships with other students, a small minority of African-Americans do not rate their fellow students as friendly and supportive, more so than is the case for other students. About 11% of first-year African-Americans are on the lower half of this 7-point scale, compared to about 6% of other students. This leaves 78% on the positive end of the scale and 11% neutral. This compares to 87% of other students positive, 7% neutral, and the rest negative. Fourth-year African-American students are more negative about their experiences with their fellow students than first-years—more than 30% were either negative or neutral about their peers. Only 13% of fourth-year whites/others were negative or neutral about their fellow students. In other words,
African-Americans overall feel more negatively about their relationships with fellow students, and this difference is greater for fourth-years. See Table 4.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality of Relationships with Other Students at U.Va</th>
<th>African-American Year</th>
<th>White/Other Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>4th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly, Supportive, Sense of Belonging</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal (Friendly, etc.) (5-7)</strong></td>
<td><strong>79%</strong></td>
<td><strong>69%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfriendly, Unsupportive, Sense of Alienation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal (Unfriendly, etc.) (1-3)</strong></td>
<td><strong>11%</strong></td>
<td><strong>16%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NSSE 2002

A slightly different pattern is apparent for student relationships with faculty members. While African-American and other students have similarly positive views of faculty in their first year (about three quarters are on the positive end of the 7-point scale), a fairly dramatic difference is seen for fourth-year students. Only 59% of African-American fourth-years are on the positive end of the scale, compared to 78% of other students. See Fig. 5.
When examining students’ overall rating of UVa, both first- and fourth-year African-Americans are less positive than whites/other. While similar percentages of first-year students rate their experience at UVa poor or fair (8% of African-Americans versus 9% of whites and other races), far fewer African-Americans rate UVa excellent (11% compared to 54% of whites). Still, over 90% of African-American first-years rate UVa good or excellent. Fourth-year whites/others are virtually identical to first-years in their overall opinion of UVa, while African-American opinion has become more polarized. Twenty-two percent of fourth-year African-Americans rate UVa poor or fair (more than double than percentage of first-years). However, the number of fourth-year African-Americans that rate UVa “excellent” is more than double (28%) that of first-years. See Fig. 6.
The last question, whether students would attend the same institution if they could start over again, reveals similar findings. That is, first-year African-Americans and whites are similarly sure that they would attend UVa again (97% and 89%, respectively). For fourth-years, differences emerge, with only 74% of African-American fourth-years saying probably or definitely yes, compared to 88% of others. Fully one quarter of fourth-year African-Americans said they would either definitely or probably not attend UVa again. Only 12% of whites/others had this opinion.

Even though no racial differences emerged when looking at the questions about race, we found significant differences when examining by race a number of questions about students’ relationships with others at the University and their general evaluations of the University. While the vast majority of African-Americans are satisfied with their relationships with other students, administrative offices, and personnel, faculty, and the University as a whole, a disturbing pattern is suggested when the data is further broken down by academic level (first-year versus fourth-year). That is, a sizeable minority of African-American fourth-years are less satisfied in these areas than their first-year counterparts. One must be careful when making assumptions about the explanation for these differences. Because this is not a panel study where the same students are surveyed over time, one cannot assume that these differences are changes over time. Nevertheless, it is an interesting pattern that requires further analysis to determine why more African-American fourth-years reported negative experiences or opinions about UVa.
longitudinal study, which was a panel study, affords the opportunity to see how student opinion changes over time.

**Longitudinal Study Data: A Pattern Confirmed**

Data from the most recent longitudinal study indicates that the pattern found in the NSSE data does reflect the experiences of individual students over time. We examined four questions: satisfaction with the way minorities are treated at UVa, satisfaction with their overall lives as students, whether or not students would choose UVa again, and satisfaction with their personal contact with faculty. The pattern noted in NSSE is confirmed by student responses to these questions when they were first-year students, compared to their responses as fourth-year students. That is, in general whites and others leave the University more satisfied than African-Americans, though the majority of African-Americans are satisfied. Whites/others either increase their satisfaction, or satisfaction remains high over their four years. African-American satisfaction decreased—not dramatically but enough that for two variables the decline (or absence of an increase) is statistically significant.

African-American dissatisfaction with the way minorities are treated at UVa rose significantly during their four years, from 33% as first-years to 51% as fourth-years. Satisfaction with African-Americans’ overall student lives declined from 81% in their first year to 69% as fourth-years. Whites/others remained steady—85% as first-years and 88% as fourth-years. In terms of whether a student would choose UVa again, the same pattern seems to be repeated but does not reach statistical significance —83% of African-American first-years would choose UVa again, compared to 74% of fourth-years. For whites/others the numbers were 87% and 85%, respectively. In terms of student satisfaction with their personal contact with faculty, whites/others increased significantly from 31% as first-years to 58% as fourth-years. For African-Americans there is little increase; first-year satisfaction was 45%, compared to 49% for fourth-years. African-Americans started out with a higher level of satisfaction, which did not change much over their four years and never went beyond 50%. White satisfaction nearly doubled to more than a majority. See Fig. 7.
NSSE Benchmarks Show African-Americans Engaged and Involved

Racial differences also emerge when examining the scores on NSSE’s five benchmarks, deemed critical to student engagement and success in college. Not all of the differences, however, are negatives for UVa. African-American and other students scored similarly on the Academic Challenge and Enriching Educational Experiences indices. On another measure of engagement, the Active and Collaborative Learning index, African-Americans are somewhat lower than whites/others in their first year. However, this difference did not hold true for fourth-years. In fact, while both African-American fourth-years and other fourth-years were significantly higher than their first-year counterparts on this index, the difference for African-Americans was greater. In other words, African-American fourth-years scored much higher (nearly 13 points) on this index than first-year African-Americans; in comparison, white fourth-years were only 6 points higher than first-year whites.

Fourth-year African-American students are less engaged with UVa faculty than other fourth-years by 7 points. First-year students, both African-American and others, score similarly on this index. This pattern is similar to the one seen on some of the individual NSSE questions and in the longitudinal study. That is, fourth-year white/other students are higher in their involvement with faculty than first-year whites/others. African-Americans show little difference between first- and fourth-years.
A somewhat different pattern is seen when comparing the data on the Supportive Campus Environment\textsuperscript{12} index. First-year African-Americans and whites/others are similar in their scores and both are lower than their fourth-year counterparts. However, the difference between African-American first- and fourth-years is twice that of other first- and fourth-years.

To summarize the findings concerning the NSSE benchmarks, African-Americans are as academically engaged as whites/others and this engagement is consistent for first- and fourth-years alike. However, lower student-faculty interaction for African-American fourth-years, when compared to other fourth-years, underscores the finding from the individual question that African-American students have somewhat less positive relationships with faculty members than do their peers. Moreover, in terms of how supportive African-Americans find the environment on grounds, the fact that African-American first-years are higher on this index than their fourth-year counterparts suggest a potential area for improvement. See Figs. 8 and 9.
Alumni Evaluations Positive

When asked on an Alumni survey administered in 1992\(^1\) to rate their satisfaction with their overall UVa experience, African-American alumni showed a statistically significant but substantively small difference from all other alumni on a five point scale (a mean of 4.06 for African Americans vs 4.37 for all others). The overwhelming majority of alumni of all races were satisfied with their UVa experience (88.9% selected 4 or 5). Still, a small pocket of African-Americans were dissatisfied; specifically, African-Americans were more than twice as likely as others to be dissatisfied (8.3% v. 3.4%). African-Americans were also less likely to select the highest possible score (5), 34.9% v. 51%, and more likely to select (4), 47.7% v. 38.9%.

The same question on an alumni survey required by the State Council of Higher Education in 1998\(^2\) (satisfaction with overall UVa experience) resulted in similar means (4.2 for African Americans, 4.5 for all others, again a small but statistically significant difference). The disparity in selecting the highest possible score was even more striking in the SCHEV alumni survey. Nearly two-thirds of alumni of other races rated their experience a 5, while only 37.5% of African American alumni did so. African Americans selected 4 nearly twice as often as alumni of other races (50% v. 28.6%).

The alumni data support the previous findings from the Longitudinal Studies and the National Surveys of Student Engagement for undergraduate students. That is, overall African-Americans are satisfied with UVa but they are much less willing to give UVa the very highest rating. Moreover, African-Americans are about twice as likely to express dissatisfaction or neutrality, though this is still a small percentage of the community--approximately 20 percent. See Fig. 10.
Conclusion

From an examination of survey data IAS has collected over the years, there is much good news for the University with respect to the state of affairs for African-American undergraduates. First and foremost, African-Americans are satisfied overall with their experiences at UVa. More than three-quarters positively evaluate UVa and would return, given the opportunity to start over again. Secondly, African-American undergraduates are engaged academically and involved in important, enriching educational and extracurricular activities—to the same extent as their peers. Thirdly, in 2002 UVa students, by a large majority of both first- and fourth-years, are having serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than their own and are being exposed to diverse perspectives in their classes—substantially more than is the case for students at other major research universities.

Tempering this good news are the findings that more African-Americans are dissatisfied with UVa compared to white and other race students and that significant pockets of dissatisfaction exist in the African-American community in particular areas, such as the honor system and the treatment of minorities on grounds. The pattern that African-American dissatisfaction appears to increase between the first and fourth years is arguably the most disturbing finding and one that will require further research to discover why this happens and what the University can do to address the problem.
Questions about this report should be directed to the Office of Institutional Assessment and Studies at 4-3417 or IAAS@virginia.edu.

1For this article, we combine white students with students of other races, including Asian-Americans, Native-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and students whose racial category is unknown. We do not examine the data by each racial category for several reasons. First and foremost, the primary question we are examining is the state of affairs for African-Americans at the University. Second, breaking the data down into more categories (that have sufficient cases for analysis)—Asian- and Hispanic-Americans, for example—would unnecessarily complicate the analysis. Third, for the most part Asian-American responses to survey questions historically have been similar to whites, with some exceptions. Finally, while little is known about how Hispanic student opinion may differ from white students (usually because of an insufficient number of cases), it is unlikely that including Hispanics in the analysis would skew the results to any measurable degree. Except for the most recent NSSE survey, there are few Hispanic respondents simply because their proportion in the University population is so small—about 2.5 percent in 2002. While there were 92 Hispanic respondents in the NSSE 2002 (due to oversampling), this would not have much of a differentiating effect when compared to 770 cases of white, Asian, and other students. In fact, on most questions examined for this analysis, Hispanics were closer to whites in their opinions than African-Americans. Return to text.

2 IAS has conducted two Longitudinal Studies of Undergraduate Education. Each was a panel study, meaning the same students were surveyed over time. Random samples of the classes of 1992 and 1999 were surveyed in each of their four years at the University, providing an opportunity to see how undergraduates develop and how their opinions change over time. Return to text.

3 The National Survey of Student Engagement is a nationally administered, cross-sectional survey of first- and fourth-year undergraduates about what they actually do in college. The data is compiled to create five benchmarks which measure how well a college or university is doing on sound and widely accepted "best practices" for undergraduate education. Colleges and universities can use these measures for institutional improvement. NSSE is thoroughly tested, theoretically sound, and is gaining national attention as a tool for evaluating colleges and universities. Learn more about NSSE at UVa Return to text.

4 This question was asked only in 2002. Return to text.

5 Unfortunately, NSSE did not provide UVa data on doctoral extensive research universities in 2000. When we say “nationally,” we are looking at the entire NSSE sample. Return to text.

6 The Academic Challenge Index is composed of answers to the following questions: how many hours per week a student spent preparing for class (studying, reading, writing, rehearsing, and other activities related to their academic program); how many assigned textbooks, books, or book-length packs of course readings a student read; how many written papers of 20 pages or more a student wrote; how many written papers of less than 20 pages a student wrote; the extent to which a student's coursework emphasized analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory; the extent to which a student's coursework emphasized applying theories or concepts to practical problems or new situations; whether the campus environment emphasized making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods; the extent to which a student's coursework emphasized synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences; the extent to which a student's coursework could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations. Return to text.

7 The Enriching Educational Experiences Index is composed of answers to the following: how many hours per week a student participated in co-curricular activities (organizations, publications, student government, sports, etc.); whether a student had done a practicum, internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment; whether a student had participated in community service or volunteer work; whether a student had foreign language coursework; whether a student had taken an independent study course or had a self-designed major; whether a student had participated in a culminating senior experience (comprehensive exam, capstone course, thesis, project, etc.); whether a student had studied abroad; how often a student had serious conversations with other students holding religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values very different from their own; how often a student had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity; how often a student used an electronic medium (e-mail, list-serve, chat group, etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment; the extent to which a student felt the campus environment encouraged contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds. Return to text.

8 The Active and Collaborative Learning index is composed of the following questions: how often students asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions; made a class presentation; worked with other students on projects during class; worked
with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments; tutored or taught other students; participated in a community-based project as part of a regular course; discussed ideas from their reading or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, coworkers, etc.). Return to text.

9 The Student Interactions with Faculty Index includes: whether students have discussed grades or assignments with an instructor; talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor; discussed ideas from their reading or classes with faculty members outside of class; worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student-life activities, etc.); received prompt feedback from faculty on their academic performance; worked with a faculty member on a research project. Return to text.

10 The Supportive Campus Environment Index is composed of: whether the campus environment emphasized providing the support students needed to help them succeed academically; whether the campus environment emphasized helping students cope with nonacademic responsibilities (work, family, etc.); whether the campus environment emphasized providing the support students needed to thrive socially; whether students felt the quality of relationships with other students were friendly and supportive and promoted a sense of belonging; whether students felt that faculty members were available, helpful and sympathetic; whether students felt the relationships with administrative personnel and offices were helpful, considerate, available, and flexible. Return to text.

11 The 1992 alumni survey was a cross-sectional survey of undergraduate alumni and was administered by the Center for Survey Research. It included the classes of 1982, 1987 and 1990. Return to text.

12 The 1998 SCHEV survey was administered by IAS and included undergraduate alumni from the class of 1996. Return to text.