

Institutional Culture: A “Reflection” of Faculty and Students

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If you ask a satisfied college student why they chose to enroll in a specific institution, it is not uncommon to receive a somewhat ill-defined, gut level response: “It just felt right.” Higher education researchers refer to this phenomenon as “institutional fit” - the match between an individual student’s interests, abilities, and expectations and the larger institutional culture. It is not surprising, then, that institutional fit is directly related to student satisfaction, performance, and ultimately, retention and graduation. The more likely a student perceives that an institution is aware of and is supportive of his/her needs and interests, the more likely a student will succeed in that environment.

Directly related to the concept of institutional fit is campus culture. Campus culture can be defined as, “the collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumption that guide the behavior of individuals and groups...and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off campus” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; pp. 12 -13). The degree of fit or sense of belongingness between a student and his/her institution is influenced by a student’s ability to feel like his or her values and beliefs are congruent with that of the institution.

Although campus culture is shaped by a variety of factors, undoubtedly, faculty members play a significant role in changing, defining, and/or maintaining campus culture. Therefore, to better understand campus culture, it is important to understand the thoughts, behaviors, and actions of its faculty members. Secondly, if we are concerned about our ability to instill a sense of belonging and community within our students and assist them in their persistence toward graduation, it is important to understand how students’ thoughts, behaviors, and actions align with their faculty members.

In fall 2004 Grinnell College participated in the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) Faculty Survey. Each year, Grinnell College also participates in the CIRP freshmen survey - a survey for first-year students that is also administered by HERI. The CIRP is administered during new student orientation. Some of the questions asked of faculty members are also asked of students. This overlap provides a convenient way to compare entering students with faculty. Additionally, first-year and senior students also participated in the National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) last spring. Examining these survey results can add insight into similarities and differences between the students and faculty at Grinnell College.

Demographics

Approximately 54% of the faculty respondents were male and 46% of the faculty were female whereas 46% of the student respondents were male and 54% of the student respondents were female. This male/female ratio mirrors the larger faculty and student population. The faculty sample was less ethnically diverse than the student sample (see table below.) Slightly over 95% of the faculty respondents identified themselves as white/Caucasian and 84% of the student respondents identified themselves as white/Caucasian. The respondent sample is less ethnically/racially diverse than the general faculty and student population with 86% of the faculty and 77% of the student population identifying as white/Caucasian. However, differences may occur since, on the CIRP and HERI, respondents could indicate more than one ethnicity

Kuh, G.D. & Whitt, E.J. (1988). *The invisible tapestry: Culture in American colleges and universities*. AAHE-ERIC/Higher Education Research Report, no. 1. Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education.

Gender (%)	Faculty	Students
Male	53.7	46.1
Female	46.3	53.9

Ethnicity (%)*	Faculty	Students
White/Caucasian	95.1	83.9
African American/Black	2.4	3.6
American Indian/Alaska Native	0	1.5
Asian American/Asian	2.4	10.3
Mexican American/Chicano/Latino	2.4	4.2
Other	1.2	2.4

*Respondents could indicate more than one ethnicity.

Personal Goals and Views

There were similarities and differences between the personal goals of faculty and students. Faculty and students were similar in their agreement on the following goals: *helping others who are in difficulty, influencing social values, integrating spirituality in my life, becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment, developing a meaningful philosophy of life, and obtaining recognition from colleagues*. For some of the goals, there was more than 5 percentage points of difference between faculty and students. A higher percentage of faculty listed *raising a family and promoting racial understanding* as personal goals. A higher percentage of students listed *becoming an authority in my field, being well-off financially and influencing the political structure* as personal goals. Overall, the political views of the incoming students mirror the political views of the faculty. A majority of the faculty and students indicate that they are liberal with the lowest percentage indicating that they are conservative or far right.

Personal goals (%):	Faculty	Students
Helping others who are in difficulty	70.7	69.3
Influencing social values	39.0	41.9
Integrating spirituality in my life	33.3	35.8
Obtaining recognition from my colleagues	40.2	44.4
Developing a meaningful philosophy of life	65.9	60.9
Becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment	24.4	29.9
Raising a family	70.7	54.6
Helping promote racial understanding	61.0	44.6
Becoming an authority in my field	42.7	53.2
Being well-off financially	28.0	38.6
Influencing the political structure	17.1	31.9

Political views (%):	Faculty	Students
Far left	10.8	13.5
Liberal	60.8	57.2
Middle of the road	23.0	22.8
Conservative	5.4	6.0
Far right	0	.6

Academic and Intellectual Experiences

The NSSE asks first-year (FY) and senior (SR) students to indicate how frequently they engage in a variety of academic experiences. HERI asks faculty to indicate how frequently they engage in specific teaching methods and does not have faculty distinguish among student classification. Where applicable, the following tables illustrate the NSSE results for first-year and senior students and the comparable HERI faculty responses.

Faculty members reported that they used class discussion and class presentations more often than students reported being engaged in these activities. Students reported working on group projects more often outside of class than during class.

Academic and Intellectual Experiences ^a	Faculty	Students	
		FY	SR
Class Discussions	3.58	3.07	3.42
Class presentations	3.01	2.29	2.74
Group projects (HERI) /Worked on group projects during class (NSSE) ^b	2.55	2.36	2.26
Group projects (HERI)/Worked with students on projects outside of class (NSSE) ^b	2.55	2.78	2.89
Participated in community-based project as a part of regular course	1.22	1.26	1.32

^a For both surveys, the scale ranged from 1 – 4 with 1 “never” and 4 “very often.”

^b The HERI asked faculty to report how often they assigned group projects whereas NSSE asked student to distinguish between group projects done during class and group projects done outside of class.

Educational and Personal Growth

On a scale of 1 – 4 with 1 being “very little” and 4 being “very much”, the NSSE asked students to rank the extent to which specific experiences have contributed to their knowledge, skills and personal development. On a similar scale of 1 – 4 with 1 being “not important” to 4 “essential,” HERI asked faculty to rate the degree to which they agreed on specific goals of undergraduate education. If we assume that a correlation should exist between what faculty think are important goals and the degree to which students believe these aspects contribute to their overall education, the faculty and student responses should be similar. To analyze these responses, it may be more helpful not to look at similarities and differences but to compare faculty and student responses. Faculty members indicated that *writing* was most important while students indicated that *thinking critically and analytically* and *acquiring a broad general education* contributed more to their knowledge, skills, and development than writing. For both groups, *spirituality* was ranked lowest.

Educational and Personal Growth Variable	Faculty ^a	Students ^b	
		FY	SR
Writing clearly and effectively	3.74	3.41	3.58
Thinking critically and analytically	3.69	3.62	3.70
Acquiring a broad general education	3.22	3.54	3.66
Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds	2.70	2.99	2.94
Understanding yourself	2.66	2.99	3.17
Acquiring job or work-related knowledge and skills	2.47	2.25	2.28
Developing a personal code of values/ethics	2.39	2.72	2.82
Developing a deepened sense of spirituality	1.58	1.81	1.53

^aFaculty were asked, "Indicate the importance of each of the following education goals for undergraduates."

^bStudents were asked, "To what extent has your experience contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas?"

Conclusions

The importance of campus culture in shaping and enhancing educational outcomes has been well-documented. More specifically, campus cultures that are mutually shared and agreed upon among an institution's faculty, students, and staff have been shown to increase overall student satisfaction, engagement, and student learning. This, in turn, positively affects student persistence and graduation. Comparing the results of CIRP, NSSE, and HERI, it appears that faculty and students share many similar views and priorities. One observation may be that faculty members have a strong ability to shape student culture and therefore, similarities between faculty and students should be expected. However, the CIRP is administered to first-year students during new student orientation before they have had any significant interaction with the faculty members. These results would suggest that personnel who work in the areas of admissions, orientation, and international students, have designed activities, programs, and publications that effectively communicate the culture of Grinnell to prospective and new students. Assuming the culture of Grinnell College has remained consistent over time, institutional reputation and interactions with alumni may also transmit messages about institutional culture. If, as the literature demonstrates, students tend to self-select institutions where they feel comfortable, it would appear that information they obtained prior to enrolling in classes must accurately convey the campus culture.

Another item to note is that although faculty and students show similar patterns in their beliefs and attitudes, they are not homogeneous. So, for instance, although a majority of faculty and students report that their views are liberal or far left, there are faculty and students who report that they are conservative. While a strong campus culture can unite students, a more successful campus culture is one that can celebrate and encourage differences to be expressed. Additional work could be done to understand those students and faculty who hold viewpoints and beliefs that differ from those of the dominant culture and how they make meaning of their experience of the culture of Grinnell.