**Assessment of Educational Equity Project**

Illinois State University

Center for Higher Education and Educational Finance

**INTRODUCTION**

The "Assessment of Educational Equity" (AEE) survey project (formerly the "Assessment of the Status of Minorities in Education" (ASME) project) is predicated on the assumption that equal participation and success in higher education on the part of Illinois residents, regardless of gender, ethnic origin, or disability status, is an important goal associated with both social justice and economic development concerns. Ongoing research concerning the characteristics that attract students to colleges and universities and support successful completion of degree programs is necessary to achieve this goal.

Minority students are under-represented on U.S. and Illinois campuses and experience lower rates of completion and academic attainment than do majority students.1 Although female college students outnumber their male counterparts, men continue to dominate certain fields of study (math and science), to be over-represented in doctoral and professional programs, and to earn more than women at all degree levels.2 Since passage of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) and the Americans With Disabilities Act (1990), institutions of higher education have been mandated to ensure equal access to educational facilities and opportunities for students with disabilities -­activities which are still underway.3 The task of leveling the educational playing field for minority and female students and students with disabilities is ongoing, but has not yet been achieved.

The AEE project assumes that successful participation in higher education depends upon "supportive and nurturing" campus climates.4 It assesses the educational experiences of students in selected Illinois public and private institutions of higher education and facilitates comparison of their perceptions and perspectives by gender, ethnicity, and disability status. Information resulting from AEE survey research can support the processes of attracting targeted types of students to colleges and universities and fostering campus environments within which students can be both comfortable and successful.

Jeanne H. Ballantine, The Sociology of Education: A Systematic Analysis, (Third Edition), Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall (1993), P. 296; Report to the Governor and General Assembly on Underrepresented Groups in Public Institutions of Higher Education in Illinois, State of Illinois Board of Higher Education (1996).

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Jane E. Jarrow, The Impact of Section *504* on Postsecondary Education, Association on Higher Education and Disability (1992); Jane E. Jarrow, The ADA's Impact on Postsecondary Education, Association on Higher Education and Disability (1992).

' Charles E. Moms and Ira L. Neal, Perceptions: Campus Racial Climate, The Center for Higher Education Illinois State University (1989), pp. 1-3; Charles E. Morris and Jeanne B. Morris, "Implications of Student Perceptions of Academic Climate: Diversity on College Campuses," unpublished paper presented at the "Enhancing Teaching Conference", Charleston, South Carolina (1993).

I) Project Description and History

During the Spring of 1984, a subcommittee on Minority Concerns of the Illinois Senate Committee on Higher Education was formed to assess the educational progress of historically disadvantaged groups in Illinois. An early conclusion of the subcommittee was that a concerted effort would be required on the part of all segments of the educational community, as well as the legislative and executive branches of state government, to overcome the problem of underrepresentation of minorities in higher education. ("Minority" refers to ethnic and racial minorities, people with disabilities, and women.) The subcommittee held five hearings between August and November 1984, and found evidence of a need to establish a continuing group to focus attention on and to study issues related to the status of minorities in Illinois education. One of the subcommittee's recommendations to the Senate Higher Education Committee was to allocate funds in support of research activities at public universities and community colleges. The subcommittee recommended that the research should focus on the causes for the underrepresentation of minorities in higher education and the identification of strategies and programs to address the problems of minority access and retention. Both the Committee and the Subcommittee were chaired by Senator Richard Newhouse.

In response to the recommendation for research and implementation of strategies, the Center for Higher Education at Illinois State University submitted a proposal to the Illinois Board of Higher Education for the project "Assessment of the Status of Minorities in Education" (ASME). (The mission of the Center for Higher Education was to respond to requests for projects, programs, and activities related to higher education at the state and national levels.) The first grant for the project was awarded by the Illinois Board of Higher Education in December 1987, effective through August 1988. Separate survey instruments for undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, and administrators, as well as for the assessment of institutional programs and services were developed during this period. These instruments were designed to measure perceptions of campus climate.

Consistent with a definition stated by the Illinois Board of Higher Education in 1988, campus climate is defined as the totality of factors which constitute the academic, social, and cultural environments for students, faculty, administrators, and staff. Each of the survey instruments addressed some of the following aspects of campus climate: academic climate, social climate, racial climate, institutional attractiveness, relationships and interactions, and faculty and classroom behavior. Student perceptions of their campus climate have implications for minority student recruitment and retention -- especially at

predominantly white institutions. Perceptions of campus climate may influence student decisions to drop-out permanently, to drop-out temporarily, to persist through graduation, or to transfer to another institution (Tinto, 1987).

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In the spring of 1989, with the financial support of several universities and associations, a pilot study was conducted at six private institutions in Illinois. The pilot study allowed refinements of the survey instruments and in the spring of 1990, over 10,600 undergraduate students at 11 Illinois colleges and universities completed the Undergraduate Student Inventory. Several reports have been generated by that data collection, which have been disseminated through journals, conferences, newsletters, and theses and dissertations.

Inthe spring of 1992, the student data base was expanded to include responses from 750 students at four community colleges. Findings from these surveys have been shared with the leaders of participating institutions to help them make decisions about policies needed to retain minority students and to encourage them to transfer to four-year institutions.

At the beginning of the 1993-94 academic year, the name of the project changed from "Assessment of the Status of Minorities in Higher Education" to "Assessment of Educational Equity" (AEE).

Findings from ASME/AEE student surveys suggest that an important factor for minority student retention on predominantly white campuses is the presence of a culturally diverse faculty and staff. Thus, in the spring of 1994, the ASME/AEE database was again expanded to include responses from minority faculty at seven public universities in Illinois in order to gain insights about how institutions can recruit and retain minority faculty. Faculty perceptions of campus climate, coupled with student perceptions of campus climate, can provide a unique and comprehensive perspective for identifying the factors which keep underrepresented groups from fully participating at various levels of the educational ladder. Over 25 colleges and universities and school systems in Illinois have participated in some portion of the AEE project. The postsecondary institutions include Barat College, Bradley University, Chicago State University, Danville Area Community College, Eastern Illinois University, Elgin Community College, Elmhurst College, Governors State University, Illinois Benedictine College, Illinois College, Illinois State University, Illinois Wesleyan University, Lake Forest College, MacMurray College, McKendree College, Millikin University, Northeastern Illinois University, Northern Illinois University, Parkland College, Sangamon State University, Western Illinois University, Wilbur Wright College, and William Rainey Harper College. Other colleges and universities have agreed to participate in ASME/AEE studies when resources permit.

During 1995*,* a pilot study on school climate was conducted for a school district in central Illinois. In addition to assessing various aspects of climate in the schools and in the community, a primary purpose of the study was to assist the school district administration

in determining the extent to which district goals were consistent with Illinois statewide goals and national goals for the year 2000.

To accomplish the goals and objectives of the project, resources are needed for collecting and analyzing data and for disseminating reports to appropriate policy-making bodies. Such bodies include educational agencies and systems, the Illinois State Board of Education, the Illinois Board of Higher Education, the Illinois General Assembly and the Governor's Office. Meetings with institutional administrators, faculty, and students to discuss effective strategies for the recruitment and retention of members of underrepresented groups are also required.

The need to identify factors related to recruitment, retention and graduation of members of underrepresented groups is evident. In 1991, 41 percent of white high school graduates were enrolled in some form of higher education. This compares to only 28.2 percent of black students and 31.4 percent of Latino students (NCES, 1993). In 1992, blacks were only *45* percent as likely as whites to earn a four-year degree by ages 25 to 29 (Mortenson, 1993). Women attend and graduate from college at the same rates as men, but reports indicate that professors involve male students more than female students during class and that women experience a less satisfying college experience than men. Further, disabled students continue to be a disproportionate small percentage of the enrollment of educational institutions because programs and facilities have not been made accessible.

Through studies of student perceptions of school and community climate, we are able to identify characteristics and factors related to the success, or lack thereof; of participation in education. These characteristics/factors include the presence of racially diverse and women faculty; academic support services; opportunities to experience the cultural beliefs, norms, and values of one's group within the total population; and opportunities to participate in student organizations. The studies conducted by the Assessment of Educational Equity (AEE) project help policymakers to address these issues.

II) Goals of the Project

The overall goal of the AEE project is to amass and disseminate information that can be used to improve retention and graduation rates and otherwise enhance the experience of members of underrepresented groups (students, faculty, administrators, and staff) in education. The AEE project also seeks to directly enhance the participation of undergraduate and graduate students in the learning process by serving as a resource center where students can receive guidance and technical assistance for papers, theses, and dissertations.

1. Objectives of the project

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Objective 1) T**o** produce detailed reports and scholarly publications, and to give presentations to educators and policy- makers who are responsible for initiating and managing activities to enhance school climate for all students, faculty and administrators.

Objective 2) To sponsor workshops, seminars, and meetings for students, faculty and administrators to promote, coordinate, and direct activities addressing issues of minority recruitment and retention.

**Objective** 3) To determine and disseminate effective strategies that enhance the participation and success of members of underrepresented groups in Illinois.

**Objective** 4) To support consultative efforts which assist institutions, systems, and agencies in addressing issues such as diversity, pluralism, racism, sexual harassment, and disability concerns.

1. Specific activities proposed for accomplishing Project objectives

Objective 1**)** To produce detailed reports and scholarly publications, and to give presentations to educators and policy- makers who are responsible for initiating and managing activities to enhance school climate for all students, faculty and administrators.

1. Produce, periodically, "Educational Equity Excerpts," two-page newsletters, highlighting important findings.
2. Provide individual reports to institutions that participate in AEE surveys.
3. Complete reports, using data in the aggregate, about perceptions of school climate based on responses collected from participating institutions.
4. Provide support to undergraduate and graduate students who are using AEE data for papers, theses, and dissertations.
5. Submit scholarly papers to journals and at conferences.

Objective 2) To sponsor workshops, seminars, or meetings for faculty and administrators to promote, coordinate, and direct activities addressing issues of minority recruitment and retention.

a) Sponsor several regional meetings (in south, central, and north Illinois) for students, faculty and administrators to discuss research, training, and strategies which focus on improving campus climate and cultural diversity.

1. Sponsor training seminars for campus leaders.
2. Sponsor campus climate/cultural diversity workshops.

Objective 3)To determine and disseminate effective strategies that enhance the participation and success of members of underrepresented groups in Illinois.

1. Collect information about institutional programs and services designed to increase recruitment and retention of members of underrepresented groups on predominantly white campuses in Illinois.
2. Re-administer campus climate surveys to students and faculty at the institutions that have participated in AEE projects to determine if perceptions of campus 'climate have changed since earlier surveys.

Objective 4) To support consultative efforts which assist institutions, systems, and agencies in addressing issues such as diversity, pluralism, racism, sexual harassment, and disability concerns.

1. Provide participating institutions with the findings of AEE and other studies to stimulate discussions about diversity, racism, sexual harassment, and other related issues. Such stimulation may result in the formation of workshops or retreats to help students, faculty, and administrators create a school climate which fosters the learning and productivity of all individuals.
2. Develop a directory of faculty, staff, and administrators from Illinois institutions and agencies to help with conducting and facilitating discussions about diversity, pluralism, racism, sexual harassment, and disability concerns.

V) Relationship of AEE Project to the mission of the Center for Higher Education and Educational Finance

The AEE Project goals, objectives, and activities are compatible with the two main goals of the Center for Education and Educational Finance which are:

(1) To publish and disseminate the results of scholarly inquiry related to higher and post-secondary education at the state and national levels;

2) To respond to requests for services from the public colleges and universities in the state of Illinois in regard to projects, programs, and activities of mutual interest.