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Evaluating campus climate according to resident status

Francine Sandone

EVALUATING CAMPUS CLIMATE ACCORDING TO RESIDENT STATUS

by
Francine Maria Sandone

A Thesis

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Dedications

I dedicate this manuscript to my family and closest friends. I owe each and every one of

you a lifetime of "thanks".

I also dedicate this manuscript in loving memory of Nicholas and Matilda Sandone

"What children need most are the essentials that grandparents provide in abundance.

They give unconditional love, kindness, patience, humor, comfort, lessons in life. And

most importantly, cookies." - Rudy Giuliani

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Abstract

Francine Maria Sandone
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Roberta Dihoff, Ph.D.
Master of Arts in School Psychology

Linked to positive student outcomes such as effective risk prevention and health promotion, decreased problem behavior, and increased likelihood for academic success, climate has become a buzzword in not only elementary and secondary education, but in higher education as well. Colleges and universities have followed the precedent of school climate research and have begun to explore and unveil characteristics that impact campus climate. However, previous research has been limited in not only the identity characteristics they assess, but also in the degree of comprehensive assessment for this complex concept. The purpose of this study was to investigate multiple dimensions of student perceptions of campus climate at Rowan University. Specifically, the primary purpose of this study was to assess if resident status, an identity characteristic previously overlooked in previous climate research, had a significant effect on campus climate scores. A mixed method, anonymous survey design was utilized and distributed online using the Rowan Subject Pool. Bivariate correlation tests were ran to identify any significant relationships using SPSS for Windows.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Need for Study

Linked to benefits such as effective risk prevention and health promotion,

increased motivation in the classroom, decreased problem behavior, and greater

likelihood for academic success, school climate is a concept held with high importance in

education (Thapa et al., 2013). Ongoing research has led to the development of distinct

dimensions of school climate, which can be assessed for in K-12 schools worldwide. The

results of school climate research have captured the attention of colleges and universities

who are also interested in the potential impacts of their overall environment. However,

previous campus climate research is overwhelmingly focused on diversity and

multiculturalism, which was measured according gender exclusively, or in addition to

race and ethnicity. As a complex, multidimensional concept, it is important for

researchers to attempt to unveil all of the identity characteristics that could impact

campus climate.

The importance of this study was to investigate the potential of an identity

characteristic that had yet to be assessed in campus climate research, student resident

status. By exploring this aspect of student identity, future researchers can investigate and

account for the potential direct influences that commuting or living on or nearby campus

may have on students' perception of their college experiences and environment.

University staff could identify with enhanced accuracy how student attitudes' are shaped,

and take necessary steps to ensure a positive learning experience with positive academic

outcomes for students of various backgrounds.

Purpose

The current study aimed to examine the role of commuting versus residential living in regards to student campus climate. Additionally, the researcher assessed overall distance from campus to account for any differences in campus climate perceptions that could be attributed to overall commute time.

Hypotheses

A prediction of this study is that student status (commuting versus residential living) would have an effect on overall campus climate scores. Additionally, this researcher predicted that resident status would have an effect on the student relationship domain scores. Specifically, that being a resident student would result in significantly higher quality of student relationship scores than commuter students.

Operational Definitions

School climate: The "patterns of people's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures" (National School Climate Council, 2007).

Campus climate: In terms of this particular study, a student's experiences of college life, experiences, and environment that "reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relations, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures" (National School Climate Council, 2007).

Commuter student: An undergraduate student who does not live on campus housing, off campus housing provided by the institution, and lived five or more miles away from campus.

Resident student: An undergraduate student who resided in an on campus resident hall, on campus apartment, off campus housing provided by the institution, or lived less than 5 miles away from campus.

Limitations

The sample size of 89 resulted from only surveying students in the Rowan University Subject Pool. Participation in the study was voluntary, and no additional notifications were sent out to invite additional students to partake in the study. Participants in the current study were exclusively members of the Rowan University Subject Pool, which constituted of strictly undergraduate student enrolled in an introductory psychology course. Therefore, an additional limitation may be that the responses by the Subject Pool may not be representative of Rowan University students of all academic levels and majors.

Assumptions

There were multiple assumptions made by the researcher in the present study. It is assumed by the researcher that:

1. The responses provided by members of the Rowan University subject pool were representative of the Rowan University student population.

2. Students responded truthfully to the survey questions.

3. The survey distributed was an appropriate assessment of the variables measured.

4. The survey questions adopted from the New Jersey Climate Survey that is administered statewide to high school students was also a relevant and appropriate means of measurement for college freshmen.

5. Identity characteristics used in the current study, and other campus climate

studies, are of importance in defining and assessing campus climate and will

continue to be of importance as the of the body of campus climate research

continues to grow.

Summary

Extensive school climate research in K-12 schools has identified a relationship

between positive school climate and positive student outcomes such as reduced

incidences of bullying, decreased absenteeism and drug use, and increased motivation to

learn (Thapa et al., 2013). To examine collegiate environment, diversity and multicultural

studies have been continually conducted to assess college climate. However, the present

study examined the degree of influence student resident status had on perceived campus

climate, an identity characteristic that was previously overlooked. Student campus

climate surveys were administered, which consisted of questions of adopted by the New

Jersey School Climate Survey. The New Jersey School Climate survey is typically

distributed to the high school student population. The research additionally included

questions pertaining student living status, as well as necessary alterations to questions.

For example, the distributed survey replaced the word teacher with the appropriate title of

professor. Overall, students were asked to answer 25 questions, all items, with the

exception of demographic questions, were measured on 5 point Likert scale.

Demographic data included student living status, distance from campus, and age. In

addition, optional demographic questions were added as well for further assessment and

analysis. Questions included identification of race/ethnicity and sexual orientation. The

researcher predicted that resident status would have a significant effect on overall campus

climate scores. In addition, a second hypothesis included a relationship between student

resident status and the domain of student relationships, specifically that resident students

would score significantly higher.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Defining School Climate

A school's educational climate, a learning environment with physical, psychological, and social components may appear to be a simple concept. However, in terms of creating a global, objective definition, this matter is complex. Consequently, the ongoing gathering of research over time has led The National School Climate Counsel to make an attempt, an adequate starting point. The counsel defined school climate as the "patterns of people's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures" (National School Climate Council, 2007).

Likewise, there is no general consensus on the exact dimensions of what constitutes school climate, but an extensive review of over 206 published research articles has led to the development of five essential dimensions. Thapa et al. (2013) defined the five essential elements of school climate as safety, relationships, teaching and learning, institutional environment, and the school improvement process.

Safety. School climate safety constitutes of not only the physical rules and norms, but also the socio-emotional. These rules and norms aim to keep individuals not only physically safe, but also feeling safe and secure (Thapa et al., 2013). Research has linked positive school climates to decreased rates of aggressive and violent behavior in schools (Brookmeyer, Fanti, & Henrich, 2006; Goldstein, Young, & Boyd, 2008; Gregory et al., 2010). Gregory et al. (2010) surveyed over 7,000 ninth grade students and 2,900 teachers from 290 high schools, and consistently found that a school environment providing

structure (consistent school discipline) and support (caring faculty) was linked to increased school safety. Moreover, an increased sense of structure and support in schools was also associated with lower rates of bullying and victimization of students (Gregory et al., 2010). In the wake of increased acts of school and college violence, the concept feeling safe in an educational environment is highly valued.

In the United States alone, over 387 school and college campus shootings have occurred since 1992. The Columbine High School, Sandy Hook Elementary School, and Virginia Tech University massacres were notably the most tragic (Algard, 2014). Psychoanalyst and clinical social worker George Hagman was the leader of the mental health team that served students, faculty, and parents of Sandy Hook Elementary in Newton, Connecticut. The mental health team served to cater to various community and individual needs, as well as reinstate feelings of safety that were tragically violated. Hagman (2014) noted it took 6 weeks to alleviate identified behavioral or academic problems that were solely due to the school shooting. However, ongoing services from the emergency mental health team were required to reinstate feelings of normalcy and safety in the school and community. Since Maslow's debut of the theory of human motivation over 70 years ago, personal feelings of safety have been considered an essential human need (Maslow, 1943).

Relationships. Another essential human need established by Maslow that is connected to school climate is love and a sense of belonging, which includes friendships and various other interpersonal relationships (Maslow, 1943). Relationships, in regards to defining school climate, are a multi-faceted concept. The subcategories of relationships include: "respect for diversity, school connectedness/engagement, social support,

leadership, students' race/ethnicity, and their perceptions of school climate" (Thapa et al., 2013) (p.358). Two studies analyzed the results of the in-school survey measure for the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Analyses found students' who possessed positive perception of school climate, at both the middle and high school level, felt socially connected to peers and faculty. In addition, positive perceptions of school climate decreased the likelihood of health compromising behaviors including cigarette use, distress, suicidal ideation, marijuana use, acts of violence, and alcohol use (Bonny et al., 2000; Resnick et al., 1997). Samdal et al. (2000) also conducted a research study that yielded similar results. Students' positive perceptions of the school psychological environment resulted in a decreased risk in health compromising behaviors.

Moreover, a later study examined high school students and found that school connectedness, in conjunction with teachers establishing a respectful climate containing reciprocity, decreased depressive symptoms including suicidal ideation as well as individual risk taking behavior (specifically individual drug use). This study attributed the decrease in individual drug use behaviors to a positive school climate that encourages fewer friendships with risky peers, and strong reinforcement of healthy school norms (LaRusso, Romer, & Selman 2008). An engaging positive school climate also encouraged a more welcoming, non-hostile peer culture according to peers and faculty. This in turn increased the overall likelihood for academic success (Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Wang et al., 2010).

Teaching and learning. Another multifaceted dimension that is a major influence to school climate perceptions is teaching and learning. The teaching and learning process is characterized by Thapa (2013) as a primarily relational concept. This dimension

includes: "social, emotional, ethical, and civic learning; service learning; support for academic learning; support for professional relationships; teachers' and students' perceptions of school climate" (Thapa et al., 2013) (p.358). Zero tolerance policies implemented by teachers in high schools have been assessed. Research has found that authoritarian, highly restrictive, zero tolerance programs often run the risk of failing to equally account for in class support (Gregory & Cornell, 2009). Supportive classrooms account for student engagement in lessons, including those who do not find value in school. Authoritative approaches implemented by educators accounted for not only behavioral expectations, but also rates of student engagement. This teaching style created not only a supportive student-teacher relationship, but increased the success rate of classroom management. These factors attributed to positive school climate (Doyle, 2006). More recently conducted research also supported this notion that an engaging climate is linked to decreasing problematic behavior in the classroom, which in turn increases the likelihood for academic success (Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Wang et al., 2010).

Institutional environment. Thapa et al. (2013) defined the institutional environment as the resources and supplies available to faculty and students, as well as the physical school environment itself. School connectedness and engagement is also included in this category since the institution is the educational setting where the social interactions occur and relationships develop. This dimension is also directly related to the safety component of school climate. For example, students were more prone to feel unsafe in areas of a school building that are unsupervised (Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010).

School improvement process. The final dimension that defines school climate is school improvement, the proactive strides made by educators (from teachers to administrators) to provide and effective and meaningful learning environment for students. Research has shown that school climate is a critical factor in effective school reform.

School Climate and Associated Outcomes

As the interest of school climate and its influence grew amongst members of the field of education, so did its body of literature. Ongoing research in K-12 educational settings has unveiled outcomes associated with positive school climate, outcomes that could influence the future of students.

Research has indicated that positive school climate contributes to positive academic outcomes. Successful schools implemented high academic standards, demonstrated exemplary leadership, and proactively built a supportive, positive school climate. These factors are most conducive to student learning (Hoy, Tarter, & Bliss, 1990). Teacher scales on an ESB (Effective School Battery) survey were used in 1989 to assess for school climate in middle and high schools. The research unveiled a positive relationship between ESB scores, academic performance, and attendance, as well as decreased dropout rates (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1989). More recent studies yield similar results in terms of the positive relationship between school climate and academic achievement. For example, the notable difference between exemplary schools, "at least 90% of the students who were tested passed and 1% or fewer of students dropped out in grades 7–12" and acceptable schools "50–79% of the students who were tested passed and 3.1–5.5% of students dropped out in grades 7–12" are that exemplary schools

outscored acceptable schools in facets of organizational health. Essentially, exemplary schools had a better overall school climate (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch 2009).

Defining Campus Climate

While considering the extensive body of research on K-12 school climates, those interested in higher education have attempted to define campus climate. In 2000, Woodward and Sims defined campus climate as "student's perceptions of their experiences both in and out of the classroom". Researchers have even attempted to identify essential dimensions to campus climate. Hurtado et al. (1998) defined 4 dimensions that constituted campus climate. These dimensions included: structural diversity, institutional history, behavioral, and psychological climate. However, Hart and Fellabaum (2008) discovered flaws with these previous attempts after conducting a meta-analysis of over 118 campus climate studies. For example, Woodward and Sims' definition reflected their sole focus on the student population. In addition, "experiences" were not explicitly defined. Moreover, established dimensions were not representative of the holistic nature of a campus climate. These dimensions reflected that their research was primarily centered on student perceptions and their race.

After reviewing the campus climate literature that was publicly available, Hart and Fellabaum (2008) stated that only one definition captured the broad nature of campus climate. They felt Peterson and Spencer's (1990) definition went beyond race and ethnicity and accounted only for student perspectives.

According to Peterson and Spencer (1990):

The major features of climate are (1) its primary emphasis on common participant views of a wide array of organizational phenomena that allow for comparison among groups over time (2) its focus on current patterns of beliefs and behaviors, and (3) its often ephemeral or malleable character. Climate is pervasive, potentially inclusive of a broad array of phenomena, yet easily focused to fit the researcher's or the administrator's interest (as cited in Hart & Fellabaum 2007).

These researchers shed light to the notion that like school climate, campus climate is a complex concept. Both concepts can be altered to fit the specific interests of the researcher without difficulty. These authors acknowledged that many phenomena accounted for the overall perception of campus learning and lifestyle. Furthermore, there was a focus on current patterns of beliefs and behaviors because campus climate itself is not constant. Students, faculty, and dimensions of campus life such as campus protocol, class requirements, and living conditions, change as time goes on. Therefore, this concept is surveyed in the present, under current campus conditions surveying current students and faculty.

For example, Rowan University's Public Safety department provides public online access to crime incidences on campus. Peaking at 2004, (dating the crime log back to 2000) there was a mean of about 71 incidents of crime per month on campus. Since 2004, the mean of monthly crime incidents have continued to decrease annually. In 2013, the mean average of monthly incidents reached an all-time low of 31 per month. The fluctuation of crime incidents could potentially influence faculty and student perceptions of campus safety. Safety is a dimension assessed in both school and campus climate

research. These statistics demonstrate that dimensions of climate and the environment in general, are not constant. Therefore, the multidimensional concept of climate does not have the potential to be constant, and must be surveyed in the present.

Peterson and Spencer's (1990) definition also drew attention to the idea that campus climate is as pervasive in the college setting as it is in the K-12 educational setting. This definition established three dimensions of campus climate to clarify the types of campus climate research. These dimensions are the objective climate, the perceived climate, and the psychological climate (as cited in Hart & Fellabaum, 2008). Unlike extensive school climate research, campus climate lacked an extensive body of research, so a general consensus on definition and dimensions has not been reached.

Overview of Campus Climate Research

Hart and Fellabaum (2008) compiled a qualitative analysis of 118 campus climate studies. Of those 118 studies, 115 contained usable data for further analysis. They assessed the identity characteristics evaluated within each study. There were 13 characteristics identified. An overwhelming 112 of the 115 studies focused on gender. 58 of the 115 studies assessed climate according to race and ethnicity. The only other identity characteristic to surpass double digits in the literature was sexual orientation, which was assessed in 21 of the 115 research studies. Shockingly, only 3 studies accounted for socioeconomic status or class as a variable to measure. Only 4 studies assessed age, and 1 on culture. These statistics exemplify that the majority of publicly accessible campus climate studies pertained to race, ethnicity, and/or gender.

Even the most recent campus climate research emphasized the need to focus on measuring for diversity, and continually assessing for race and ethnicity. For example, the importance of cross-racial interactions (CRIs) inside, not just outside, of the classroom has been assessed. Faculty members were interviewed and research found that the more aware instructors were of the importance of CRIs, the more they perceive the importance of doing so during lectures. These faculty members were proactive in attempting to incorporate CRIS in their lectures, despite feeling unsure of how to handle a potentially dangerous discussion regarding race. Faculty who explicitly defined a goal in facilitating and cultivating CRIs reported higher rates of impact on student learning in the classroom (Valentine et al., 2012). When surveying students, religiosities, being a female, and active participation in an ethnic student organization were all variables that lead to an increase in CRIs across college campuses. Asian, African, and Hispanic American students were more likely to participate in CRIs more frequently than Caucasians (Bowman & Park, 2014). A possible explanation for this finding is that the lowest amount of diversity exposure occurred amongst Caucasian students (Locks et al., 2008). Bowman and Park (2014) found this occurrence is attributed to Caucasians typically living in homogeneous environments from childhood (Massey et al., 2003; Orfield, 2009).

Edman and Brazil (2009) assessed perceptions of student climate amongst community college students and found results that were atypical from the norm. About 80% of all student participants stated that they did not have to change in order to fit in, or possessed undesirable cultural values that conflicted on campus. Moreover, African American students reported positive campus climate and self-perceptions comparable to

Caucasian students on campus. Furthermore, 85% of the African American students who participated in the study disagreed with the statements on the survey "I feel that I am leaving my family values behind by going to college" and "My ethnic or cultural values are in conflict with what is expected at this school". Previous research including studies by Ancis et al. (2000), Chatman (2008), and Suarez Balcazar et al. (2003) have suggested that African American students frequently report experiences of discrimination, stereotyping due to ethnicity, and tend to perceive lower levels of campus belonging (as cited in Edman & Brazil 2009). However, this study did find that the positive perceptions of self-efficacy did not translate into academic achievement; the average overall GPA among the African American participants in the study was 1.85 (Edman & Brazil 2009).

In contrast, Tynes, Rose, and Markoe's (2013) study focused on the notion that campus life and climate is extending itself into the realm of the World Wide Web. Results of online social media analysis aligned with prior research that stated African Americans tend to have a significantly more negative perception of campus climate. Not only were their perceptions more negative, but they also experienced more online racial discrimination and stress. Their findings also lie in conjunction with the previously mentioned research that claimed African Americans on campus encounter more instances of racial discrimination and harassment (Navarro et al., 2007). Specifically, that negative perceptions of campus climate is a significant predictor of poor psychological adjustment in students of color (Santos et al., 2007).

As Hart and Fellabaum's (2008) analysis indicated, gender differences in educational settings have been of interest to researchers. Differential treatment and female disadvantage in the classroom was addressed in Hall and Sandler's

groundbreaking report, *The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One for Women* (1982). Unjust

treatment of women was reflective of the norms of society. Differential, unequal

treatment and disadvantages in the classroom environment according to gender was

coined "chilly" by these authors. After years of debate of whether instances of

maltreatment occurred frequent enough to be deemed an important issue, Allan and

Madden (2006) discovered that the method employed in campus climate studies

significantly affected previous research results. Therefore, these authors employed a

mixed method approach to their investigation. They found that a qualitative approach,

one that includes open-ended responses, revealed behavioral characteristics of a chilly

campus climate regardless of enrollment gender patterns (female majority, male majority,

or proportional). These behaviors included: displays of discouragement, invisibility and

marginalization, questioning of women's competence, and defining women by their

sexuality.

A chilly campus climate can also be experienced by those individuals who do not

self- identify according our hetero-normative society. For example, the frequent use of

the offensive phrase "that's so gay" is a microaggression that negatively affects the

lesbian, gay, and bisexual community, potentially even their psychological wellbeing

(Woodford et al., 2012). This phrase is perceived as hostile and inappropriate. Yet

Woodford et al.'s (2012) study found 9 of 10 respondents reported hearing "that's so

gay" on campus at least once in the past 12 months or upon arriving at the university.

About 47% of those participants heard the phrase 10 or more times. Respondents

consequently felt more left out at the university, which in turn can evolve into negative

perceptions of campus climate for the LGBT community. Woodford continued his

investigation a year later on a larger scale that included a random sample of 8,000 graduate and undergraduate students, which resulted in 2,568 participants who agreed to participate and answered all questions. As seen previously, about 90% of participants heard the phrase on campus, with 63% hearing it 10 or more times (Woodford et al., 2013).

On November 17, 2014 the Dean of Students at Rowan University notified students and faculty members via email regarding a social media incident that addressed the needs of transgender students. On the social media application Yik Yak, a freshman undergraduate student made a comment recommending that the university act as an advocate for transgender students. The application Yik Yak allowed for individuals in the geographic area to respond to the post with comments. The freshman undergraduate student received several threatening comments, with one alarming comment suggesting death. Microaggressions have the potential to seriously impact the lives of the LGBT community.

With such a vast focus on race, ethnicities, and gender in the growing body of campus climate literature, are these identity characteristics the most significant influences on a student's assessment of their college environment? Knox, Lindsay, and Kolb (1999) stated that these factors do not play a prominent role in the formation of students' perceptions of their higher education experience. These authors characterized race and ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic origins, and measured abilities as influential, but as background factors. They found a positive relationship between full-time student enrollment and social interactions on campus. For each 10% increase in the proportion of full-time students versus part-time students, the probability of student satisfaction reports

increased by 8%. Their results also predicted that the layout of campus housing and proportion of residential students living on campus had a likelihood of affecting facets of campus climate such as academic and extracurricular experiences. Ten years later, Larid and Cruce (2009) assessed differences in part-time and full-time students and found similar results. Self-reported gains were statistically significant when comparing part-time students to full-time students. These researchers suggested that improving and facilitating part-time students' interactions with faculty may help alleviate this discrepancy in college climate, especially educational gains such as writing and critical thinking skill acquisition.

Limitations of Previous Campus Climate Research

With a vast majority of study focused on diversity, specifically gender, race, and ethnicity, one major limitation of current campus climate research is a blatant lack of comprehensive assessment (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008; Hutchinson, Raymond, & Black, 2008; Henry, Fowler, & West, 2011; Lundy-Wagner & Winkle-Wagner 2013). A more holistic view is warranted to gain a greater understanding of what constitutes and influences overall campus climate. With the exception of gender, race, and ethnicity, identity characteristics are underrepresented in campus climate research such as socioeconomic status, age, and culture (Hart & Fellabaum 2008). Despite the increased emphasis of diversity in education, not much attention has been addressed in assessing the validity and quality of the instruments and measurements used in campus climate research (Worthington, 2008; Rankin & Reason, 2008). Hellriegel and Slocum's (1974) foundational study of organizational climate as a multidimensional concept stated that as long as climate is defined as a perceptual summary of all individuals in a given

organizational system, the degree of congruency between those perceptions, dimensions of the system, and the suitability of these to that specific environment must all be accounted for. Without an established, valid, and comprehensive assessment of those dynamic concepts, those characteristics will not be appropriately evaluated.

Moreover, Lundy-Wagner and Winkle-Wagner (2013) inferred that although studying racial campus climates and sexual harassment together can help analyze, critique, and improve the college campus environment, the form of these variables failed to account for promoting climates for all students. Therefore, the very nature of this research has thus far been counterproductive. A more expansive approach of climate is warranted to account for various influential identity characteristics. This suggestion aligns with the findings of Santos et al. (2007) that indicated ethnically adversarial campus climates can be attributed to the lack of support, programs, and student aid initiatives for all individuals, regardless of ethnic background.

Furthermore, another major concern is the limited accessibility of completed campus climate studies. The majority of campus climate research is not readily accessible beyond the involved researchers and institution members (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008; Hurtado et al., 2008). Hart and Fellabaum (2008) attributed the unwillingness to allow transparency, in regards to research results, to the potential negative repercussions the institution's image could face (especially when assessing for such personal characteristics such as race, ethnicity, or age). Although consenting to an imperfect, transparent image would demonstrate a genuine commitment and dedication to campus improvement, a desirable image to potential students and faculty often times takes precedence. A readily visible flawed image could deter future students from attending the university, or even

encourage current members of the campus community to transfer. A paradox has been identified, the idea of building a near perfect image versus promoting the ideology that there is always room for improvement.

Summary

Extensive research regarding school climate has indicated that positive perceptions of climate contributes to positive student outcomes such as: decreased rates of aggressive and violent behavior (Brookmeyer, Fanti, & Henrich, 2006; Goldstein, Young, & Boyd, 2008; Gregory et al., 2010), decreased likelihood of health compromising behaviors (Bonny et al.,2000; Resnick et al., 1997,; Samdal et al. ,2000), exemplary assessment scores (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch 2009), increased academic performance and attendance, as well as decreased dropout rates (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1989). A meta-analysis of over 206 studies revealed 5 essential elements of school climate: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, institutional environment, and the school improvement process (Thepa et al., 2013). Those in higher education took notice to the importance of climate and have attempted to define and assess climate on the college campus.

As the body of research on campus climate began to expand, various attempts were made to define and characterize the multifaceted concept. However, no general consensus has been reached on what characteristics most accurately define it. Moreover, the majority of conducted campus climate research was not readily accessible beyond the involved researchers and its institution members. In addition, Hart & Fellabaum (2008) also identified in their review that the majority of campus climate studies exclusively pertained to race, ethnicity, and/or gender, leaving other characteristics overlooked (age,

sexual orientation) or completely left out (student resident status). Amidst higher

education climate research focused on diversity, specifically gender, race, and ethnicity, a

limitation of previous campus climate research is a lack of comprehensive assessment

(Hart & Fellabaum, 2008; Hutchinson, Raymond, & Black, 2008; Henry, Fowler, &

West, 2011; Lundy-Wagner & Winkle-Wagner 2013). Without establishing a valid and

comprehensive method of measurement and assessment, this multidimensional concept

will not be appropriately evaluated (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008; Hellriegel & Slocum,

1974).

Chapter 3

Methodology

The current study aimed to examine and identify differences in student's campus climate perceptions. Specifically, to identify whether any differences could be attributed to student resident status classification (being a commuter versus a residential student).

Participants

The current study's survey was completed online by 89 Rowan University undergraduates. Out of the 89 participants, 88 disclosed their resident status, 22 (25%) participants self-identified as a commuter student and 66 as a (75%) residential. The current study's participants were members of the Rowan Subject Pool; therefore all 89 participants were enrolled in the course Essentials of Psychology at Rowan University at the time of study to earn research credit. There was almost an even representation of gender in the study, 42 participants identified as male and 47 identified as female. The average age of the participant in this study was 19.5, with ages ranging from 18-34. The majority of the current study's sample identified as Caucasian (63 participants, 72%). This sample of race/ethnicity was representative of the student population at Rowan University, with minority groups representing approximately 26% of the overall population (Rowan University Media & Public Relations, 2014). The only restriction in regards to participant recruitment was age; individuals were required to be 18 years old or older to participate.

Materials

Subjects participated in a self-constructed survey (see Appendix A) that was heavily influenced by the by the State of New Jersey's School Climate Survey for middle

and high school students. This survey was available on the State of New Jersey's website for school districts to distribute and utilize. The state's survey highlighted important aspects of climate that reflected a more holistic approach, which is critical in studying this multi-faceted topic. Many previous campus climate surveys reflected an emphasis on one particular identity characteristic, such as race or gender. The self-constructed questions on this questionnaire integrated elements from the State of New Jersey's survey, but necessary alterations were made due to a change in population, college students. For example, instead of referring to school building and classroom safety there were references to overall indoor and outdoor campus safety. Similarly, the title of teacher was changed to professor to create an appropriate and relevant survey for college students. The questionnaire was available on the Sona Systems website for 14 days during the Spring 2015 semester. The survey utilized a Likert scale to measure 20 questions addressing five variables of campus climate: campus safety, academic advisors, professors, fellow students, and personal identity while attending Rowan University. A qualitative design was also utilized in this survey. A "Suggestions for Improvement" open-ended question was provided for participants to provide recommendations to end each dimension's section.

The dependent variables measured in this study were the overall average of scores in each of the five campus climate domains, and the overall mean average score from all question responses.

Design

The collected data was analyzed using a bivariate analysis for the purpose of identifying any potential empirical relationships between them. The program SPSS for

Windows was used. Demographic questions such as age, gender, student status, and major were included in the survey measure, student status being the primary independent variable in this study. Two optional demographic questions were also included in the survey, race/ethnicity and sexual orientation. Qualitative "Suggestions for Improvement" data was categorized and frequency scores were calculated for each domain. The dependent variables measured were the overall average of scores in each of the five campus climate variables, as well as the overall mean average score from all question responses. Survey items in this research study were selected to answer questions the researcher had about factors that influence and differentiate perceptions in overall campus climate.

Procedure

Participants registered for the campus climate study through the Sona Systems website. Professors of the introductory psychology course were required to inform students at the beginning of the semester of the research participation requirement for the course. Students were then provided with various opportunities throughout the semester to fulfill the requirement by registering for available studies provided on the Sona website. In addition, an alternative research article option was provided for students to fulfill the remainder of required hours. Therefore, student participation in this survey was completely voluntary and allowed for withdrawal at any time. There were no associated risks or potential harm to participants in the current study.

Directions for completion, a statement ensuring confidentiality of all responses, and the survey questionnaire were provided for registered study participants. The online data collection was from March 27, 2015 to April 10, 2015. The survey data from the

Sona Systems website was collected, then entered and analyzed using the program SPSS

for Windows.

Chapter 4

Results

The first hypothesis questioned if there would be a significant relationship between student resident status and overall campus climate scores.

A bivariate correlation was conducted to determine whether a relationship existed between resident status and overall campus climate scores. There was no statistically significant relationship present r (86) =.166, p=.123.

Additional bivariate correlations were conducted to determine whether a relationship existed between student resident status and each of the five established domains of campus climate. These domains included feelings of campus safety, quality of student relationships, quality of relationships with professors, quality of relationships with academic advisor(s), and expression of personal identity. The relationship between student resident status and quality of student relationships was statistically significant r (86) =.210, p=.050 (See Figure 1).

Additional bivariate correlations were also conducted to determine whether other identity characteristics influenced campus climate scores. These characteristics included gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The relationship between race/ethnicity and overall campus climate scores was statistically significant r (86) = -.437, p=.000 (See Figure 2).
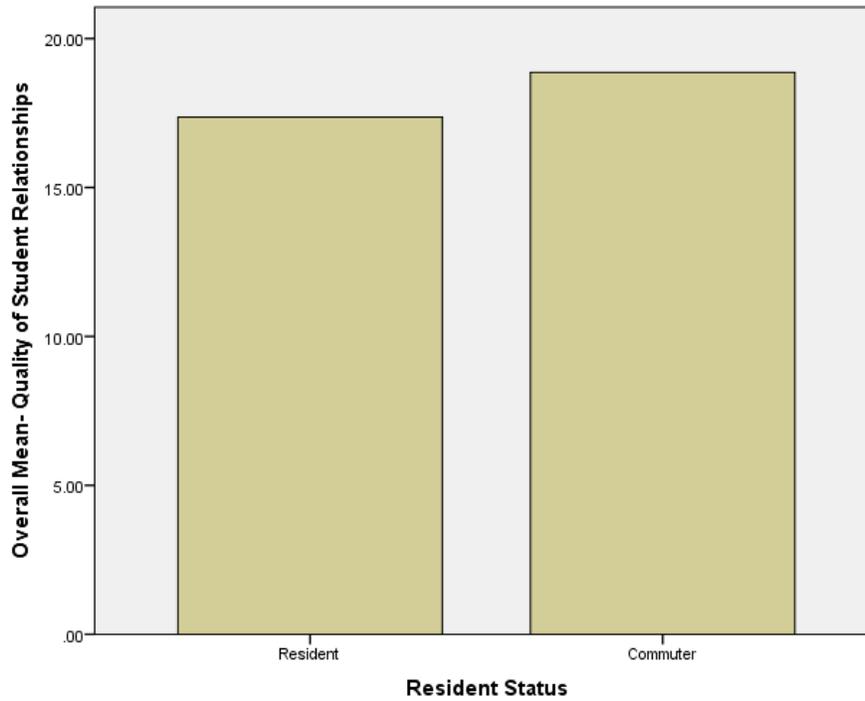
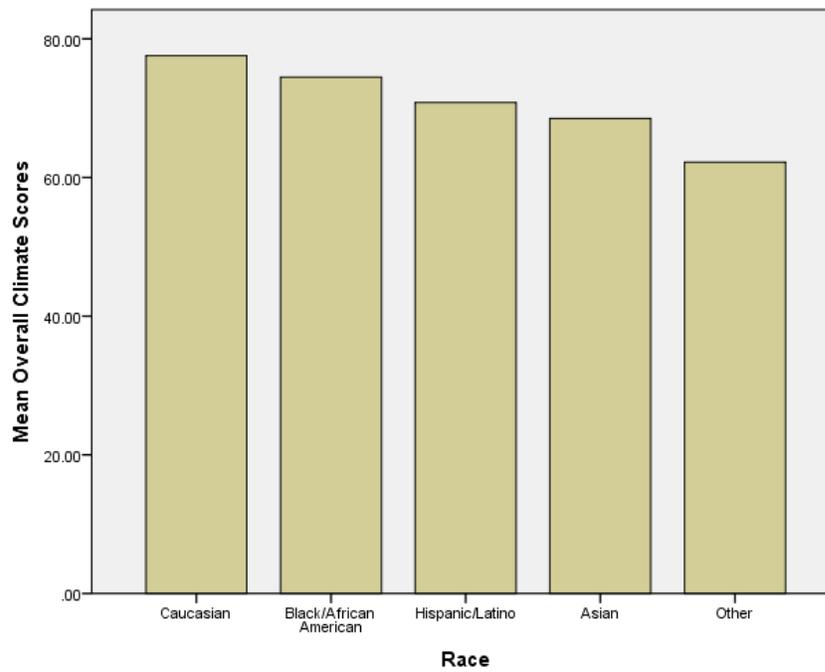*Figure 1*. Comparison of Student Relationships According to Resident Status

Figure 2. Comparison of Overall Campus Climate Scores According to Race

Descriptive statistics revealed that the mean overall campus climate score was about 75.7 out of a possible 100. Campus climate domain mean scores were also calculated: safety averaged at 12.3 out of 15, student relationships 17.7 out of 25, professor relationships 19.7 out of 25, academic advising 6.8 out of 10, and personal identity 19.2 out of 25. Mean satisfaction percentages did not go below 68%, and peaked as high as 82%. With this data one may infer that perceptions of campus climate at Rowan University were generally positive.

Concluding each domain's section of the survey, participants were provided with an opportunity to mention any recommendations for improvement within that particular domain. These 5 sections were the only responses in an open-ended format in the survey. The qualitative data indicated that the undergraduate sample provided the most suggestions for improvement in regards to campus safety. Out of the 89 participants 41% responded to the safety suggestion section, more than every other domain by at least 10%. This section also provided the largest frequency of suggestions. About 30% (11 out of 37) of responses suggest increased lighting on campus). The other 30% (11 out of 37) of responses recommended an increase in security presence on campus.

In the remaining domains, student relationships, professional relationships, academic advising, and identity expression, the "none" "no" responses were of the majority. However, an inference cannot be a made that the participants did not believe there were any possible improvements that could be made. In terms of student relationships, about 29% (6 out of 21) of respondents suggested an increase of student group availability. Comments were also made in regards to the number of activities themselves and the frequency of meetings. Availability was also a trend in professor and

advising relationships. Increased availability and student access to faculty was suggested in 16% of professor and 27% of academic advising responses (10 comments total). One participant also voiced a concern about the Yik Yak application. The response stated, "Yik Yak is a concern of mine. I deleted the app because I didn't like what I saw. People write hurtful things about others." This comment is in reference to the Yik Yak microaggression previously mentioned in the review of the literature. A student suggested accommodating the transgender community at Rowan University and received multiple insensitive comments including a threat suggesting death on November 17, 2014. This qualitative data could be considered for further campus climate research, as well as the school improvement process.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Summary

The current study aimed to assess and identify significant differences in student perceptions of campus climate at Rowan University. Specifically, the study attempted to identify the effect of an identity characteristic previously overlooked campus climate research, resident status. It was hypothesized that student resident status would have an effect on overall campus climate scores. If a significant relationship was identified, then we may infer that resident status could be an influence in climate perceptions to include in future assessments and research.

Based on the bivariate correlation test performed, no significant relationship was found. However, significant findings were present for the relationship between resident status and quality of student relationships, as well as race/ethnicity and overall climate scores. These findings suggest that further research in this topic is necessary to not only determine what dimensions define and characterize campus climate, but also to discover all potential identity characteristics that influence student perceptions to establish an optimal means of comprehensive assessment.

Limitations

There were multiple strengths in regards to this study. The research design of this study ensured that participants' responses remained anonymous. In addition, this design also utilized a mixed method approach, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. Previous research has indicated that in order to adequately assess complex psychological

research questions concepts such as climate, a mixed method design is the most optimal to paint a holistic picture (Bartholomew & Brown, 2012; Hart & Fellabaum, 2008). Also, multiple domains of climate were assessed, which also is warranted to research climate in a holistic manner.

However, there were weaknesses present in this study. Unlike the extensive body of school climate research, there was a lack of exhaustive comprehensive campus climate research. Therefore, no consensus has been reached in regards to to what factors most heavily influence, and what concepts most accurately define campus climate (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008). Furthermore, the variables adopted from previous research and the NJ School Climate Survey in the current study may not have appropriately assessed campus climate.

Out of a total of 89 student participants, 66 of those 88 participants self- identified as a resident student. Therefore, 75% of participants were resident students, the remaining 25% commuter students. This sample was not representative of the undergraduate student population at Rowan University. Rowan University's "Fast Facts" page indicated that about 36% of the undergraduate student body lives on campus (2014). The predominantly commuter population was underrepresented in the current research study.

Future Research

The current study investigated the potential effects of resident status on student perceptions of campus climate, an identity characteristic absent from previous campus climate studies. Future research should be conducted to determine if resident status is an

identity characteristic that significantly influences student perceptions of campus climate.

Moreover, future researcher should investigate additional previously overlooked

characteristics such as socioeconomic status, culture, and sexual orientation. Ongoing

multidimensional research of campus climate may eventually lead to the discovery of its

essential domains, which may differ from school climate. An updated, more

representative consensus of an operational definition may be reached. The discovery of

what this psychological concept truly is, and what comprises it, could result in the

development of a valid assessment to use across campus populations. A mixed method

design should be employed in future research since it has been established as the

preferred and most accurate means of assessing this psychological concept (Bartholomew

& Brown, 2012; Hart & Fellabaum, 2008). In conclusion, other members of the campus

community such as professors, employees, and graduate students should be integrated in

future research of climate to integrate a comprehensive means of evaluation.

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Appendix

Survey

Age:

(All participants in this study must be over the age of 18)

Gender: **Male**   **Female**

Resident Status: **Commuter**   **Resident**

A commuter student is defined as an undergraduate student who does not live on campus housing, off campus housing provided by the institution, and lives five or more miles away from campus.

A resident student is defined as an undergraduate student who resides in an on campus residence hall, on campus apartment, off campus housing provided by the institution, or lives less than 5 miles away from campus.

Major:

Optional: The following information is not required but would help us understand climate more fully

Race/Ethnicity:

American Indian or Alaska Native
Asian
Black or African American
Hispanic or Latino

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

Caucasian

Other

Sexual Orientation:

Heterosexual

Homosexual

Bisexual

Questioning

Other

Instructions:

Please read each question carefully, and circle the number under the one answer that most accurately represents your opinion

My campus

	Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
feels safe inside buildings.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
feels safe while walking around outside during the day.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
feels safe at night.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

Suggestions for Improvement:

Students who attend this school

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
genuinely care about one another.	1	2	3	4	5
do not only look out for themselves.	1	2	3	4	5
help each other in need.	1	2	3	4	5
treat each other with respect.	1	2	3	4	5
are provided with ample opportunities to get involved in sports, clubs, and other school activities beyond the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5

Suggestions for Improvement:

My professors

	Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
genuinely care about their students.	1	2	3	4	5
provide extra help outside of our regular class time when needed whether via email or on campus.	1	2	3	4	5
encourage and provide students with opportunities to share their ideas about topics being studied in class.	1	2	3	4	5
treat students with respect.	1	2	3	4	5
assign meaningful coursework.	1	2	3	4	5

Suggestions for Improvement:

My academic advisor

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Disagree
is genuinely concerned about my academic well-being.	1	2	3	4	5
is available when I need advisement.	1	2	3	4	5

Suggestions for Improvement:

Personal Identity

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Disagree
I feel like I belong at this university.	1	2	3	4	5
I do not wish I decided to attend another university.	1	2	3	4	5
I enjoy attending this university.	1	2	3	4	5
I have opportunities to express my thoughts and ideas at this university.	1	2	3	4	5
I have not compromised my values or beliefs to fit in at this university.	1	2	3	4	5

Suggestions for Improvement: