



Graduating Senior Survey: Experiences Leading to Understanding of Diverse Perspectives

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Executive Summary

This report summarizes findings from the UCLA Senior Survey for years 2009 and 2010 regarding students' experiences that helped them understand people with backgrounds different than their own. This study examined over 4,000 open-ended responses to identify the nature and quality of experiences that promote diverse interactions and opportunities for students to engage with diverse perspectives. Findings were divided into four key areas: 1) type of interaction, 2) environmental context or location of interaction, 3) content or topic area around which the interaction occurred, and 4) negative or challenging interactions. Findings suggest that UCLA students' living situations and academic settings create powerful opportunities for meaningful engagement with diverse others. This is especially evident when students are able to actively engage in conversation and develop relationships with each other, suggesting not only the role the university can play in creating access to these opportunities, but also the role the students play in engaging with one another.

Most student responses (3,229) reflected on the nature or type of interaction that helped them understand diverse perspectives. Students most frequently reported that living with others (1,220), the general act of meeting others and developing relationships (1,032), and engaging in conversation with others (534) facilitated this understanding. Almost as many students (3,027) described a distinct location or context or placed the interaction within a particular environment. Housing, especially on-campus housing (1,020), was the most frequently cited environment followed by by academic settings (709) and co-curricular activities (558).

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Across all types of experiences, 1,630 students reflected on an experience that included a diversity-related topic (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, political, religious, socioeconomic, and sexual orientation). The most discussed type of diverse interaction was with peers of a different racial group (896); however, students also described meaningful interactions across socioeconomic class (317) and religious differences (192).

A number of students (184) reported challenging experiences and negative interactions. These experiences were most often through living with others, particularly in on-campus housing, indicating the crucial role the university plays in providing space for meaningful interactions and support to move students through dissonance toward greater development.

### Introduction

The influence of diversity in educational settings is of particular interest for university stakeholders and administrators as efforts to maximize the benefits of diversity increase. While a diverse campus

environment provides context for diverse interactions, research has shown that simply sharing an environment with diverse peers does not create the same level of influence on educational outcomes as does interacting and actively engaging within this environment (Chang, 2007). For this reason, investigating experiences where students learn to understand diverse others is pertinent for UCLA administrators who seek to further understand and promote valuable experiences for students.

Data utilized for this analysis was drawn from an open-ended question on the 2009 and 2010 UCLA Senior Survey that asked students to “describe an experience you had at UCLA that most helped you understand the perspective of individuals from different backgrounds than your own.”

Over 4,000 open-ended responses from the 2009 and 2010 Senior Survey were examined to identify the nature and quality of experiences (e.g., interactions, locations, content) that promote diverse interactions and opportunities for students to engage with diverse perspectives.

## UCLA Graduating Senior Survey and Sample

The Senior Survey is administered every spring to graduating seniors. Data collected reflect students’ views of their overall college experience, student and campus life, academic majors and minors, quality of faculty interactions and courses, and research opportunities for undergraduates. In the spring of 2009 and 2010, 9,363 graduating seniors responded to the survey (3,763 respondents; 52% of graduating class from the 2009 and 5,600 respondents; 78% of the 2010 graduating class). The sample for this analysis included 4,132 students who responded to an open-ended question that asked them to reflect on an experience that helped them gain diverse perspectives. Compared to the 2009-2011 undergraduate population at UCLA, women and direct-entry students were slightly overrepresented in the sample (See Table 1 for a full description of demographics by year).

**Table 1: Demographics by Survey Year**

	2009 (n=1,419)		2010 (n=2,720)	
	#	%	#	%
Native American	5	.4%	14	.5%
African American	51	3.6%	69	2.5%
Hispanic	250	17.6%	438	16.1%
Asian	458	32.3%	1073	39.5%
White	536	37.8%	917	33.8%
International	42	3%	105	3.9%
Other/Missing/Declined	76	5.4%	98	3.6%
Male	549	39%	948	35%
Female	870	61%	1766	65%
Direct-entry	881	62%	1808	67%
Transfer	537	38%	906	33%

The findings fell into four key areas: 1) type of interaction, 2) environment of interaction, 3) topic area of interaction, and 4) negative or challenging interactions. Open-ended responses varied in the level of detail and description. Responses often combined multiple types of experiences, environments, and topics and were also coded as negative or challenging when appropriate. Analysis also considered differences in the frequency of codes by entry status, gender, and race groups. The results begin to frame experiences that may be influential in the development of students' diverse perspectives while in college. This brief will discuss the broad conceptual areas that were coded and will present the top five codes for each subsection. (See Appendix A for full coding overview).

### Nature of Interaction

Several different types of interaction emerged in the data: living with others, interpersonal interactions, talking with others, observing others, and eating with others (3,229 comments total). These codes were used to understand in what ways students are engaging with diverse perspectives to develop understanding of others.

Nature of Interaction	Frequency
Living with Others	1218
Interpersonal Interactions	1032
Talking with Others	534
Observing Others	226
Eating with Others	194

Students' responses demonstrated that their interactions with others were generally active, in that they described opportunities where they engaged in an exchange of ideas and experiences with others. Fewer students described experiences that were passive, suggesting the lasting impact that active, as opposed to passive, experiences have on students.

#### Day-to-Day Living

The act of sharing a space and daily living routine with others was the most frequently reported interaction that facilitated the development of diverse

perspectives (1,218 comments). One student stated that the opportunity to live with and get to know others helped him become more familiar with students from different backgrounds:

My first year at UCLA I lived in the residence halls with a roommate that had a different sexual orientation than myself. Prior to this, I had not encountered anyone at a close level that identified in this way. This initial college experience allowed me to see right away and firsthand how people live their lives in ways different than my own. Furthermore, this experience allowed me to become much more open-minded about the topic, and overall allowed me to develop as a much more open-minded and sensitive person. (Black male)

A common shared experience among students' residential experiences was the opportunity to share meals and eat with one another (194 responses). For example, another student shared the following experience:

I had an Indian random roommate my first year and we stayed up many nights and stayed long in the dining hall after many meals talking about our very different backgrounds and families and, at the same time, discovering how similar we were. (White female)

Although not all eating experiences occurred on campus, a large majority of the responses explicitly mentioned the residential dining halls along with eating with roommates or floor mates as central to their experiences.

#### Interpersonal Interactions

General interpersonal interactions such as meeting others and developing relationships through studying, socializing, and spending time with others was the second most frequently reported response (1,032 comments). These interactions were valuable opportunities to engage and learn about diverse perspectives. For example, one student responded that, "Just learning about different cultures more in depth helped me understand different cultures, such as my South Indian friend. She taught me a lot about their culture and their beliefs" (White female). Another student stated that studying and socializing with others allowed for greater understanding of diverse perspectives:

I became friends with a Lesbian last year. We were natural friends, and through her I learned more about the LGBTI community. We went out to eat a few times, studied for finals together (even when we were in different classes), and more than once played designated drivers. Despite my being a male, I think our age (me-25, her-24) played a larger part for us being natural friends. (White male)

Beyond building relationships with others, several students explicitly identified talking with others as a way of building understanding of diverse perspectives. Talking with others (534) not only included informal conversation, but also dialogue, discussion or other verbal exchanges of ideas. For example one student reported:

I discussed AB540 status with a few fellow students and I feel that it provided a more thorough understanding of the issue of immigration and how it deeply affects educational opportunities for a specific community. The group was able to relate their respective opinions and I think it made us all more aware of our differences on the issue but it also revealed much more similarities and how we could reach compromise. (Hispanic male)

**Observations of a Diverse Environment**

While the majority of the interactions reported were active, students also described more passive interactions as ways of understanding others. Even though observing others (226) was considered as a type of “interaction,” it reflected a more passive style of engagement compared to living, eating, talking, and developing relationships. Responses described general exposure to the UCLA community that included seeing, watching, listening, or witnessing to understand diverse perspectives. For example, one student explained:

It’s nice seeing people of different cultures and them being proud of it. In my neighborhood back home, everyone was (honestly) white, so I never got to see any other type of lifestyle or culture. But being here, it was really cool to see people take pride in their ethnic music, style, beliefs, etc. (Asian female)

While research shows that general exposure to diverse others is not shown to have as significant an impact on educational outcomes as more active

engagement (Chang, 2007), having access to a diverse community was still meaningful for a number of UCLA students who had little previous exposure to diverse communities and perspectives.

**Environment or Location of Interaction**

The context in which interactions occurred was also an important consideration to students’ experiences of gaining diverse perspectives (3,027 comments). Other students simply described the environment, itself, as influential. The five most frequently reported locations for interactions to occur were on-campus housing, the academic environment, co-curricular environments, unspecified housing arrangements (i.e. when housing was referenced but not with enough specificity to ascertain on or off-campus), and campus employment environments (see Table 3).

<b>Table 3: Frequencies of Environments</b>	
<b>Environment</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
On-campus Housing	1020
Academic Environment	709
Co-curricular Environment	558
Unspecified Housing Arrangements	276
Campus Employment	176

**Housing Experiences**

Reflecting on the time spent at UCLA, many senior students (1020) responded that their on-campus housing experience was significant. For example, a student described:

My first year, I had two random roommates. I'm Filipino and both my roommates were white and already knew each other. I felt that I was the odd one out. Additionally, coming from a hometown of mostly Filipinos and Mexicans, I didn't really know what to expect or how to interact. However, these concerns faded from day to day in our normal interactions. Nighttime talks, dinners, parties, video games, and sports were just a handful of the situations where bonds were slowly formed. I learned that if you act yourself and, given time, people can learn to understand each

other. Being at UCLA pushes you into situations you normally wouldn't choose to be in. And there are ways to make connections, be it dining hall dinners or floor activities. (Asian male)

In addition to on-campus housing, students also mentioned off-campus (50) or referenced housing but not with enough specificity to determine the nature of their housing (276). Regardless, students felt that housing in general provided an environment for meaningful interactions. For example, one student stated:

My current roommates and I all have lived either with or near each other since our freshman year. We are of different races (white, Asian, hispanic, and mixed) and different socioeconomic backgrounds (low-income to upper middle class). We all have different political views (strongly conservative to libertarian to liberal to socialist). We all come from very different family backgrounds (small families, large families, white-picket-fence families, divorced parents, single parents, etc). There are only a couple places where we aren't very different: religion (three Catholics, one agnostic) and sexual orientation (all heterosexual). Of course, we also have friends who are entirely different from us, who fall outside the categories I've already listed. What I mean to say with all of this is that my entire living experience at UCLA has been a lesson in getting along with people from different backgrounds. (American Indian female)

The large number of responses highlighting housing indicate the important role that students' living experiences played in influencing their understanding of diverse perspectives. The fact that students most often reported on-campus housing as the residential environment for these meaningful interactions indicates the influence that residential life and other university housing programs have in creating meaningful contexts for diverse interactions to occur. Additionally, because on-campus housing often results in random roommate and floor mate selection, the value of involuntary versus voluntary exposure to diverse perspectives should be considered.

### ***Academic Learning Environments***

Not surprisingly, the academic environment was the second most frequently reported environment. This included various aspects of academic learning

environments, such as descriptors of the classroom, their academic major, discussion sections, and class projects as experiences that allowed for developing understanding of diverse perspectives. This student's response exemplified the in-class aspect of these experiences:

We are asked to engage in debates in many of my critical studies classes. This type of interaction really brings experiences and political beliefs as relevant material for discussion into play. Understanding the context that shapes people's opinions broadens my outlook and perspective on topics. (White male)

Another student described a class project that allowed her to get to know her friends better:

I took a class on Asian American Education last quarter. As one of the assignments, I interviewed some of my friends to see their educational experiences and self-identity. I learned new things about my friends and their background from this activity. Also, we often talked about our childhood and shared fun experiences in the past with each other. Daily discussion and conversation often help me understand my friends' perspectives, though I think the best way is when an interesting topic was raised in class and we could talk about it afterward. (Asian American female)

Students also utilized academic co-curricular environments (123), such as research, study abroad, educational support programs such as the Academic Advancement Program (AAP), workshops, and service learning. For example:

I lived in the residence halls during the summer for AAP's TSP program. It was one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had. The perspectives of individuals ranged in age, sex, size, color, socioeconomically and internationally. I lived and shared the "world" with my colleagues. It was a great experience. (Black female)

### ***Co-curricular Opportunities/Experiences***

Over 550 students commented that co-curricular opportunities were helpful spaces to develop an understanding of diverse perspectives. Overall, responses included a range of co-curricular environments, such as recreation activities,

intramural sports, student organizations, student government, Greek life, and campus events. For example, a student stated:

I have been a member of CCM (Chicanos/Latinos for Community Medicine), as well as a project director for [student group]. Not only do I get to talk to people who volunteer with these organizations, they also give me the opportunity to go out into the community and talk to people who are different from myself. (Hispanic female)

Other students referenced student organizations and campus events that provided a space to develop an understanding of diverse others.

I was involved in Bruin Feminists for Equality, a club that spends a great deal of time sharing experiences of members from all sorts of backgrounds. One poignant example were the protests of the budget cuts and fee hikes, where many students shared stories of hardships, some working 3 jobs to stay in school. This gave me a new perspective on my own struggles and made me more passionate about protecting all of our rights to access to education. (White female)

Finally, some students (176) described their on-campus jobs as meaningful environments. For example, one student described in detail his experience working for an on-campus office:

My whole work experience at ASUCLA provided me with the ability to understand perspectives of individuals from different backgrounds because the office I work at is so socio-economically and racially diverse.  
(Asian male)

The frequency of students identifying co-curricular and housing contexts should not go unemphasized. While academic environments were prominent, the majority of interactions referenced took place outside of the classroom, indicating the importance of university support of co-curricular contexts. At the same time, this finding also highlights the initiative of students to create their own contexts for engagement with diverse perspectives. Student organizations, Greek life, and other campus events are largely student run and participation is entirely voluntary. Existing university support and the success of student-run initiatives should be considered as administrators aim to maximize the benefits of a diverse environment.

## Topic Area of Interaction

Approximately half of graduating senior responses (1630 comments) described an experience in which students gained a perspective in a diversity-related area (e.g., racial or ethnic, gender, political, religious, socioeconomic, and sexual orientation differences). Interactions around differences among racial or ethnic groups were most common (896); however students also reported interactions that highlighted differences by socioeconomic class (317) and religious differences (192). (see Table 4 for full distribution)

An example of a response around the topic of race comes from a student who recalls living in the residence halls:

Topic	Frequency
Race/Ethnicity	896
Socioeconomic Status	317
Religion	192
Sexual Orientation	119
Politics	106

Being an Asian-American student and living with an African-American student in my 1st year in the residence halls opened my eyes to how startlingly different the environments we grew up in truly were. We would share some of our most trying experiences in our lives, and realized that we both went through very different struggles to get into UCLA. (Asian male)

Other comments (317) reflected learning and growth through an interaction with a student from a different socioeconomic background:

I made a presentation about welfare and my opinion of it. Coming from an upper-middle class background, I do not have much experience with welfare recipients. A girl in my class was the opposite; she had quite a bit of personal experience. She agreed with aspects of my proposal, and disagreed with others. It was educational. (White female)

Reflections about experiences around religion often looked similar to these students responses:

One day I talked about religion with an agnostic person. During the conversation, we passed by an atheist group passing out flyers about how the world is better off without religion. He felt that if there were no religions, many wars and atrocities would never have happened. In response to that, I said religions don't start wars but people do. It is my belief that religion was perverted to meet the needs of a few crazy people to start wars, genocide, and promote terrorism. He saw where I was coming from, but ultimately still thought that even though that may be true, religions might have done more harm than good lately. I didn't agree with that, but I could understand how he felt that way. (Black male)

There was one occasion when random floormates gathered in my dorm and we discussed our different religions. It was very enlightening to hear different points of view because I was never able to discuss religion with people with different religious backgrounds. (Asian female)

It was common for responses to include multiple topic areas that were explored through a particular experience. For example, one student wrote:

My junior year I lived in a triple with two freshman both of whom had very different racial, familial, and socioeconomic backgrounds than myself. While we seldom got along very well, living with them taught me a lot about people and maturity and how our religions and upbringings or lack thereof affect us as adults. (White female)

By looking at which topic areas were most common, we gain a better understanding of how diversity as a subject is interpreted and reflected. Conversations regarding diversity are often narrowly focused on discussions of racial and ethnic diversity. However, students comments represented a broad scope of diversity-related topics, capturing the range of experiences and ways that students understand the meaning of “diversity” on campus.

## **Challenging Experiences and Negative Interactions**

It is important to document that a number of comments described negative or challenging interactions(184 comments) even though these represent a small portion of the total. Coding for these responses was unique because it captured an

emotional aspect of the interaction not captured by any of the other previous codes. Among the types of interactions, negative and challenging interactions most often occurred when students described living with others (51 comments) and similarly the most frequently identified environment was on-campus housing (79 comments). Race, ethnicity or culture was the most common topic area (44 comments). (See Appendix B for summary)

Recognizing that interactions around diverse perspectives are not always easy, focusing on students’ sentiments, even briefly, provides insight into students’ feelings and interpretations of these experiences at UCLA. For example one student stated, “...most of my time in the residence halls was unpleasant because my roommates were either bigoted, racist, homophobic, or socially awkward and unconscionably aggressive. I still do not understand what compels some people to behave inordinately mean.” (Hispanic female)

Other examples of negative interactions:

I did not have a pleasant experience at UCLA nor do I have many memories. I feel that too much judging of others goes on and people tell you to be yourself, but they really want you to be how you look. They too believe they are true to themselves, and if this is so, they have too much hate in others and too much love for themselves when they think people have to be a certain way based on their physical appearance. (Asian male)

I found that African-Americans aren't necessarily welcomed with open arms into the scientific community; as students of similar backgrounds often stick together, the opportunity for engaging in out-of-class interaction was limited. (Black female)

Spending 4 years at UCLA has taught me that individuals from different backgrounds feel that I am their enemy because I am a white male protestant. I rarely interact with those of other backgrounds here because they go out of their way to make me unwelcome. Clubs and classes tell me that all wrong with the world is the fault of my ancestors, and life would be perfect if only people like me went away. (White male)

Negative or challenging interactions align with the concept of disequilibrium or dissonance as a strong predictor of cognitive growth. So while some of these

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comments did not describe overtly negative or challenging emotions, one can gain the sense that many of these experiences were particularly influential precisely because of the cognitive dissonance they created. After looking at these examples we can see how some interactions were unresolved and in some of the responses it appeared as though the student made meaning of the experience and grew from it. The university can play a powerful role in supporting students through these dissonance-causing interactions. Helping students develop and refine skills to better handle challenging situations allows for students and the greater campus community to gain the most from those experiences.

### **Conclusion**

College is an especially crucial time in which students have opportunities to engage with diverse others and develop cross-cultural understandings to prepare them to function in an increasingly diverse and global professional world. Students identified important developmental experiences such as living in the residence halls, engagement in the classroom, and involvement in student groups and activities that enabled students to interact and problem solve with their peers and strangers. UCLA students described influential experiences as ones of relationship building and the active exchange of ideas more often than they described simply being in the presence of diverse perspectives. Students reflected that these experiences, while sometimes challenging, were important to their development of diverse perspectives in college.



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**Appendix A**  
**Frequency of Codes and Negative/Challenging**  
**Interactions by Code Category**

<b>Nature of Interaction</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Negative/ Challenging</b>
Eating with Others	194	1
Interpersonal Interactions	1032	16
Living with Others	1218	51
Observing Others	226	15
Doing Community Service	26	0
Talking with Others	534	12
Total	3230	95

**Environment or Location of Interaction**

Academic Environment	708	18
Academic Co-Curricular	123	1
Co-Curricular	558	8
Social and Political Context	84	3
Employment	176	4
Unspecified Housing Arrangements	276	7
Off-campus Housing	50	1
On-campus Housing	1020	79
Orientation	32	0
Total	3027	121

**Topic Area of Interaction**

Race/Ethnicity /Culture	896	44
Gender	34	5
Politics	106	5
Religion	192	9
Socioeconomic Status	317	20
Sexual Orientation	119	11
Total	1664	94
<b>Overall Total</b>	<b>7921</b>	<b>404</b>