



**Providence College:**  
*A Report on the Climate Assessment Focus Groups*

**Developed by Rankin & Associates, Consulting**  
**January 27, 2014**

## Introduction

As a Catholic and Dominican liberal arts college, Providence College strives to create and to sustain a campus community that fosters mutual respect, civil discourse, and academic freedom, while constantly affirming the God-given dignity of every person. Consistent with our Statement on Diversity<sup>1</sup> and the College's Strategic Plan for Diversity<sup>2</sup>, we are dedicated to providing safe working, living, and learning environments in which each community member is valued and respected, and can optimize his/her creative human potential.

As part of the College's on-going efforts to promote an enhanced understanding of, and respect for, diversity in its many forms, the Office of Institutional Diversity, with the support of the Office of Academic Affairs and the Committee for Diversity Implementation (CDI), commissioned a Campus Climate Assessment to learn how diverse members of the campus community experience Providence College. Consisting of a series of focus groups with a cross-section of the campus community, the goals of the project were to: 1) identify successful initiatives; 2) uncover any challenges facing members of our community; and 3) develop strategic initiatives to build on the successes and address the challenges.

This project is one of several initiatives with the goal of promoting a campus climate in which all members thrive personally, professionally, and academically, and we will continue to develop mechanisms to engage and solicit constructive feedback from members of the campus community. For more information, please visit the website of the Office of Institutional Diversity: [www.providence.edu/institutional-diversity](http://www.providence.edu/institutional-diversity).

## Contextual History

Providence College was established in 1917 to provide access to a college education to Catholic immigrants and their children, while also being open to members of all faiths. Many of these students were the first in their families to graduate from college, and today's diversity initiatives

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<sup>1</sup> [www.providence.edu/strategic-plan/five-core-values/Pages/Statement-on-Diversity.aspx](http://www.providence.edu/strategic-plan/five-core-values/Pages/Statement-on-Diversity.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> [www.providence.edu/institutional-diversity/Documents/strategic-plan-for-diversity.pdf](http://www.providence.edu/institutional-diversity/Documents/strategic-plan-for-diversity.pdf)

are seen as a way to return to our roots in providing access to new Americans and the underserved.

Building on the various past committees that were commissioned to assess and develop action plans to address diversity issues at Providence College, in 2008 Fr. Brian Shanley, O.P., President, appointed a Diversity Initiatives Committee to perform an updated analysis of diversity on the campus. The committee work resulted in a Strategic Plan for Diversity and the recommendation to create an Office of Institutional Diversity and to hire a Chief Diversity Officer. Over the last several years Providence College has made major strides with respect to diversity. Shifts in admission and financial aid policy have helped lead to a significant increase in the number of Students of Color attending Providence College, and more students of all backgrounds taking advantage of study abroad opportunities. During this time there has also been a modest increase in the diversity of faculty and staff, and significant efforts to engage the College with the local Smith Hill and Elmhurst communities through community service and the work of the Feinstein Institute for Public Service, as well as the newly opened PC/Smith Hill Annex. The new Core Curriculum now includes a Diversity Proficiency requirement, and students are able to take a more diverse range of courses. And in January 2012, upon the recommendation of the Diversity Initiatives Committee, the College hired its first Associate Vice President/Chief Diversity Officer, to provide leadership and coordination for campus diversity efforts.

While these are certainly noteworthy accomplishments, challenges remain. The College continues to struggle with recruiting and retaining diverse faculty and staff, and the increased presence of diverse students (e.g., Students of Color, LGBTQ students), has not necessarily led to a general feeling of acceptance among members of those communities. The decision to perform an in-depth assessment on how members of our community experience Providence College was made to enable the College to identify best practices that may be replicated, as well as to pinpoint on-going challenges. Furthermore, the insights gleaned from this project will allow the College to develop relevant programs and policies to move toward becoming a truly inclusive environment where *all* members feel valued and respected and can realize their full potential.

## Methods

Providence College's known history of reports, recommendations, and data collections over two decades (since 1990) has been clear and consistent with respect to the conclusions they have drawn: that the College must make significant progress in promoting, encouraging, supporting, and improving structural diversity, diversity initiatives, and diversity interactions among students, faculty, and staff. The Campus Climate Focus Groups Study was intended not as a singular or new attempt to "quantify" the community's experience with respect to diversity and inclusiveness at the College. Rather, it was conducted to add "voice" – qualitative data – to the ongoing effort to assess the College's embrace of diversity and, more importantly, to enhance it.

To minimize internal bias, the College contracted with Rankin & Associates (R&A) to facilitate the climate project. The Campus Climate Working Group (CCWG) made up of faculty, staff, and students from Providence College worked with R&A to contextualize the process, and to design the focus groups. The focus groups were facilitated by R&A.

On October 7, 2013, Providence College students, faculty, and staff participated in 16 focus groups. All participants were solicited by the CCWG and invitations from Father Shanley were forwarded to participants through the Office of Institutional Diversity. The interview protocol<sup>3</sup> used in the groups included four questions, which addressed participants' perceptions of Providence College's campus climate, greatest challenges for various groups at Providence College, and suggestions to improve the campus climate at Providence College.

One hundred and twenty-nine (129) people participated in the 16 focus groups that included 71 students, 27 faculty members and 31 staff members. The groups, selected by the CCWG, were divided by selected demographic characteristics<sup>4</sup> so that participants might feel safe to speak candidly about their experiences. At each group, participants were offered the contact information of R&A staff for the opportunity to provide additional information if they wished.

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<sup>3</sup> The qualitative research design employed in this project followed current scholarly practice (Creswell, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A for a listing of the groups and the number of participants in each group.

## Themes – Identification of Key Findings

### Theme 1: Divergent Perceptions of Campus Climate

Divergent perceptions of campus climate emerged among the various constituent groups who participated in the focus groups, with members of social, cultural and statistical minorities experiencing more challenges compared to their majority peers. Generally, Student-athletes, Students with Disabilities, White students, and White men faculty viewed the overall campus climate as “positive” while International students, White women faculty and staff, Faculty and Staff of Color, International students, LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff, and faculty, staff, and students from other than Catholic spiritual affiliations shared experiences of feeling excluded and/or invisible on campus. Even among those groups who felt that the climate was positive, some offered challenges.

- “For the most part, faculty are really understanding...we are given a lot of support...we are really offered skills to help us be prepared...” [*Student-athlete*]
- “The campus is “supportive” and “close-knit.” [*White man faculty*]
- “There is a sense of awkwardness everywhere. I need to prove myself. There’s tension in every space.” [*African/African American student*]
- “Coming in here was culture shock...the fact is that we aren’t noticed. If you’re light you’re White, if you’re dark you’re Black. It’s like you don’t exist. It’s like Latinos are lost in the rumble of PC.” [*Latino/a student*]
- “I think being here as gay is unwelcomed...” [*LGBTQ student*]
- “If you have views that contradict the Catholic mission, you have no place to go.” [*Student from spiritual affiliation other than Catholic*]
- “...The campus is open and friendly...I’ve seen Providence grow and I’m hopeful...” Other participants offered, “When they [Providence College] talk about diversity, they really mean Latino and Black here...“I’ve never had another Asian student in class with me...which makes it very isolating.” [*Asian/Asian American students*]
- “We are treated fairly equal by faculty and staff.” Other students offered, “They [staff] do not treat me with respect.” [*International student*]
- “It’s not very welcoming except when we are among one another.” [*African American student*]

- “I get all the extra time, notes, and accommodations I need.” Other participants offered that mobility issues still exist. “It’s hard for people in wheelchairs or on crutches to get around.” [*Students with a disability*]
- “There is no fear of being overwhelmed by other groups on campus.” [*White man staff member*]
- “I feel like administration is pushing us aside. I feel like they’re bending over backwards to accommodate diversity and feel neglected as a White female.” [*White woman student*]
- Women staff felt that the male-dominated environment, lack of women in leadership positions, and recent change in campus policies have contributed to a chilly campus climate for Women at Providence. “The most influential people on campus are men...” [*Women staff members*]
- Faculty of Color felt strongly that the lack of effort by the institution to retain them was a great challenge. They were also disappointed with the amount of support they received from administration over issues that are blatantly racially motivated. Providence has become “a place of omission and neglect.” [*Faculty of Color*]
- “Women are held to a higher standard once we have children” [but one’s] “department won’t have the conversation about how or if family life impacts career progression.” [*White woman faculty member*]
- “I do not believe this is a safe space for me to be in, so I [may] leave.” [*Faculty member of Color*]
- “There is a White, male, conservative, Christian pressure to be really masculine. There is a strong stigma.” [*White Man Student*]

## **Theme 2: Perceptions of Negative Stereotyping**

Several focus group members offered that they perceived they were subjected to negative judgments, assumptions, and profiling due to their identity. Such experiences led some participants to be continually vigilant about their identity.

- “Professors always call me out to speak for others and be the Asian person.” [*Asian/Asian American student*]

- “My friend was in a photo shoot for Providence” [and although this individual was not pursuing a major in the Sciences] “they put her in a lab coat [for the picture]...how terrible.” [*Asian/Asian American student*]
- “You can’t have too many Black people in a group so we need to strategize because people will be scared of us all at once.” [*African/African American student*]
- “I’m afraid my grade will be lowered from the teacher feeling prejudice [toward LGBTQ people].” [*LGBTQ Student*]
- “Professors do not affirm our enrollment in science classes, for example one professor said women students will ‘never get science’ or ‘women students won’t survive in this class’.” [*White woman student*]
- “We are commonly perceived to be another Staff member of Color...people tend to mix you up.” [*Staff member of Color*]
- “Can we not only see Hispanics working in the cafeteria or bathrooms?” [*Latino/a student*]
- “We are put into stereotypical roles when referred to...for example; African American men are referred to as “coach” consistently.” [*Staff member of Color*]
- “Because you aren’t White...you have a challenge being taken seriously and getting promotions. I feel that I had to put more work into it.” [*Staff member of Color*]
- “There is a definite power structure and I am only able to get to a certain point where my male counterparts can get higher with the same experience.” [*Woman Faculty member*]
- Stereotyping was exacerbated by campus security alerts where alleged perpetrators are described as “Black or Hispanic only with a hoodie.” [*Latina/o student*]

### **Theme 3: Expressed Need for Additional Education/Awareness**

Several groups discussed the need for institutionally sponsored efforts to continue to raise awareness and increase communication regarding issues of “difference”, a burden that too often is borne by members of under-represented groups.

- [We are] “tired of being teachers” or having “teachable moments” with colleagues or members of the campus community...it’s tiring when every moment is a teaching moment.” [*Staff member of Color*]

- “There’s not a lot of interaction between the races.” *[White Man Student]*
- “There is a lack of communication between the international students’ office and faculty to find ways to make international students feel more comfortable.” *[International Student]*
- [There is]...“a general lack of awareness of the campus climate for White Men Faculty and Staff...is anyone really thinking about issues and concerns of White men?” *[White Man Faculty]*.
- “Education! Education on difference between members and society. Let’s have some queer sex ed. That would be a validating experience!” *[LGBTQ staff member]*
- There were also concerns expressed that as more Faculty and Staff of Color are hired, more opportunities for education about racial diversity will be necessary. “A wave of progressive and liberal Faculty of Color [is] clashing with the old boys club.” *[Faculty member of Color]*
- “It is essential that this education is promoted by leadership and through organized programming and not from Staff of Color themselves.” *[Staff member of Color]*
- “The campus has few options for the opportunity to be educated especially in LGBT issues as events are limited, don’t happen, or are cancelled.” *[LGBTQ student]*
- “Consider us [Asian/Asian-American Students] in all these factors around diversity and important conversations.” *[Asian/Asian American student]*
- “There needs to be more conversations on other religions, not just Western religions.” *[Student from spiritual affiliation other than Catholic]*

### **Process Forward**

Embarking on this climate assessment is further evidence of Providence College’s commitment to ensuring that all members of the community live a nurturing environment; one of inclusiveness and respect. The primary purpose of this project was to assess the climate at Providence College including how members of the community felt about issues related to inclusion and work-life issues. At a minimum the results add additional data to the current knowledge base and provide more information on the experiences and perceptions for several sub-populations within the Providence community.



While the findings in and of themselves may guide decision-making in regard to policies and practices at Providence College, it is important to note that the cultural fabric of an institution and unique aspects of each campus's environment must be taken into consideration when considering action plans based on these findings. Kezar and Eckels (2002a, 2002b) and Zane (2002) note the importance of campus climate and culture to a successful transformational change initiative. They found that transformational change requires support from senior administrators, collaborative leadership, a bold vision for change, staff development, and a series of visible actions. An overarching commitment to a single unified aspiration, such as creating a community of difference (Tierney, 1993) is necessary for successful organizational transformation.

The current project's goal, to engage and solicit constructive feedback from members of the campus community, is one of several initiatives implemented to address the tenets outlined in both the College's Strategic Plan and the Strategic Plan for Diversity. It is recommended that Providence College develop measurable actions to build on the strengths and address the challenges outlined in this report. To that end, the process for the development of specific actions will begin with a series of faculty, staff, and student action forums facilitated by the climate project members that will be held in February 2014. The purpose of the action forums is to develop 2-3 specific and measurable actions that can be accomplished in the next year. In March, the facilitators will reconvene and discuss the actions that were developed in the community action forums and those recommended by the senior leadership. The committee will develop 1-3 actions based on all of the community feedback. From April 2014 –June 2105, the actions will be communicated to the community and integrated into the Strategic Plan. Updates on the progress of the actions will be communicated on a regular basis to the community. To respond to an ever-changing climate and to assess the influence of the actions initiated as a result of the current assessment it is also recommended that the assessment process be repeated regularly.

### References

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## Appendix A

### Focus Group Participants

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
White Women Faculty	7
White Women Staff	8
White Men Faculty	6
White Men Staff	10
White Women Students	9
White Men Students	5
Faculty of Color	7
Staff of Color	9
African/African American Students	10
Asian/Asian American Students	8
Latino/a Students	9
International Students	7
Student Athletes	10
Sexual and Gender Minority Students, Faculty, and Staff	11
Students, Faculty, and Staff with Disabilities	3
Students, Faculty, and Staff with Non-Catholic Spiritual and Religious Affiliation	10
<b>TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS</b>	<b>129</b>