

“Best Fit for Me”: Exploring the Role of Cultural Relevance to Improve Success for Underrepresented Minority Students in the Apparel Major

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Introduction

Based on primary challenges identified across a California state university system (CSU, 2021), this pilot study was developed to address equity gaps among Apparel Under-Represented Minority (URM) students who are of Hispanic, African American, and/or Native American backgrounds. Among Apparel freshmen, an equity gap between URM and Non-URM students was identified during 2017 to 2020. This pilot study aims to learn more about Apparel students based on challenges due to the pandemic and transition to support their success.

Purpose

This study is informed by Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP). Shifts in student demographics with minorities expected to be a majority, historical achievement gaps among minority students, and lack of diverse teachers prompted attention towards CRP (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). CRP aims to address student achievement, while accepting and affirming students' cultural identities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). We aim to apply three CRP principles: (1) identity and achievement that includes attention to students' identity, culture, multiple perspectives, affirming diversity, and validation of home-community cultures, (2) equity and excellence, which involves recognizing the distinct needs of students and holding students to high standards, (3) student-teacher relationships includes being caring, maintaining a connection, interaction, and creating a welcoming classroom atmosphere. This informed the following research questions: (1) Are there Culturally Relevant (CR) factors that motivated students to major in Apparel? (2) What influences students' sense of achievement, excellence, and student-teacher relationships? (3) What are primary barriers experienced by students? And (4) how can faculty improve the classroom experience?

Methods

Focus groups were prepared with culturally relevant approaches (Rodriguez et al., 2011). Apparel students with similar social and cultural identities moderated the focus group sessions. Preparation involved reading relevant literature (Danner et al., 2018), participating in a workshop to create a psychologically safe environment, and conducting an in-person mock session. Students in pre-determined Apparel courses were recruited during February 2023 through a Qualtrics online interest and consent form as a convenient sample. Nineteen students expressed interest, and seven students participated in four in-person focus group sessions hosted during February and March 2023. Focus group sessions were audio recorded with an assigned primary

and secondary moderator. Interviews were transcribed, moderators reviewed the transcripts and developed a code book for qualitative data analysis. Dedoose software was used to apply codes to the four transcripts. With high levels of agreement among two researchers, excerpts were exported for further analysis to address major research questions.

Results & Analysis

Participants

All participants were in the Apparel major with five focusing on Retail and two from the Apparel Production option. Participants included one senior, four juniors, and two freshmen. Their race and ethnicity included four Hispanic students, two Asian students, and one White student. There were six female participants and one male participant. They were between the ages of 20 to 21. Three participants were the first in their family to attend college and two transferred to the university. Two participants were working part-time. Students who entered as freshmen expected to graduate in a 4-year timeline, and transfer students expected to graduate in a 2-to-3-year timeline.

Focus Group

Cultural Relevant Factors. The students in this study identified several CR factors that influenced them to choose the Apparel major. This includes the availability of the Apparel major, family, and influence of family, friends, or high school-community college teachers. Participants expressed their interest in fashion and seeking a university that can meet their distinct interests. Some shared experiences and concerns with fashion and art schools, which would not provide a traditional university experience, concerns with expenses, and desire to be close to home. Students expressed holding themselves to a higher standard with intentional efforts to seek a 4-year university with a “learn by doing” approach that includes hands-on activities, not only lectures. Additionally, students expressed being held to a high standard by their family. As an example, first generation students expressed being role models for siblings and feeling strong familial support, which can add pressure.

Support for Student Success. Participants expressed several aspects that impacted their sense of achievement, excellence, and student-teacher relationships. A major theme was that student-teacher relationships impacted their sense of success, especially based on whether they felt comfortable asking questions. Students appreciated a welcoming classroom environment, feeling like the faculty wanted them to learn, and willingness to answer questions. They appreciated learning about faculty’s professional and personal experiences for motivation. Other support included being in-person for classes and access to campus resources, such as cultural centers, clubs, or dorms. Having friends in the same department, or from a previous school was helpful for students to share common experiences. However, some students found joining social groups or making friends challenging since it is a commuter campus where students may not live nearby and drive everyday.

Barriers. Students identified several challenges related to the pandemic, transition, and mental health. Students shared challenges during the pandemic with courses that were hard to engage in a meaningful way and lack of a “learn by doing” approach. Nonetheless, students expressed that the pandemic allowed them to take more courses and get good grades since they

were at home. When the mode of instruction shifted to in-person, many continued to try to hold themselves to a high standard to get good grades and expressed challenges with the course expectations, attention span, and additional time to commute. They also felt social anxiety and difficulty making friends. Some students expressed mental health challenges, such as feeling anxious or depression, and needed additional social support.

Recommendations to Improve Experience. Students provided several recommendations for faculty to improve the classroom and overall experience. They expressed interest in more engaging and interactive lecture sessions for active learning. This can contribute towards building a stronger sense of community beyond regular group work in classes. New students also felt like they needed more guidance through the resources available, and a need to find a “safe space.” Students expressed areas where communication between students and faculty can be improved, need for flexibility, need for a consistently welcoming environment, and additional resources (i.e., faculty time, tutoring).

Conclusion

This pilot study provides foundational knowledge regarding Culturally Relevant approaches to support success of underrepresented minority students in the Apparel major. Participants of this study expressed being heavily influenced by their families and having distinct needs based on their personal expectations. Adopting active learning experiences that are welcoming with opportunities for social engagement can help improve their sense of success. This pilot study informed a subsequent Culturally Relevant Apparel faculty workshop and Supplemental Instruction practice-based approaches during Spring 2023. Future research can include qualitative interview data collection with a larger, purposive sample to verify results and expand Culturally Relevant approaches to support student success, especially to reduce equity gaps and improve student graduation.

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