



Civil Rights Pilgrimage Immersion Experience

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the relatively-homogenous population of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire campus and surrounding community, a twice-yearly Civil Rights Pilgrimage immersion experience provides an opportunity for students to enhance their multicultural competence and experience diversity in ways not fostered by the community make-up of Eau Claire.

The Civil Rights Pilgrimage domestic-intercultural immersion experience provides an opportunity for UW-Eau Claire students to learn about key individuals, events, and other aspects surrounding the American Civil Rights Movement on a national basis. Students spend ten days immersed in the Deep South to learn about the Movement, visit major sites of significance to the Movement from the 1950s to the 1970s, and hear firsthand accounts of experiences from people who were active in the Civil Rights Movement.

The Civil Rights Pilgrimage is an evaluation study of the impact of immersion experiences on the development of multicultural competence at the University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire. Research was conducted by distributing a survey before the ten-day trip to test previous knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement; this survey also included the Modern Racism Scale, testing each participant's level of racist beliefs and personal holdings. When the trip was completed the students were given the same survey, with satisfaction questions about the trip added. With the variations in participant's responses we, as a research team, were able to evaluate the differences in knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement and the individual's racist attitudes. Their answers to the knowledge-based questions were accurate and insightful. The participants developed a progressive notion of diversity today from looking at it directly from the past, present, and future perspectives.

Researchers addressed several key questions in this study:

-How do participants' individual movements on the Modern Racism Scale differ between stand-alone immersion experiences and course-embedded immersion experiences?

-If a participant is ethnically diverse, does that participant's movement on the Modern Racism Scale occur at a different level?

METHODS

Pre-tests were given to participants on a voluntary basis on the first day of the Civil Rights Pilgrimage to test the pre-existing feelings and ideas the participants had about racism and social justice. After the ten-day immersion, a post-test was sent out to all participants via email. The post-test was voluntary and no monetary reward or prize was given. The sample size was 16 completing both pre and post surveys. The average age was 20.3 years with a mix of majors represented. Fourteen self-identified Caucasians, one self-identified Hispanic/Latino, and one self-identified Asian person.

Pre-tests were also given to another group. Twelve students chose to participate in WMNS 222: Women of the American Civil Rights Movement, the companion course for the Pilgrimage. Nine took the pre-test during the first few days of the course, and six completed the post-test upon return. Because there were problems with the survey system, the post-tests were printed and handed out individually. This made it difficult to collect all the tests and opened up our study to human error. Only three of the students in the WMNS 222 course completed both the pre- and post-tests, resulting in a remarkably small sample size. The average age of those three students was 19 and represented a mix of ethnicities/races: one Caucasian, one African American, and one Hispanic/Latino person.

RESULTS

There were no significant results on the Modern Racism Scale for the class or trip participants. There were, however, significant results for seven of the eleven questions created to examine the participants' ideas about social justice and diversity issues. Although the Modern Racism Scale is usually the main focus of the survey, the results from the second set of questions allow another look into the transformation of the participants' ideas about their past involvement in social justice and how to deepen their current involvement.

Unfortunately, we had too small of a sample size from the WMNS 222 class to yield results of any significance or reliability; however, it is interesting to note that students in the class were more ethnically diverse than students on the trip, in general. Arguably, although not tested, this factor could have positively served to increase the awareness and understanding of diversity and social justice issues among class and trip participants alike.

The questions from the pre- and post-surveys that yielded significant results from the participants were:

- *I have knowledge of diversity issues*
- *My knowledge of diversity issues informs my involvement in social justice initiatives*
- *My involvement in community service activities has enhanced my knowledge of issues of social justice.*
- *I believe experiential learning is an important component of the educational experience*
- *There is an important connection between social justice, service learning, and experiential learning.*
- *I have engaged in activities to develop my multicultural competence.*
- *Cultural immersion experiences are an ideal way to achieve multicultural competence.*

Students responded to these questions on a Likert scale, with choices of response including: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.

MOVEMENT OF TRIP PARTICIPANTS ON MODERN RACISM SCALE

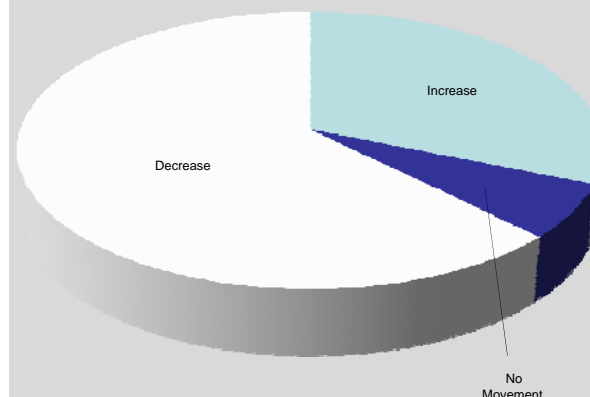


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ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

"It is widely recognized among contemporary social scientists that racial prejudice is expressed more covertly in American society today than it was before the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s" (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1999; Sears, 1988). Immersion experience class research has been on the rise due to the impact it has on the students. The participation has proven to have a positive impact on the students' learning, and the results have shown that their level of cultural awareness and sensitivity has increased (Canfield, 2006; Seaman, 2001). The research also correlates to the effect of multicultural courses. Not only can they heighten the students' awareness of social problems (e.g. to confronting minorities), they can promote more of an open attitude (Hill & Augoustinos, 2001; Smith, Roberts, & Smith, 1997). Current numbers indicate that most universities require a diversity course. Fifty-eight percent of universities require a specific course and 42% require at least two or more (Arredondo, 2009).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue to offer the Civil Rights Pilgrimage as a high-impact intercultural-domestic immersion experience at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
- Expand this data set through a continuance of data collection in the longitudinal study.
- Explore additional options with potential to provide students with domestic-intercultural immersion experiences with a focus on social justice issues and appreciation and awareness of diversity.

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