Brown
Alumni Magazine ONLINE

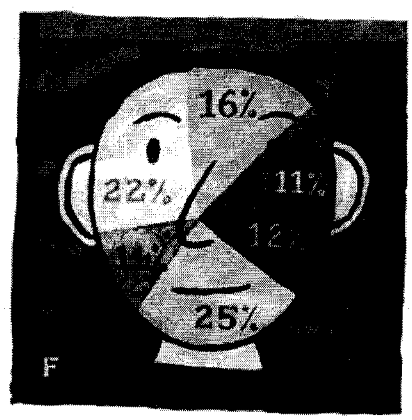
March/April 2002

The Face of Diversity

How accurate are student perceptions of Brown's racial mix?

By Joachim Krueger and Jordan Robbins

According to a recent poll reported in the *New York Times*, only three out of ten people believe that race plays a major role in shaping their identity. But statistics often obscure one story while telling another. One might suspect, for example, that race has a relatively small influence on a white person's self-image while members of minority groups are more conscious of the role their racial status plays in their lives. In fact, being part of a minority group can have a variety of psychological consequences; members can feel unique and special, but they can also feel marginalized or disempowered.



(Jeffrey Fisher)

The racial makeup of Brown's student body exists against this unsettled background of U.S. race relations. At least as far back as 1968, when student protesters at the University demanded higher admission rates for African Americans, the campus community has struggled to decide upon and implement the most desirable racial mix among students, faculty, and staff. In 1986, the Visiting Committee on Minority Life and Education, which developed goals for increasing minority membership in the Brown community, suggested that by 1990, 12 percent of students admitted should be African Americans, 8 percent should be Latinos, and a percentage "equal to the general admit rate" should consist of Asian Americans. In 2000, a follow-up committee found that Brown was still falling short of the 1986 recommendations and noted that the University had agreed to "effect in each entering class the black representation in the general populace."

Setting numerical goals for diversity is only the beginning. Acceptance rates may differ from admission rates, and graduation rates may differ from acceptance rates. Even when goals are met, they may not be faithfully reflected in the perceptions of the racial mix on campus. At worst, as the 1986 committee noted, "discussion of such things can turn sour, with whites believing that admissions standards have been unevenly and unfairly applied and minority students suspecting the worst about themselves."

To begin to examine the relationship between real and perceived diversity on campus, we conducted a survey of 164 Brown undergraduates. Respondents estimated the percentage of Brown students in each of the four main racial categories (Caucasian, African American, Latino, and Asian American) both now and in 1990. We then asked them to make the same estimates for the general population of the United States. Finally, we averaged their estimates and compared them with data from University records and from the U.S. census.

Even though the number of students sampled was small, we found that the estimates were generally accurate, regardless of the students' racial or ethnic makeup. Students, for example, were aware of the relative differences in group size and knew which groups had become larger and which had become smaller. As one might expect, estimates about Brown varied less from person to person than did estimates about the general population. This difference suggests that respondents were more certain about the racial composition of the student body than they were about that of the general population. Not surprisingly, we also found that students underestimated the size of the white majority both at Brown and in the United States and overestimated the total minority population. National surveys show similar misperceptions; to the statistically minded, they reflect little more than a generic regression to the mean—people generally tend to underestimate percentages that happen to be large and overestimate percentages that happen to be small.

But among all groups in our survey an intriguing misperception appeared. Although the students underestimated the size of the white majority both at Brown and in the United States, their estimates were more accurate for Brown than for the U.S. population. For 1990, their average estimate was that 69 percent of Brown students were white, compared with an actual representation of 71 percent—a 2 percent difference. In contrast, they estimated on average that 60 percent of the U.S. population was white, compared with an actual number of 76 percent—a 16 percent difference. For the year 2000, the estimate for Brown was 59 percent—3 percent less than the actual number—and the estimate for the country at large was 53 percent—17 percent less than the actual number.

What do these results suggest about student perceptions of the racial mix on campus and off? What do they imply about perceptions of fair racial and ethnic representation? Any answers based on this small survey are bound to be speculative, but the numbers suggest that students believe that the white majority is larger at Brown than in the United States generally, even though the data show that the opposite is the case. To these students, Brown would have to reduce its white majority to mirror what they see as the greater diversity in the country overall. This may help explain why the racial composition of the Brown community continues to be such a pressing issue.

Brown has long endorsed an ideal of pluralism, which is as appealing as it is hard to define. The 1986 Visiting Committee report noted that a pluralistic community is one in which different groups are "willing to affirm each other's dignity," whereas diversity demands that "various groups are merely present." In a 1991 report, the Third World Coalition emphasized that "pluralism must begin with diversity, with a significant number of students of color on campus." Numerical diversity, according to this view, is the first step toward a truly pluralistic community. But as our survey suggests, even changes in numerical diversity may remain ineffectual if they are systematically misperceived. It might be easier for the University to meet its goal if the gap between perception and reality were to close.

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