

Report for “Fostering an ‘Open’ Culture at Empire State College: An Ethnographic Study of Niagara Frontier Center Participant Observations” (AY 2013-2014)

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ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss the AY 2013-2014 survey results for the Buffalo Project, a full-scale ethnographic study of non-traditional student perceptions of culture at SUNY Empire State College-Niagara Frontier Center (hereafter referred to as NFC). Now in its second year, this project has been successfully impacting cultural understanding and the development of student-centered programming at NFC. Data utilized in this stage of this project (AY 2013-2014), combined Western New York (WNY) regional census reports, ESC census data, and general findings from formal surveys to discuss the level of cultural understanding at NFC and whether it correlated with student academic inclusiveness. Previous survey data (AY 2010-2013) indicated a general lack of cultural understanding among student populations and suggested that culturally diverse students were not being adequately engaged. Results of the AY 2013-2014 formal survey reaffirmed many of the previous survey results, but also yielded new information about NFC culture not previously considered. Information from all survey data collected (AY 2010-2014) has been used to create cultural activities to engage students at the Center. Positive feedback and regular attendance at these events by students, staff, and faculty suggest the validity of the data set, support of diversity initiatives at NFC, and benefits of student opinions in inclusive academic programming. The tentative results of this data collection are articulated in the report presented below.

INTRODUCTION

The premise of this research project is twofold. First, it builds upon the mission of SUNY-Empire State College, which states that ESC aims to provide “rigorous programs that connect individuals’ unique and diverse lives to their personal learning goals” (“College Mission,” 2014). It also advances the College’s commitments to “promoting social justice and a sustainable world through responsiveness to human and social circumstances” and to “ensuring a healthy democracy that recognizes and respects diversity in all its forms” (“College Mission,” 2014). It does so first by assessing the current state of cultural openness among students at NFC, and then by using those data to inform the development of programming directed at fostering cross-cultural understanding.

Secondly, this project builds upon recent socio-cultural research into student engagement and retention in collegiate settings. Decades of research stemming from Vincent Tinto’s seminal work on the causes of student attrition have suggested a positive link between student engagement and degree completion (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, & Kinzie, 2008; Tinto, 1990; Tinto, 2006). Toward this end, the researchers sought to discover and develop student activities that would afford opportunities for co-curricular and extra-curricular engagement, while simultaneously providing students with experiences that would enhance cultural understanding. The outline presented below is the realization of this full-fledged research project.

NEED AND PURPOSE

Recent studies have suggested that engagement with diversity is a boon to academic achievement. In a study conducted at the University of Michigan, F. Nelson Laird found that “students with more experiences with diversity, particularly enrollment in diversity courses and positive interactions with diverse peers, are more likely to score higher on academic self-confidence, social agency, and critical thinking disposition” (Laird, 2005, p. 365). Others have found that interactions with diverse peers, in both formal and informal settings, are associated with positive learning and democracy outcomes, largely due to the way that unexpected experiences cause students to question established beliefs (Bowman & Brandenberger, 2011; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). These findings suggest that student engagement with diversity not only benefits the College’s bottom line of retention and persistence, but improves academic outcomes as well.

One of the key barriers to cultural openness in higher education has been the discrepancy in equity and access experienced by students that have been historically underrepresented in higher education. Several scholars across the disciplines have examined the negative impact that demographic divides have on student academic performance, retention, and persistence (Bridgeman & Wendler, 1991; Brown & Cross, 1997; Daugherty & Lane, 1999; Galicki & McEwen, 1989; Lu, 1994; Porter, 1990; Schram, 1996). For these reasons, scholars have pointed to the necessity of “mapping diversity efforts” (Halulani, Haiker, & Lancaster, 2010)—that is, of the need for institutions of higher education to engage in self-inquiry around the issues of diversity and inclusion. At the same time, current research has acknowledged that diversity efforts are too often evaluated from an institutional point-of-view, and thus has increasingly attempted to assess the student perspective. Some institutions, for example, have asked undergraduates to complete surveys or interviews in which they define diversity, evaluate their attitudes toward diversity and express how willing and/or motivated they are to learn about diversity issues (Cuba et al., 2011; Littleford, 2013).

However, the vast majority of current research has concentrated on the experience of traditional college students, aged 18-24. In order to expand on this current research trend, this study utilized a non-traditional adult student population from one of SUNY Empire State College’s seven regional centers, the Niagara Frontier Center, located in Western New York. A sampled population at NFC was used to determine what factors impact a non-traditional student body and if they are to those impacting traditional aged students. To address this research focus, two sets of criteria were collected and measured in this survey project: 1) sociocultural demographics and 2) individual perceptions of culture in NFC and WNY as interpreted by our sample population of students. It is our ultimate goal to use this data to gain a better understanding of how culture impacts NFC students and determine if, in fact, NFC is a “culturally open” regional center.

DEFINING “CULTURALLY OPEN”

In order to verify our results, it is important to first define the phrase “culturally open.” Within academia, many scholars have discussed the role of cultural openness, usually deeming it

a form of intercultural competency (Bennett, 1993; Byram, 1997; Chen & An, 2009; Deardorff, 2006, Deardorff, 2008; Deardorff, 2009(a); Deardorff, 2009 (b); Deardorff, 2010; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). As Sharma et al. notes, “Cultural openness is determined by willingness to interact with people from other cultures and experience some of their artifacts” (Sharma et al., 1995). Many of the current terms used in educational research (such as “multiculturalism,” “cultural sensitivity,” and “cultural awareness”) imply tolerance of “others” but not experience with or adoption of different peoples’ cultural norms, beliefs, and attitudes. The use of this term for this project implies our desire to be inclusive of all representative student cultures at NFC.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

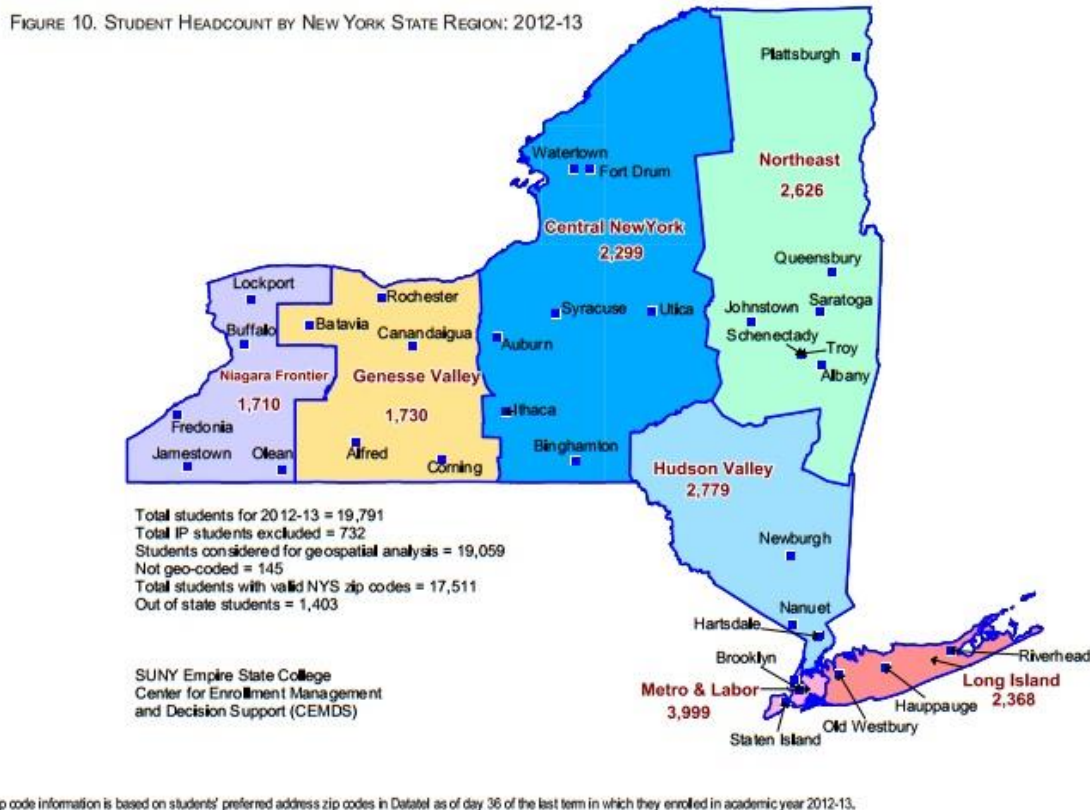
In order to understand the research design and methods employed in this project, it is first important to contextualize the student population at NFC. As a geographically distributed campus, SUNY-ESC occupies a unique position within the SUNY system. Rather than centrally organized at a residential campus, ESC serves students across the state, both on site and at a distance, at regional centers and units, as well as online. To illustrate this point, Figure 1 represents AY 2012-2013 students enrolled at ESC regions, both at centers (indicated in red lettering) and in units (indicated by blue squares) across the state.¹ As indicated in the figure, NFC served 1,710 students during the AY 2012-2013, which represents 8.6% of the overall student population (1,710:17,511). Included in this total are all students who are served by the College in the western NY region. It is important to note that this does not mean that all students are considered NFC students; some may affiliate with the School for Graduate Studies and/or Center for Distance Learning (CDL).² Further, surveys in this project were distributed to all students in the region, not just those who attend NFC.³

¹ More recent data was unavailable at the time of this writing.

² For the purpose of this Figure, it is worth noting that student enrollments were calculated using the geocoding of valid zip codes. (To learn more see, *AY 2012-2013 Fact Book*, Center for Enrollment Management and Decision Support, 2014, pg. 47).

³ A number of mass emails were sent to students; some included Graduate and CDL students and others did not. As a result, this may have an impact on our findings and skew our results towards a more NFC-centric audience than a regional focus, as we first intended. We may have collected more information if the same student population was solicited during the entire AY 2013-2014.

Figure 1. Total Student Headcount at SUNY Empire State College in AY 2012-2013



A. Research Question and Objectives

The scope of this research is to measure the varied cultural experiences of students of the NFC community as defined through the concept of “cultural openness.” Using the most recent demographic data from ESC, cited in Figure 1, as well as US census data from 2010, the researchers collected information over the course of the AY 2013-2014 year using the following processes. Based on the aforementioned definition and literature, the following research question was developed for this project:

1. How can ESC/NFC become a more “culturally open” regional center?

Based on this question, we developed the following research objectives. Our hope is to:

1. **Understand** and or construct a localized cultural history for ESC/NFC students and faculty in the context of the surrounding WNY cultural populations;
2. **Comment** on the role of culture in each representative demographic group at ESC/NFC and the greater Buffalo region; and
3. **Determine** what elements of “culture openness” have been identified in or around ESC/NFC that may have positively or negatively impacts on the learning processes for diverse populations.

B. Methodological Overview

Analytical Methods

For this project, we organized, cataloged, and analyzed the data set associated with the AY 2013-2014 Buffalo Project survey (i.e., the survey consent form, participant profile form, and participant observation form; see appendices). We used this information to deduce culturally-based behavioral patterns, themes, and general observations reflected in the data set, following typical Grounded Theory analytical approaches to data analysis.

Initially, we sorted the surveys by submission type (emailed, mailed, hardcopy/print, or online form submission) and then processed all surveys according to the following procedures. All printed and mailed surveys were color-coded to maintain student anonymity. Using the coding process set up in prior years of this study, these surveys were classified as follows:

Table 1. Color Coding for Student Participants Anonymity

Yellow = student participant survey Number
 Pink = Emailed Surveys
 Blue = Printed Surveys
 Orange = Mailed Surveys

Once all documents were coded, names were removed and a list of all AY 2013-2014 survey participants were compiled in a spreadsheet titled *Confidential Participant Names and Numbers AY 2013-2014* and stored on a flash drive in a secure file cabinet.⁴ Once the rough sort was complete, the Participant Profile Forms and Participant Survey Forms were grouped into two spreadsheets titled *Participant Survey Form AY 2013-2014* and *Participant Profile Data AY 2013-2014*. Once sorted, all data was analyzed according to their respective variables.

⁴ The Co-Primary Investigator (Co-PI), Dr. Rhianna C. Rogers, continues to be responsible for ensuring data integrity and safety monitoring for human subjects who are involved in the research. The data that will be monitored and collected, including respondents' survey responses, and will be overseen by Dr. Rogers; additionally, all discussions and potential participant feedback for this project will be collected and stored by the PI. Digital records with identifiable information will be stored separately for verification purposes. The PIs will be responsible for SEPs. If SEPs do arise the PI will meet and report them in an expeditious manner. Due to the low risk, we believe that little could warrant stopping the study, save a breach in security of de-identified data, in which case the project would be stopped. Dr. Rhianna C. Rogers will be responsible for communicating any negative outcomes to the IRB expeditiously. We hope that materials created in this study can be used for future educational purposes within Empire State College as a whole and, more specifically, at NFC and in the greater WNY region.

Table 2. *Participant Survey Form AY 2013-2014* Data Fields

1. Participant ID
2. IP Address (if applicable)
3. First and Last Name (if applicable)
4. Question #1 Multiple Choice Response
5. Question #2 Multiple Choice Response
6. Question #3 Multiple Choice Response
7. Question #4 Multiple Choice Response
8. Question #5 Multiple Choice Response
9. Question #6 Multiple Choice Response
10. Question #7 Multiple Choice Response
11. Question #8 Multiple Choice Response
12. Question #9 Multiple Choice Response
13. Question #10 Multiple Choice Response
14. Question #11 Multiple Choice Response
15. Question #12 Multiple Choice Response
16. Question #13 Multiple Choice Response

Table 3. *Participant Profile Data AY 2013-2014* Data Fields

Participant Profile Form Data Fields

17. Participant ID
18. IP Address (if applicable)
19. First and Last Name (if applicable)
20. Question #1 Multiple Choice Response
21. Question #2 Multiple Choice Response
22. Question #3 Multiple Choice Response
23. Question #4 Multiple Choice Response
24. Question #5 Multiple Choice Response
25. Question #6 Multiple Choice Response
26. Question #7 Multiple Choice Response
27. Question #8 Multiple Choice Response
28. Question #9 Multiple Choice Response
29. Question #10 Multiple Choice Response
30. Question #11 Multiple Choice Response
31. Question #12 Multiple Choice Response
32. Question #13 Multiple Choice Response
33. Question #14 Multiple Choice Response
34. Question #15 Multiple Choice Response
35. Question #16 Multiple Choice Response
36. Question #17 Open-Ended Response
37. Question #18 Open-Ended Response
38. Question #18 Open-Ended Response

This information was tabulated and used to identify independent variables impacting the student population at NFC.

Sampling Methods

Students were provided with various opportunities to participate in this project. Mass emails were sent periodically during the term in order to include all students enrolled in Fall 01/Fall 02, Spring 01/Spring 02, and May A/B terms. The survey timeline initially submitted with this project because was revised when we failed to collect any surveys with the original time frame. Included below is a comparison of the original and revised timeframes.

Table 4. **Project Timeline** AY 2013-2014 Formal IRB Survey

Date	Survey Collection
Sept. 9-Dec. 20, 2013 (Fall 01 and Fall 02) ⁵	Collect data online and in person from students across ESC-NFC
Jan.-March 2014	Data Processing
April-May 2014	Report Write Up and Presentation

Table 5. **Modified Project Timeline** AY 2013-2014 Formal IRB Survey⁶

Date	Survey Collection
Sept. 9-June 20, 2014 (Fall 01/0, Spring 01/02 and Summer A/B) ⁷	Collect data online and in person from students across ESC-NFC
June 2014	Data Processing
July 2014	Report Write Up and Presentation

C. Theoretical Overview

This project utilizes aspects of the Grounded Theory approach, first introduced by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), in conjunction with the quantitative principles of the multivariate analysis. Viewing this study through both of these lenses will allow us to use historical and contemporary research, survey and census data, and participant profile tabulations to observe the efficacy of NFC as a culturally open regional center and measure the impact of cultural openness on student performance, retention, and persistence. Participants completed and

⁵ It is important to note that no surveys were collected during the projected data collection period. As such, we had to extend data collection to the entire AY2013-2014 academic year to create a viable data set.

⁶ Based on the fact that we were not able to collect a sufficient amount of data during the projected data collection period, our subsequent timeline was modified. Here is a draft of our modified schedule.

⁷ It is important to note that no surveys were collected during the projected data collection period. As such, we had to extend data collection to the entire AY2013-2014 academic year to create a viable data set.

submitted formal surveys (AY 2013-2014) which documented the role of “cultural openness” in NFC and in the greater Buffalo area.

RESULTS⁸

A total of 1537 non-duplicated, students enrolled at NFC in AY 2013-2014 (Fall 01/0, Spring 01/02 and Summer A/B: AY 2013-2014); however, these calculations are based on students who reside within one of the 4 WNY counties not if they currently attend NFC as their home center. As such, this number may include students whose home location maybe either NFC, CDL, or the School for Graduate Studies.*

Table 6. AY 2013-2014 Student Enrollments at NFC*(2013 Fall 1 & 2, 2014 Spring 1 & 2, 2014 Summer A & B)

1537 - Total students from 4 WNY counties (Cattaraugus, Chautaugua, Niagara, Erie) enrolled at Empire State College

945 - NFC home location

476 - CDL home location

116 - GRAD program home location⁹

Between September and June 2014, 86 surveys were collected from NFC students, of which 67 were completed in their entirety. Those students who did not complete all three IRB forms (i.e., the survey consent form, the participant profile form, the participant survey form) were excluded in this sample. All Survey Monkey surveys, which constituted the vast majority of surveys in this sample, were digitally compiled and the results were exported into a spreadsheet.¹⁰ All other surveys were added to the associated *Confidential Participant Names and Numbers AY 2013-2014*, *Participant Survey Form AY 2013-2014*, *Participant Profile Data AY 2013-2014* spreadsheets.

⁸ For the purposes of this report, we have not included the 4 printed/emailed surveys. Those results will be calculated in a later publication.

⁹ As indicated in Figure 1, students at ESC are classified based on their county zip codes. Certain issues arise with this, including how to classify those students who do not have a valid zip code. Below are a few examples for AY 2013-2014.

6682 - **CDL** students noted as enrolled during the academic year

476 - coded with one of four WNY counties as home county

361 - no county code

110 - coded as "unknown"

1630 - **GRAD** program students noted as enrolled during the academic year

116 - coded with one of four WNY counties as home county

42 - no county code

47 - coded as "unknown"

¹⁰ This is a change from previous years, in which printed surveys were the most common submission format. This difference likely stems from the fact that printed surveys were not provided at Niagara Frontier Center Information Sessions, Fall 2012/2013 Business Residencies, and the 2013/2014 Student Art Showcases, as they had been in prior iterations of this project. At these events, 67 surveys were collected, and 63 were fully completed with all three IRB documents.

A. Participant Profile Data Sample

Table 7. Total Tabulations for Surveys Collected in AY 2013-2014 Formal Survey¹¹

Total AY 2013-2014	Total Incomplete	Total Complete
Print Surveys	4	4
Emailed Surveys	2	2
Survey Monkey Surveys	51	57
TOTALS	67	63

1. Describe the salient characteristics of the subjects including the age range, sex, institutional affiliation and any other special criteria.

As previously stated, this survey included **63** complete responses, which may include graduate, CDL, and undergraduate students. Information collected in the participant profile form and collected in the spreadsheet titled *Participant Survey Form AY 2013-2014* provided the following data related to age range, sex, and institutional affiliation. Below is a listing of said data. NOTE: We excluded duplicate and incomplete surveys when encountered as well as those completed beyond the June 2014 cut off period of this study.

Table 8. Total Tabulations for Student Ages

Answer Choices	Responses	
Under 20	0.00%	0
20 to 39	24.56%	14
40 to 49	35.09%	20
50 to 59	36.84%	21
60 to 69	3.51%	2
70 to 79	0.00%	0
Total		57

Table 9. Total Tabulations for Sex (M/F)

Answer Choices	Responses	
Female	77.19%	44
Male	21.05%	12
Other (please specify)	1.75%	1
Total		57

¹¹ NOTE: We excluded duplicate and incomplete surveys when encountered as well as those completed beyond the December 2012 cutoff period of this study.

Table 10. ESC Affiliation by Location or Program

Answer Choices	Responses	
Part-time student	48.21%	27
Full-time student	46.43%	26
Non-matriculated student	1.79%	1
NFC-Cheektowaga	66.07%	37
NFC-Olean	0.00%	0
NFC-Lockport	12.50%	7
NFC-Jamestown	5.36%	3
NFC-Fredonia	0.00%	0
NFC-CDL (Primary Learning Center)	3.57%	2
Total Respondents: 56		

Table 11. Total Tabulations for Racial Self Classification(s)¹²

Answer Choices	Responses	
American	57.89%	33
Italian-American	14.04%	8
Irish-American	22.81%	13
African-American	10.53%	6
German-American	8.77%	5
Native-American	7.02%	4
Hispanic/Latin-American	1.75%	1
Polish-American	7.02%	4
Middle Eastern-American	1.75%	1
Bi-Racial (please clarify) _____	0.00%	0
Multi-Racial (please clarify) _____	5.26%	3
Immigrant (please clarify) _____	0.00%	0
Other (please clarify) _____	7.02%	4
Total Respondents: 57		

Table 12. Length of Time Residing in WNY

Answer Choices	Responses	
0-5 years	3.51%	2
6-10 years	1.75%	1
11-15 years	1.75%	1
16-20 years	0.00%	0
21-25 years	8.77%	5
26 years or more	84.21%	48
Total Respondents: 57		

¹² Students were allowed to classify themselves in more than one category. The fact that so many elected to do so is a telling statistic.

Table 13. Total Tabulations for Military Students

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes, I have	10.53%	6
No, I have not	89.47%	51
Total		57

2. Explain the selection of special and/or vulnerable populations and, if there are alternatives, why they are not being used. Explain how the rights and welfare of these special populations will be protected.

No vulnerable populations were targeted for inclusion in this study (see comments in Data Safety section above and see Table 13 below); however, students were asked to self-classify as having a disability.¹³

Table 14. Total Tabulations Students with Disabilities (Self Classified)

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	21.43%	12
No	78.57%	44
Total Respondents: 56		

3. Explain how the subjects are to be recruited and what compensation, if any, is offered. Attach a copy of the recruiting materials (letter, poster, advertisement).

Participants were voluntarily recruited and asked to sign a consent form, as well as to complete the participant profile and participant survey forms. Though the PI is an instructor, only those students who consented had their experiences included in the analysis, including students who may have taken or are taking courses with the PI. Status of consent did not impact course

¹³ The risks for this project are minimal. As mentioned above, students' names were removed from the print documents and all survey participant names (both print and online) were stored in a separate location on a secure flash drive. The participants were fully informed of the experimental tasks before they consented, and only individuals who volunteered and provided consent were counted as participants. The participants were advised in the consent form that they could decline to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable and they could terminate their participation at any time (see Appendix A). Some students did elect to skip questions, but no students decided to terminate their involvement in the project. No adverse effects were encountered; however, we did note some students openly classified themselves as disabled (n= 12). Since we were not aware of all of the participants' personal histories, there was a possibility that we could have encountered "at risk" individuals in our survey population, including those who may be classified as "disabled, mentally disabled, and/or physically ill." However, the information collected in this study did not specifically target these populations or require that these individuals disclose any of the aforementioned information if they elected not to and skip the question. As such, we believe that these individuals' rights and welfare were not impacted by their participation in this project.

grades in any way. Each student was informed in writing that his or her participation in this study in no way impacted his or her grades in any way. Further, participation was wholly voluntary and data analysis did not take place until after final grades had been assigned.

Recruitment consisted of announcements via email and informed consent, participant profile, and participant survey forms delivered via email, as well as verbal announcements made in various courses and during various activity days at NFC. All verbal announcements for this project were given at NFC-Cheektowaga. NFC students in the units were provided only with email announcements. Some unit coordinators were given print versions of the survey; however, the digital survey was more readily used by unit participants.

In courses, the students were asked to volunteer for the study by one of the PIs. Signed consent forms were held in sealed envelopes until the appropriate time for data to be analyzed (see Tentative Timeline in Appendix A).

4. If relevant, describe how permission has been obtained from cooperating institution(s) – school, prison or other organization. For research within school districts, New York State law requires that the superintendent of schools grant permission, not the principals. Attach the approval letters.

N/A

B. Participant Survey Data Sample

Table 15. Total Tabulations for Survey Question #1: “I believe that ESC-NFC is a culturally open institution?” in AY 2013-2014 Formal Survey

Answer Choices	Responses	
Strongly Agree	47.54%	29
Agree	32.79%	20
Unsure	18.03%	11
Disagree	1.64%	1
Strongly Disagree	0.00%	0
Total		61

Table 16. Total Tabulations for Survey Question #2: “I believe that cultural understanding is important to the college learning environment?” in AY 2013-2014 Formal Survey

Answer Choices	Responses	
Strongly agree	52.46%	32
Agree	36.07%	22
Unsure	6.56%	4
Disagree	3.28%	2
Strongly disagree	1.64%	1
Total		61

Table 17. Total Tabulations for Survey Question #10: “I am unsure how to approach others about their cultural backgrounds?” in AY 2013-2014 Formal Survey

Answer Choices	Responses	
Strongly agree	3.33%	2
Agree	23.33%	14
Unsure	18.33%	11
Disagree	38.33%	23
Strongly disagree	16.67%	10
Total		60

Table 18. Total Tabulations for Survey Question #13: “I consider myself culturally sensitive?” in AY 2013-2014 Formal Survey

Answer Choices	Responses	
Strongly agree	28.33%	17
Agree	51.67%	31
Unsure	16.67%	10
Disagree	3.33%	2
Strongly disagree	0.00%	0
Total		60

Table 19. Total Tabulations for Survey Question #14: “I believe that other peoples' languages are important to include in the college environment?” in AY 2013-2014 Formal Survey

Answer Choices	Responses	
Strongly agree	18.03%	11
Agree	36.07%	22
Unsure	21.31%	13
Disagree	14.75%	9
Strongly disagree	9.84%	6
Total		61

INTERPRETATION AND CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this study, research strategies have been used to discuss the “cultural openness” of NFC; however, the data has not yet been analyzed collectively.

A. Participant Profile Data Revisited

A closer examination of the sampled demographics yielded a few expected and unexpected results. The NFC age range, sex, and institutional affiliation fell somewhat outside the latest college-wide student demographic data (corresponding to AY 2012-2013),¹⁴ collected

¹⁴ Data has not yet been processed for AY 2013-2014, which may impact this comparison.

and analyzed in 2013 by the Center for Enrollment Management and Decision Support. NFC sex ratios indicated that 77.19% (44:57) of the participants were female, while 27% (12:57) were their male counterparts, and 1.75% (1:57) identified as “other.” NFC’s age range included participants representing ages 20-69 years, with the largest percentages representing those within the classification of 40-49 years 35.09% (20:57) and 50-59 years 36.84% (21:57). These figures illustrate a somewhat inflated calculation compared to the 2012-2013 college-wide statistics, which stated that only 61.6% of the overall student population was female. This may indicate that NFC has a larger population of female students than do other locations across the College. Additionally, since the mean age of an ESC student is currently 35.4 years, our data suggests that NFC serves an older population than do other parts of the College.¹⁵ As would be expected, the vast majority of survey participants were full-time (n= 27) and part-time (n= 26) attendees of NFC; no non-matriculated students responded. This could indicate a lack of involvement among these students within everyday activities of this Center. In addition, most of the students who participated in this survey were from NFC-Cheektowaga (n= 37); however there was some representation from other Center/Unit locations, including Lockport (n=7), Jamestown (n=3), and NFC-CDL (n=2). Students in NFC-Olean and NFC-Fredonia did not participate in this survey, which may indicate a lack of effective communication between the main location in Cheektowaga, the survey coordinators, and NFC units; unfamiliarity with the PIs; or a lack of involvement among students in their unit’s student life. Some of the same demographic results were again reflected in this survey data set, including higher than expected household income, increased interest in the preservation of neighborhood and WNY identities, and a high number of students who classified themselves as first-generation college attendees.

B. Participant Survey Data Revisited

Unlike the demographic comparative data used in the previous section, ESC currently does not have a formalized climate survey for students.¹⁶ As such, this study fills a much-needed gap for NFC data collection. Information collected in the participant survey form has been imported into the spreadsheet titled *Participant Profile Form AY 2013-2014*.¹⁷ Below is a listing of said data. NOTE: We have not yet processed this information and have only included it for references purposes. It is our intent to process some of this data in upcoming publications.

A closer examination of the sampled survey questions yielded a few expected and unexpected results. As we found in the previous survey, the vast majority of students perceived NFC as a “culturally open” regional center. However, it should be noted that a tentative analysis of all questions suggests that students held differing perceptions about what it means to be culturally open. For example, while 88.53% (54:61) of students either agreed or strongly agreed

¹⁵ 2011-2012 Fact Book: *Prepared by the Center for Planning and Institutional Effectiveness*. Saratoga Springs: State University of New York, Empire State College, Revised 12/2012, pg. 37

¹⁶ The Center for Enrollment Management and Decision Support currently does have published information about for student climate data.

¹⁷ We excluded duplicate and incomplete surveys when encountered as well as those completed beyond the June 2014 cut off period of this study.

that cultural understanding is important to the college learning environment; however, only 54.1% (33:61) agreed or strongly agreed that other peoples' languages are important to that environment. Further, a full 24.59% (15:61) of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed that other peoples' language are important to the college learning environment. This data suggests that the connection between language and culture may not be clear to a number of students. And while students were quick to cite the importance of cultural understanding, a notable percentage either disagreed that they were culturally sensitive (3.33% (2:60)) or responded that they were unsure (16.67% (10:60)) —numbers that may in fact be artificially low, but illustrate a desire to be perceived as culturally sensitive and/or tolerant even if they may not be so.

Additionally, while students generally expressed a willingness to learn about other cultures, survey data indicates that many are not completely comfortable with approaching individuals from different cultural backgrounds. In the survey, 26.66% (16:60) of students either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, "I am unsure about how to approach others about their cultural backgrounds," and 18.33% (11:60) responded that they were unsure about this statement and how they interpreted its meaning. A number of factors may be influencing these results. First, as demonstrated in the participant profile data, the overwhelming majority (84.21%) of students have lived in the Western New York region for twenty-five years (n= 48) or more and, as a result, these students may not have had firsthand interaction with cultures that they perceive as foreign or unfamiliar. Second, to further reinforce this insularity, the Buffalo region has historically been one of the most segregated communities in the nation, so cross-cultural contact even within the region may be limited (Yin, 2009). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is currently no formal diversity requirement in the general education curriculum, so while students are eager to learn about other cultures, there is no compulsory means of doing so. As a result, the curricular and co-curricular activities associated with the project, described below, are a critical way to fill that gap.

BENEFITS OF PROJECT AND ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES

As indicated in the abstract, the collection of data from this project is meant to help NFC improve its connection to diverse student populations and become a more "culturally open" regional center. Through the dissemination of student survey results and the solicitation of feedback from students, faculty, and administration, we had hoped to gain insight about the best ways to implement activities that reflected the views that students articulated in the survey. What we have found, over the years, is very positive. Since the initial pilot study of this project through to the formal research survey (AY 2010-2014), students, faculty, and staff have attended many events originally associated with this study. New NFC initiatives and committees have been formed to take into account the student voice, which reflect an increased awareness of students' diverse opinions about their learning experiences at NFC. Below are a sampling of activities and initiatives that grew, organically out of the survey results and activities.

1. Establishment of a semi-annual Cultural Diversity Luncheon/Global Food Fest for NFC faculty, staff, and students. (Fall 2010, Spring 2013, Fall 2013)
2. Establishment of a semi-annual Buffalo Project Academic Plenary Series. (See Appendix D for presentations). (Fall 2010-present)

3. Community presentations about the Buffalo Project. Lectures listed below. (Fall 2013-present)
4. Development of a culturally sensitive, NFC Student Club- SUNY ESC NFC CARES (Spring 2012-present)
 - a. Club Website: <http://sunyesccares.wordpress.com/>
 - b. Club Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/SUNYESCCARES?fref=ts>

NEED FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It is our view that this work has a lot to offer the broader anthropological, ethnographic, and student service communities of this region as well as those researchers who are specifically interested in the application of cultural research to broader educational concepts of cultural sensitivity, student retention, academic performance and inclusivity. We believe studies like this one have the potential to improve student retention as well as to increase awareness of cultural diversity and interests in college settings. In addition, we also believe projects like this one have the potential to allow instructors, in both local and regional capacities, the ability to better tailor their studies to students' diverse cultural interests, which ultimately will allow for the enhancement of learning opportunities for future students and their retention by this institution. Moving forward, our goal is to disseminate the results of this project to the broader academic community in order to encourage the creation of similar projects across SUNY-ESC and beyond.

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APPENDIX A

SURVEY CONSENT FORM

Purpose of the Research. We are conducting an ethnographic study of cultural openness at Empire State College's Niagara Frontier Center (ESC-NFC) and its affiliated Units. This project utilizes aspects of the Grounded Theory approach, first introduced by Drs. Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), in conjunction with the quantitative principles of the Multivariant Approach. We hope that the combination of both theoretical approaches will allow us to use historical research, survey and census data, as well as participant profile tabulations to observe the effectiveness of NFC as a culturally open regional center. Participants will submit surveys in order to communicate with external and internal audiences the role of cultural in the learning process at NFC.

Procedure & Duration. This study will include a short survey and participant profile form about your experiences with culture at ESC-NFC.

Voluntary Nature. Participation is voluntary and responses will be kept confidential. You have the option to not respond to any survey questions that you choose. Participation or nonparticipation will not impact your relationship with Empire State College. Though the PI is an instructor, only those students who consent will have their experiences included in the analysis, including students who may have taken or are taking courses with the PI. Status of consent will not impact course grades in any way. You are free to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.

Confidentiality. During this survey you will not be asked for your name. Your survey responses will not impact your grades at ESC in anyway.

The results from the study could be presented in educational settings and at professional conferences, and the results might be published in a professional journal. No identifying information will be presented in any capacity to protect your anonymity.

Risks and Benefits. Whenever one works with the internet there is always the risk of compromising privacy, confidentiality, and/or anonymity. We've taken precautions to insure this does not happen but if you participate in the online survey and submit answers, you should close your browser.

The results of the study will be used for improving future courses at Empire State College, to improve learning experiences at ESC-NFC, and for scholarly purposes only.

Compliance Officer, Empire State College, One Union Avenue, Saratoga Springs, NY 12866-4391; 518 587-2100 ext. 2358.

Implied Consent. By signing below, you imply that you have read this information and agree to participate in this research. By signing this informed consent to participate you affirm that you are at least 18 years of age. Thank you for your participation.

Participant Name (Printed): _____

Date: _____

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX B
PARTICIPANT PROFILE FORM

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Rhianna C. Rogers
RESEARCH ASSISTANT: Maria L. Tripi

Theoretical Overview:

This project utilizes aspects of the Grounded Theory approach, first introduced by Drs. Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), in conjunction with the quantitative principles of the Multivariant Approach. We hope that the combination of both theoretical approaches will allow us to use historical research, survey and census data, as well as participant profile tabulations to observe the effectiveness of NFC as a culturally open regional center. Participants will submit surveys in order to communicate with external and internal audiences the role of cultural in the learning process at NFC. To do so, this project utilizes multiple distribution platforms to collect information, including mini-disclaimer lectures and online postings that correlate with the use and collection of online web surveys and in-person survey results.

Directions: Please check all boxes that apply

1) What is your gender?

Male Female Other

2) What is your age?

Under 20 20-39 40-49 50-59 60-69 70-79

3) Where do you currently live? (e.g. City/Town/Neighborhood)

4) How long have you lived in Western New York? (years)

0-5yrs 6-10yrs 11-15yrs 16-20yrs 21-25yrs 26yrs and over

5) Estimate your annual household income (US Dollars)

Less than \$20,000 \$20,000-\$29,000 \$30,000-\$49,000

\$50,000-\$74,999 \$75,000-\$99,000 \$100,000 and above

6) Do you consider yourself religious and/or spiritual?

Yes No

If yes, please indicate which religion or spiritual group: _____

7) Which of the following best describes your occupation?

Sales/Marketing Trade/Labor Education/Student

Manager Medical Professional

Other: _____

8) What is your relationship status? (Check all that apply)

Married Living together Single Never Married

Widowed Separated Divorced

9) How do you classify your race? (Check all that apply or fill in space below)

American Italian-American Irish-American

African-American German-American Native-American

Hispanic/Latin American Polish-American Middle Eastern-American

Bi-Racial (please clarify) _____ Multi-Racial (please clarify) _____

Immigrant (please clarify) _____ Other (please clarify) _____

10) Have you ever served in the military?

Yes No

11) Would you classify yourself as a student with a disability?

Yes No

12) Are you the first in your family to attend college?

Yes No

13) How are you affiliated with SUNY-Empire State College (mark all that apply)

Part-time student Full-time student Non-matriculated student

NFC-Cheektowaga NFC-Olean NFC-Lockport

NFC-Jamestown NFC-Fredonia NFC-CDL (Primary Learning Center)

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT SURVEY FORM

Project Research Question and Objectives: How can ESC/NFC become a more culturally ‘open’ regional center?

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS: Rhianna C. Rogers, Ph.D. and Aimee M. Woznick, Ph.D.

To help us better serve you, please complete this survey and return it to us. Thank you!

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I believe that ESC-NFC is a culturally open institution					
I believe that cultural understanding is important to the college learning environment					
I believe that my own cultural identity is important					
I believe that other peoples’ cultural identities are important					
I believe that the preservation of neighborhood identity is important					
I believe that the preservation of Western New York identity is important					
I take the time to understand various cultures and their differences and similarities					
I enjoy learning about different races and ethnicities in a college setting					
I enjoy learning about different races and ethnicities in a personal setting					
I am unsure how to approach others about their cultural backgrounds					
I believe that cultural misunderstandings hurt others					
I believe that discrimination of any type still exists					
I consider myself culturally sensitive					
I believe that other peoples’ languages are					

important to include in the college environment					
I believe that the use and knowledge of technology differs between cultural groups					
I believe socio-economic opportunity impacts culture and subcultures differently					

1. What do you think it means to be “cultured”?

2. What do you think would make ESC/NFC a more culturally open educational institution for students?

3. What do you think is your greatest obstacle for being a success at ESC?

APPENDIX D

Institutional Lectures/Plenaries:

“Native American Keynote Address by Dr. Rodney Haring and Tribal Sovereignty Plenary Session” *Semi Annual Buffalo Project Plenary Series Presentation with Brian Murphy and Drs. Sandra Johnson and Rodney Haring* (Event Co-Organizer with Sandra Johnson and Panel Moderator), SUNY Empire State College-Niagara Frontier Center, Cheektowaga, NY, Nov. 2013.

“African American Plenary Event” *Semi Annual Buffalo Project Plenary Series* (Panel Organizer with Drs. Mark Soderstrom and Sonja Brown Givens and Event Moderator), SUNY Empire State College-Niagara Frontier Center, Cheektowaga, NY June 2013.

<https://ensemble.annese.com/app/sites/index.aspx?destinationID=aSPB6eUGcku1g7SLDiz5Hg&contentID=9PRpWq-EY0-mbVL0WeswOA&pageIndex=1&pageSize=10>

“Native American Event: Why do we celebrate Native American Month?,” *Semi Annual Buffalo Project Plenary Series* (Panel Co-organizer with Dr. Sandra Johnson and Prof. Ann Garner and Event Moderator with presenters Brendalee Piccone, Brian Murphy, Ann Garner, Sandra Johnson, and Sierra Adare-Tasiwoopa api), SUNY Empire State College-Niagara Frontier Center, Cheektowaga, NY, Nov. 2012. <http://vimeo.com/53705437>

“The Buffalo Project: How Can Empire State College’s Niagara Frontier Center Become a Culturally ‘Open’ Regional Center,” *ESC Virtual Academic Conference*, Cultural Studies AOS Meeting, SUNY Empire State College-Coordinating Center (Main Campus), Saratoga Springs, NY, Oct. 2012.

Rhianna C. Rogers and Maria L. Tripi “How Can Empire State College’s Niagara Frontier Center Become a Culturally ‘Open’ Regional Center,” *8th Annual Empire State College Student Academic Conference*, SUNY-Empire State College, Adams Mark Hotel, Buffalo, NY, Oct 2012.

“What is Cultural Sensitivity?” Panel Organizer and Moderator with Bob Gerulat, Sandra Johnson, Hartley Hutchins and Brian Murphy, Cultures Across the Curriculum Residency, SUNY Empire State College-Niagara Frontier Center, Cheektowaga, NY, Nov. 2011.

“ESC as an Open University: An Ethnographic Study of SUNY ESC-Niagara Frontier,” in *ESC as an Open Institution: Open to Whom?* SUNY Empire State College All College Conference, ESC Coordinating Center (Main Campus), Saratoga Springs, NY, March 2011.

Community Conferences/Lectures:

“Keynote Address: How Culture Can Impact WNY Settlement Patterns: Case Studies from the Buffalo Project” *Realty Edge Business Meeting*. Millennium Hotel, Cheektowaga, NY Nov. 2013

“The Importance of Cultural Awareness in WNY Realty: Case Studies from the Buffalo Project” *WNY Relators Association, Hyatt Regency Hotel*, Buffalo, NY Oct. 2013

“The Importance of Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity to WNY Realty” in *WNY Relators Association-Women’s Council of Realtors Business Meeting*, Amherst, NY Oct. 2013