CAMPUS
ASSESSMENT
WORKING GROUP

First-year students' perceptions of diversity at UMD

This report, written by the Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) Beginnings subcommittee, discusses first-year students' perceptions of diversity at the University of Maryland in Fall 2020. The report also provides longitudinal comparisons where possible. Unlike previous cohorts, newly enrolled students in Fall 2020 began their college career under unique circumstances. Both the COVID-19 pandemic and recent social unrest due to racial injustice impacted the learning environment for students. On-campus housing was exclusively single rooms to reduce density and support social distancing due to COVID. Additionally, all courses were held virtually for the first two weeks of the semester, regardless of hybrid or in-person status. Fall 2020 marked the first semester in which the university offered an onboarding program for first-year students with an explicit diversity, inclusion, and equity focus. Finally, social desirability[1], the tendency to respond so that others view them favorably, may have led respondents to answer items the way they thought they "should" be answered, given the global racial justice reckoning sparked by George Floyd's murder in May 2020.

The 2020 Beginning Student Survey (BSS) was administered online to new, first-time undergraduates (including Freshmen Connection) in select courses from October 19 - November 6, 2020.[2] During the Fall 2020 semester, 1,080 (20%) out of 5,445 new, first-time undergraduates completed the survey. The distribution of respondents by race/ethnicity mirrored that of the population. Female students were slightly over-represented (56% of respondents compared to 50% of the population). Seventy-eight percent of respondents said that when in-person classes began, all their coursework remained online, and the remaining 22% said they had a mix of in-person and online classes. Most respondents self-reported living either in an on-campus residence hall (42%) or off campus with family/guardians (51%). The other seven percent lived elsewhere.

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[1] See King, M. & Bruner, G. (2000). Social desirability bias: a neglected aspect of validity testing. *Psychology & Marketing 17(2):* pgs. 79-103 for one example.

[2] The Beginning Student Survey (BSS), historically an in-person paper survey taken by over half of all first-year students, was administered in ENGL101, UNIV100, GEMS100, BSCV181, HNUH100, IDEA1010, and TLPL288D. Fall 2020 classes began completely remote. On November 5, UMD announced all courses would transition online after Thanksgiving. Although UMD transitioned to remote instruction the week of November 16, this announcement may have influenced some students' responses. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Although most respondents agreed with the benefits of diversity and felt comfortable engaging across differences, fewer reported engaging in diversity-related behaviors in the first eight weeks of the semester.

- **Feelings**: Student respondents generally felt comfortable talking about diversity with people of both similar (91%; see Figure 1) and different (87%) identities.
- **Beliefs**: Three-quarters or more of respondents believed that being on a culturally diverse campus is a benefit of being at UMD (77%) and that racial/ethnic diversity at UMD is a good goal (90%).
- **Behaviors:** Two-thirds of respondents (66%) said they engaged in discussions with culturally diverse perspectives. Eight weeks into the semester at UMD, four in 10 first-year respondents said they had been challenged to critically examine their beliefs about race and ethnicity (43%).

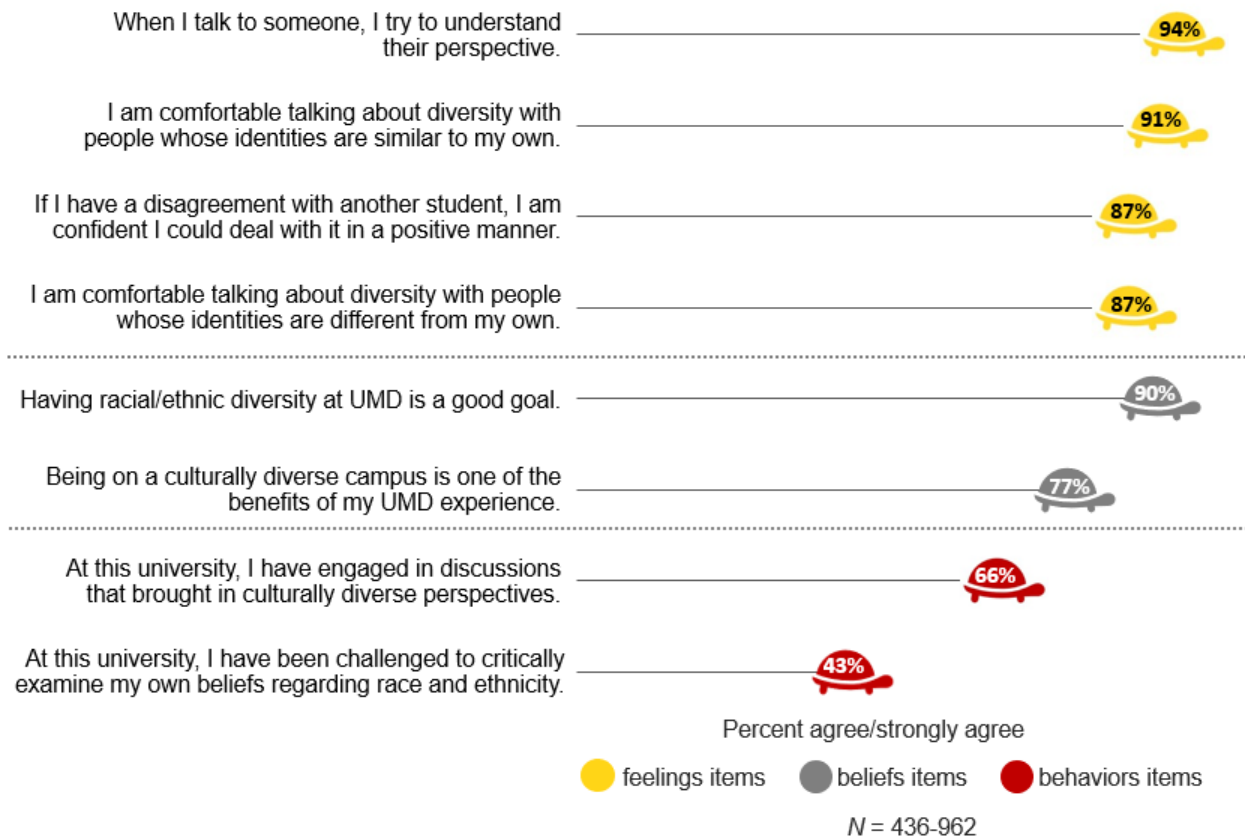BSS 2020 responses to items about students' **feelings, beliefs,** and **behaviors**.

When I talk to someone, I try to understand their perspective.	94%
I am comfortable talking about diversity with people whose identities are similar to my own.	91%
If I have a disagreement with another student, I am confident I could deal with it in a positive manner.	87%
I am comfortable talking about diversity with people whose identities are different from my own.	87%
Having racial/ethnic diversity at UMD is a good goal.	90%
Being on a culturally diverse campus is one of the benefits of my UMD experience.	77%
At this university, I have engaged in discussions that brought in culturally diverse perspectives.	66%
At this university, I have been challenged to critically examine my own beliefs regarding race and ethnicity.	43%

Percent agree/strongly agree

⬤ feelings items   ⬤ beliefs items   ⬤ behaviors items

N = 436-962

Figure 1. Percent of respondents who selected agree/strongly agree, BSS2020

More respondents agreed with questions about diversity and inclusion this year than in 2015, when they were last asked.

- We compared four longitudinal items from the BSS15 and the BSS20. Context around the 2020 survey is discussed above; 2015 was one year before a contentious presidential election.
- Similar percentages of respondents agreed with the item, "Being on a culturally diverse campus is one of the benefits of my UMD experience" (72% in 2015 vs. 77% in 2020; see Figure 2).
- There was a 10 percentage point increase in what students experience on campus (see the bottom two items in the figure below), and an increase from an already high percentage of students who believe racial/ethnic diversity at UMD is a good goal.
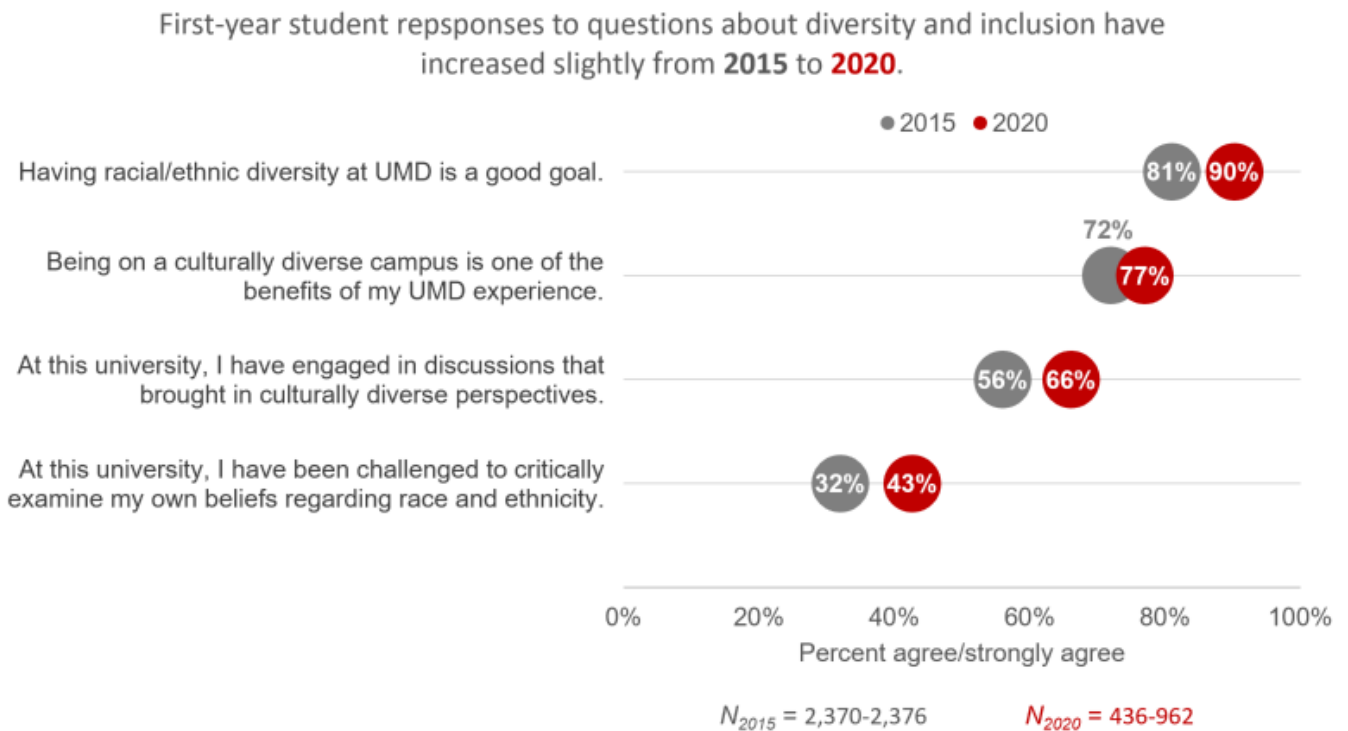
First-year student repsponses to questions about diversity and inclusion have increased slightly from **2015** to **2020**.

● 2015 ● 2020

Having racial/ethnic diversity at UMD is a good goal. ——————— 81% 90%

Being on a culturally diverse campus is one of the benefits of my UMD experience. ——————— 72% 77%

At this university, I have engaged in discussions that brought in culturally diverse perspectives. ——————— 56% 66%

At this university, I have been challenged to critically examine my own beliefs regarding race and ethnicity. ——————— 32% 43%

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%
Percent agree/strongly agree

N_{2015} = 2,370-2,376 N_{2020} = 436-962

Figure 2. Percent of respondents who selected agree/strongly agree, BSS2015 (grey) and BSS2020 (red)[3]

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[3] Note that the different *N* sizes were due to the different distributions. The 2020 survey was administered fully online due to COVID-19.

Students living on campus and at home responded similarly about feelings, beliefs, and behaviors related to diversity.

- This pattern is different from other topics in the same survey, such as classroom engagement, social transition, academic transition and resources, in which on-campus respondents reported being more engaged than off-campus respondents. See our previous memo for more information.
- Most respondents either reported living on campus or off campus at home with family/guardians. The other responses ranged from one respondent (fraternity or sorority) to 39 respondents (off campus with friends/roommates), and are not discussed here.
- It is worth noting that in Fall 2020, the student experience on and off campus may not be as different as in previous years. On-campus COVID de-densification shifted to all single bedrooms, and many students often have single bedrooms at home. Moreover, there was limited in-person programming, further collapsing the difference between on- and off-campus housing experiences.

In comparison to all respondents, respondents of color reported lower agreement with some items.

We conducted analyses to determine if racial groups responded similarly or differently to these items. Differences (tested with-chi square analyses) are reported where the responses across racial/ethnic groups are significantly different ($p \leq 0.05$) than expected relative to the overall response pattern (see Table 1).[4] Only groups with large enough numbers could be included in the analyses.[5]

Respondents of color were generally lower in agreement compared to all respondents. Specifically, Asian, Black or African American, and Hispanic student respondents were usually lower in agreement compared to all respondents, whereas White respondents reported similar levels of agreement to all respondents.

- **Feelings:** Compared to all respondents, fewer Asian and Hispanic respondents agreed with all four items. For two items, fewer Black respondents than all respondents agreed: "When I talk to someone, I try to understand their perspective" (89% compared to 94% for all) and "I am comfortable talking about diversity with people whose identities are different from my own" (81% vs 87%). For one item, more White respondents (96%) than expected (94% for all respondents) agreed: "When I talk to someone, I try to understand their perspective."
- **Beliefs:** Compared to all respondents (90%), fewer Asian (88%) and Hispanic (86%) respondents agreed that having racial/ethnic diversity at UMD is a good goal. Fewer Black (70%) and Hispanic (73%) respondents than expected (77%) agreed that being on a culturally diverse campus is one of the benefits of UMD.
- **Behaviors:** Relatively few group differences emerged for these two items. Compared to all respondents (66%), fewer Asian respondents (56%) agreed that they've engaged in conversations that brought in culturally diverse perspectives at UMD. Fewer Hispanic respondents (30%) agreed that at UMD, they were challenged to critically examine their own beliefs regarding race and ethnicity, while more White respondents (49%) agreed with this item compared to all respondents (43%).

Questions to Consider:
What role have the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racial justice reckoning had on students' approach to diversity-related beliefs, feelings, and behaviors? How have these challenges, which are experienced differentially by students of color, influenced issues of trust and comfort levels critical to engaging in difficult conversations about identity and diversity?

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[4] For example, if 70% of all respondents agreed with a statement, we would expect 70% of Asian students to agree, if race/ethnicity were not a factor. However, if 65% of Asian respondents agreed and we found a statistically significant difference, we would report that "fewer Asian students than expected" agreed with the item.

[5] Race/ethnicities are based on information captured in UMD's Student Information System and use federal reporting categories; they are not self-reported. The American Indian/Native Hawaiian, Unknown, and Foreign racial/ethnic/citizenship groups were not included due to small sample sizes that make statistical analyses unreliable.

In the table below, the "all respondents" column lists the percentage of all respondents who selected that they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement. The percentages by race/ethnicity show the percent of respondents by race/ethnicity who "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement. **The "--" indicates that there was no statistically significant difference between the way respondents of that race/ethnicity answered compared to respondents overall.**

	All respondents N = 1,075	Asian N = 216	Black or African American N = 108	Hispanic N = 101	White N = 522
When I talk to someone, I try to understand their perspective.	**94%**	92%	89%	92%	96%
I am comfortable talking about diversity with people whose identities are similar to my own.	**91%**	90%	--	89%	--
If I have a disagreement with another student, I am confident I could deal with it in a positive manner.	**87%**	79%	--	83%	--
I am comfortable talking about diversity with people whose identities are different from my own.	**87%**	82%	81%	83%	--
Having racial/ethnic diversity at UMD is a good goal.	**90%**	88%	--	86%	--
Being on a culturally diverse campus is one of the benefits of my UMD experience.	**77%**	--	70%	73%	--
At this university, I have engaged in discussions that brought in culturally diverse perspectives.	**66%**	56%	--	--	--
At this university, I have been challenged to critically examine my own beliefs regarding race and ethnicity.	**43%**	--	--	30%	49%

Table 1. Percent of respondents who selected agree/strongly agree by federally reported race/ethnicity, BSS2020