Appreciation of differences: promoting diversity and flourishing among college students

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Abstract
Purpose – College students who are interested in experiencing and learning about other cultures could be potential agents to ongoing social and policy initiatives in promoting societal changes. As universities intensify their efforts toward embracing cultural diversity, it is imperative to gauge how these diversity initiatives resonate with students' developmental stage and pursuits in diverse campus climates. However, what kinds of educational experiences/contexts students choose for enhancing cultural competence, and how seeking diversity experiences might benefit college students in emotional wellbeing and cognitive skills, are under-investigated.

Design/methodology/approach – This study explores the relationships among college students’ diversity-seeking behaviors, cultural competence, perspective-taking, and flourishing. A total of 359 college students from a STEM-focused university participated in this study. Students were recruited from classes over four semesters, from 2021 to 2023.

Findings – Students exhibited moderate to high levels of interest in seeking diversity in their learning experiences. Results from the structural equation modeling showed that higher levels of diversity-seeking in learning were associated with higher levels of perceived cultural competence, as well as higher levels of perspective-taking and flourishing.

Originality/value – This research delves into experiential and extracurricular dimensions of learning diversity, bridging a significant gap in academic literature. This study also elucidates the links between aspects of diversity engagement, cultural competence, and positive outcomes for college students, which underscores the significance of diversity-focused educational opportunities in higher education. Such opportunities are instrumental in enhancing cultural proficiency and further implications on cognitive growth and emotional well-being.

Keywords Culture competence, Diversity-seeking, Perspective-taking, Flourishing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
To uphold higher education’s mission of promoting student achievement, as well as civic engagement and responsibility, it is crucial to delve into strategies and initiatives that could enhance diversity and inclusion in college (United States, 2016). As universities strive for greater cultural diversity, it is essential to examine how their diversity initiatives align with the aspirations of students in such multifaceted campus environments. Current understandings of how to advance diversity in university settings are limited by the lack of understandings from students’ perspectives (Cuba et al., 2011). Some basic critical questions remain unanswered, such as what kinds of educational experiences students choose for enhancing cultural competence, how changes toward a diverse and inclusive environment are being sought and valued by students, and how diversity benefits students.
from various backgrounds. Therefore, this study has two objectives: (1) to understand the scale and nature of college students’ diversity-seeking behaviors, and (2) to examine the potential links between diversity-seeking behaviors and positive cognitive and psychological outcomes through college students’ cultural competence. This study aims to provide empirical evidence for university diversity initiatives and directions for such work based on students’ needs so that they can be incorporated into programs that target diversifying campus culture. The implications of enhancing diversity and cultural competence could extend beyond academia and into the broader realms of life. Students who develop cultural competence through diversity-seeking behaviors are likely be equipped to navigate the complexities of globalized workplaces, excel in team dynamics, and foster effective interpersonal relationships later in life.

For many college students who grow up in racially segregated areas, college/university could be their first chance to engage in meaningful interactions with racially diverse groups of peers and programs designed to enhance cultural diversity (Garvey et al., 2020). This opportunity arises at a critical time in a person’s life when their values and sense of self are in flux, and college students have the chance to seek different experiences and develop values that differ from those instilled during their childhood and adolescence (Arnett, 2000, 2007; Magolda, 2003). Diversity-seeking is defined as a person’s propensity to seek out products, services, and experiences that are culturally diverse; people possessing diversity-seeking traits not only accept cultural diversity but also tend to actively seek out inclusion in their daily lives (Brumbaugh and Grier, 2013). Past research demonstrated that people’s level of diversity-seeking was correlated with behaviors in diversity-related consumption (e.g., Bowman, 2011; Brumbaugh and Grier, 2013). This trait of underlying diversity-seeking behavior, however, has not been fully examined in the educational setting to see if students with this trait are more motivated to seek experiences in diversity opportunities, more willing to engage in diversity-related actions, and more eager to find chances that meet their needs for increased involvement in cultural diversity.

People who seek diversity (e.g., contact, experiences, and products that are culturally diverse) are not only more receptive to differences but also consistently strive for inclusivity in their daily lives (Brumbaugh and Grier, 2013). Multiple studies have been conducted to present that an enriched diverse learning environment enhances students’ academic self-confidence and learning outcomes (Denson et al., 2021; Laird, 2005). For example, students who reported higher levels of contact with diverse ideas, information and people were more likely to present positive changes in their complex thinking and higher levels of intellectual engagement (Gurin et al., 2002). Other studies showed that in medical schools, diversity in the student body enhanced the educational experiences of students (Dhaliwal et al., 2013; Whitla et al., 2003). In addition, the pursuit of diversity in college encompasses various approaches, including seeking learning from diversity courses and through extracurricular activities and study abroad programs. A strategy that infuses diversity across the curriculum—achieved through formal coursework and the integration of diverse content into various subjects—has been shown to effectively promote student growth (Bowman, 2010; Denson et al., 2021). This method provides students with repeated exposure to diverse viewpoints and information, prompting them to reassess their own beliefs and perspectives in classrooms (Crisp and Turner, 2011). On the other hand, seeking diversity experiences beyond classrooms offers students firsthand experiences that may often yield a deeper, more nuanced understanding of diversity from the exposure to multiple perspectives, seeing how diversity concepts manifest in the real world (Denson, 2009; Kolb and Kolb, 2005, 2017). Students with more experiences in diversity through positive interactions with peers and faculty were associated with higher scores on academic self-confidence and critical thinking abilities (Laird, 2005). With the growth of this body of research, however, the linkage between college students’ diversity-
seeking and associated increased levels of ability in cultural competence, perspective-taking, and moving away from self-focus has not been fully examined.

Flourishing is a complex construct that encompasses various positive psychological attributes contributing to a sense of contentment and success in life (Huppert and So, 2013; Węziak-Bialowolska et al., 2019). Seligman’s PERMA model is a widely recognized framework that identifies five factors essential for adult flourishing: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2018). Seeking diverse experiences with peers and instructors may increase a college student’s sense of interpersonal relatedness and connectedness to the campus, which may facilitate well-being and flourishing. Emerging adulthood theory (Arnett, 2000, 2007) suggests that emerging adulthood is a time of positive growth and development. Additionally, during this period, many young adults actively engage in the exploration and assimilation of worldviews. The integration of positive values and beliefs is linked to several markers of flourishing, including active participation in diversity-related events and interactions with diverse peer, faculty, and curricula (Barry and Nelson, 2008; Sandhu et al., 2022). The internalization of adaptive behaviors and values during emerging adulthood may be strongly connected to flourishing. In this context, actively seeking diverse experiences during college years can potentially enhance students’ well-being and personal growth.

Exploring diverse experiences with both peers and instructors can potentially enhance a college student’s sense of cross-cultural competence, which, in turn, can facilitate their overall well-being and flourishing. Cultural competence refers to the ability of a person to understand, respect, and effectively interact with people from different cultural backgrounds (Lum, 2013). Lum posited that cultural competence comprises three key areas: cultural awareness (values), knowledge acquisition (knowledge) and skill development (skills). Similarly, the construct of universal-diverse orientation (UDO), as proposed by Fuertes et al. (2000), is also rooted in a knowledge, values, and skills framework. UDO facilitates effective intercultural interactions and is defined as an attitude toward all other persons which is inclusive yet differentiating in that similarities and differences are both recognized and accepted (Miville et al., 1999). They further delineated UDO into three interrelated sub-constructs: diversity of contact (skills), which involves actively seeking a diversity of contact with others; relativistic appreciation (knowledge), which measures the degree to which individuals appreciate cultural differences and similarities and recognize the value of diversity on self-understanding and personal growth; and comfort with differences (values), which involves a sense of connection with the larger society or humanity as a whole.

In addition to promoting cultural competence, diversity-seeking also demonstrates potential in promoting college students’ cognitive outcomes. Students who experienced diversity through the completion of diversity courses were rated higher scores on academic self-confidence, critical thinking abilities, and positive behavioral outcomes in both diversity-related and non-diversity-related contexts (Denson et al., 2021; Laird, 2005). Students with more experiences in diversity through positive interactions with peers and the completion of diversity courses were associated with higher scores on academic self-confidence and critical thinking abilities (Laird, 2005). In this study, we focus on a specific type of cognitive outcomes—perspective-taking. Perspective-taking describes the ability to understand different viewpoints, which includes the ability of “non-judgmental understanding of someone else’s thoughts, motives, and/or feelings” (Ku et al., 2015, p. 80). This ability typically develops in emerging adulthood, a stage that coincides with undergraduate education for traditional-age college students, which makes undergraduate years an opportune time to foster students’ perspective-taking skills (Jones et al., 2020; Ku et al., 2015). According to the exploration perspective, students may experience gains in perspectives when learning about issues and experiences that are new to them. This perspective is based on Gurin et al.’s (2002) idea that when college students encounter diversity, whether through formal coursework or informal interactions, they often experience a sense of disequilibrium that
challenges their existing beliefs and values. When college students encounter diversity in various forms, they are presented with the option of modifying their worldview to accommodate new perspectives (Bowman, 2010). This involves assimilating the diversity experiences with their current beliefs or accommodating their perspectives and values to adapt to these experiences, particularly when faced with unfamiliar interactions across multiple dimensions of diversity such as race, social class, gender and sexual orientation (Bowman, 2010). This process of engaging with diversity has the potential to enhance students’ perspective-taking abilities, enabling them to develop a more nuanced understanding of the world around them. Therefore, one goal with this study is to examine diversity-seeking from college students’ perspective and examine the effects of diversity-seeking on students’ positive cognitive outcome.

**Objectives and hypotheses**

The first objective of this study is to assess the different facets of diversity-seeking behaviors among college students by employing survey methods for data collection. Furthermore, this research aims to investigate both the direct and indirect impacts of these behaviors on cultural competence, perspective-taking abilities, and overall psychological well-being. By exploring the associations among these variables, this research seeks to enhance our understanding of how diversity-seeking behaviors may facilitate personal growth and intercultural understanding among college students. The study hypothesizes that (1) higher levels of diversity-seeking in both learning and diversity activities will be associated with higher levels of cultural competence in terms of diversity of contact, relativistic appreciation, and comfort with differences; (2) higher levels of cultural competence will be linked to higher levels of perspective-taking and flourishing; and (3) higher levels of diversity-seeking in both learning and diversity activities will have direct and indirect effects on flourishing and perspective-taking. By analyzing the interrelationships among these variables, this study seeks to shed light on the significance of diversity-seeking behaviors in promoting cultural competence and enhancing cognitive and psychological outcomes among college students.

**Method**

*Participants and sampling procedures*

Participants were recruited from a private not-for-profit, STEM-focused institution located in a predominantly White rural community in the northeastern region of the United States. This study was approved by the institutional IRB. A total of 382 students participated in the study; 359 students were retained for the data analysis. To ensure the validity and reliability of the collected data, we excluded students who completed the survey in less than three minutes or left more than half of the questions unanswered from our analyses. Students were recruited from Introduction to Psychology, Diversity Science, and Cultural Psychology courses during four semesters, from fall 2021 to spring 2023. Participants were recruited through the departmental online research recruitment system by posted flyers on the website as well as through the student learning management webpage. On the flyers, students who were interested in participating were instructed to email our research lab with their age and birth date (month/date/year; we used this information to evaluate whether parental consent is necessary for participation in the study. If a student is under the age of 18, we require them to submit a form of parental consent to be eligible for participation). Once we had this information, we enrolled them in the study by emailing the Qualtrics link. Students who participated in the study received 1% course bonus/extra credits. The sample comprised 359 participants with a mean age of 19.44 years (SD = 2). Of the participants, 49% identified as male, 48.2% identified as female, and 2.8% identified as nonbinary. With regards to race/ethnicity, 78.3% identified as White, 8.1% as Black, 4.5% as Asian, 1.4% as Hispanic/Latino/
a/x, 2.8% as two or more ethnicities, 0.6% as American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 2.8% as other. In terms of sexual orientation, 79.1% identified as heterosexual, 10% as bisexual, 3.3% as lesbian/gay, 4.2% as other, and 3.3% preferred not to say. Refer to Table 1 for additional demographic information of the study sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Sample mean (SD) or %a</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Mean = 19.44 (SD = 2.004; ranged from 17 to 39)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male = 176 (49%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female = 173 (48.2%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-binary/Third Gender = 10 (2.8%)</td>
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<td>School year</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sophomore = 109 (30.4%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Junior = 60 (16.7%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Senior = 62 (17.3%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Other = 1 (0.3%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Prefer not to answer = 1 (0.3%)</td>
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<td>Asian = 16 (4.5%)</td>
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<td>Black = 29 (8.1%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hispanic/Latino/a/x = 5 (1.4%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>White = 281 (78.3%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Two or more ethnicities = 10 (2.8%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Other = 10 (2.8%)</td>
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<td>Prefer not to answer = 5 (1.4%)</td>
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<td>Lesbian/Gay = 12 (3.3%)</td>
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<td>Buddhist = 5 (1.4%)</td>
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<td>Other religion = 23 (6.4%)</td>
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<td>Majorsb</td>
<td>STEM = 332 (92.5%)</td>
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<td>Non-STEM = 27 (7.5%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note(s): a. Means and standard deviations are reported for continuous variables and percentages for categorical variables. b. STEM Major: STEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics; a STEM major here refers to any academic program or degree that falls under above mentioned four broad disciplines (e.g., computer science, engineering, data analytics, economics, psychology). Non-STEM Major: academic disciplines that fall outside the realms of STEM (e.g., history, literature and communication)

Source(s): Author’s own creation/work

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for demographic variables (N = 359)
Measurement

Diversity-seeking behaviors. The diversity-seeking scale (DSS; Brumbaugh and Grier, 2013) was used to assess individual’s tendency to seek out cultural diversity in products, services, and experiences. The scale consists of 15 items that are rated using 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The DSS measures three dimensions of diversity-seeking behavior: (1) cognitive interest in diversity, (2) affective interest in diversity, and (3) behavioral engagement with diversity. The two subscales measuring diversity proneness related to learning (about cultures, ethnic groups, cultures outside the US) and activities (desire to engage in diversity themed activities related to culture, religion, race, and ethnicity) and were included in this study. Example items are “I am interested in attending events or activities that celebrate diversity” (diversity-seeking activity dimension) and “I often seek out opportunities to learn more about different cultures and traditions” (diversity-seeking learning dimension). The average scores for each subscale were calculated, with higher scores representing higher levels of diversity-seeking behaviors. This scale presented good reliability in the past studies (Cronbach alpha ranged from 0.61 to 0.90 in Brumbaugh and Grier’s (2013) study, and 0.86 in Fete’s (2017)s study). The Cronbach’s alpha for this study is 0.92.

Cultural competence. The Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale-Short (M-GUDS-S; Fuertes et al, 2000; Miville et al., 1999) was used to measure cultural competence. M-GUDS-S is a 15-item questionnaire designed to measure an individual’s UDO and assess their attitudes toward diversity and multiculturalism. M-GUDS-S consists of three subscales: diversity of contact (e.g., “I have interacted with people from different cultures”), relativistic appreciation (e.g., “It is important to try to understand the perspective of people from different backgrounds”), and comfort with differences (e.g., “I feel comfortable interacting with people who are different from me”). Responses were rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” M-GUDS-S has been widely used in existing research studies related to diversity and cultural competence and demonstrated relatively high construct validity and high internal consistency (Denson et al., 2021; Durlak et al., 2011; Hussain and Jones, 2019). The average scores for each subscale were calculated, with higher scores representing higher levels of cultural competence. The Cronbach’s alpha for each subscale is 0.81 for diversity of contact, 0.81 for relativistic appreciation, and 0.76 for comfortable of differences.

Flourishing. The eight-item flourishing scale (Diener et al., 2010) was used to assess various aspects of human functioning, including purpose and meaning in life, positive relationships, engagement in activities, personal growth, and self-acceptance. Respondents rate each item on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”). The flourishing scale has been used in various research studies to measure psychological well-being in different populations, including college students (e.g., Lipson et al., 2018). Example items are “I lead a purposeful and meaningful life,” “my social relationships are supportive and rewarding,” and “I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me.” The average score for this scale was calculated, with higher scores representing higher levels of flourishing. This scale has been used widely in recent years and demonstrated high internal reliability, such as Cronbach’s alpha is greater than 0.88 in Flett et al.’s (2019) study, 0.83 in Demerouti et al.’s (2015) study, and 0.90 in Duffy et al.’s (2019) study. The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale in the present study is 0.9.

Perspective-taking. Perspective-taking subscale of the interpersonal reactivity index (IRI; Davis, 1983) was used to measure levels of perspective-taking. This subscale consists of 7 items that are rated on a 7-point scale ranging from “does not describe me well” to “describes me very well.” The perspective-taking subscale specifically includes items related to the respondent’s tendency to take on the perspective of others in various situations, such as “I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their
perspective” and “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.” The negative-worded items were reverse coded, and average score for this subscale was calculated, with higher scores representing higher levels of perspective-taking. Internal consistency is robust for the IRI, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranging from 0.71 to 0.77 as reported by Davis (1983). Subsequent research, specifically by Baldner and McGinley (2014), supports these findings, confirming a 0.75 Cronbach’s alpha for the perspective-taking subscale. The Cronbach’s alpha for perspective-taking in the current study is 0.81.

Analytic procedure. The study employed descriptive and correlational analyses to assess the sample characteristics and the relationships among the research variables, as summarized in Tables 1 and 2. We evaluated the proposed direct and indirect effects using structural equation modelling (SEM) with Amos 28.0 software. We proposed that two aspects of diversity-seeking behaviors would predict three aspects of cultural competence, which, in turn, would predict perspective-taking and flourishing (see Figure 1). We created general latent variable models for the two diversity engagement indicators. Covariates such as sex (male vs. female), gender (gender minority or not) and race/ethnicity (white vs. non-white) were included. Model fit was assessed using three fit indices, and a comparative fit index (CFI) greater than 0.90 and a root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) less than 0.08 indicated good fit. The study regarded path coefficients between variables as statistically significant when the \( p \)-value was less than 0.05 and employed the full information maximum likelihood estimation method in the model estimation (Hox, 2013).

Results

Preliminary analyses

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for diversity-seeking items. On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree to the statement) to 7 (strongly agree), the average score for diversity-seeking in learning was 5.66 (SD = 0.89), indicating a moderate-high level of interest in seeking diverse perspectives and knowledge. In contrast, the average score for diversity-seeking in activity was 4.62 (SD = 1.11), suggesting a moderate level of interests in engagement in seeking out diverse experiences and interactions. Among the items measuring diversity-seeking in learning, the highest-rated activity was viewing travel as an opportunity to learn about different cultures, with an average score of 6.03 (SD = 1.11). This was followed by talking to...
people from other ethnic groups to learn about the stories of their heritage, which received an average score of 5.7 (SD = 1.02), and enjoying learning about other cultures, which received an average score of 5.72 (SD = 1.1).

Our findings indicate that two dimensions of diversity-seeking are significantly associated with three dimensions of cultural competence. Perspective-taking is positively correlated with diversity-seeking learning ($r = 0.28, p < 0.01$) and diversity-seeking activity ($r = 0.299, p < 0.01$). Perspective-taking also is positively correlated with diversity contact ($r = 0.266, p < 0.01$), realistic appreciation ($r = 0.279, p < 0.01$), and comfortable with diversity ($r = 0.207, p < 0.01$). Flourishing is only positively correlated with diversity-seeking learning ($r = 0.164, p < 0.01$) among the diversity-seeking dimensions. Flourishing also is positively correlated with realistic appreciation ($r = 0.179, p < 0.01$), and comfortable with difference ($r = 0.136, p < 0.05$). Perspective-taking and flourishing are positively correlated ($r = 0.129, p < 0.05$).
**SEM model**

As shown in Figure 1, the proposed model demonstrated a good model fit with $\chi^2 = 206.1$, $df = 84$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.94; RMSEA = 0.064. All indicators posited to the latent factors of diversity-seeking in learning and activities had significant factor loadings at less than 0.01 level, ranging from 0.56 to 0.86 (see Figure 1).

Our study found significant positive associations between diversity-seeking in learning and all three aspects of cultural competence (diversity of contact: $\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$; relativistic appreciation: $\beta = 0.553$, $p < 0.001$; conform with differences: $\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$; see Figure 1). However, we did not observe direct effects between diversity-seeking in learning and flourishing, or between diversity-seeking in learning and perspective-taking. Nonetheless, we observed direct effects between diversity-seeking in activities and perspective-taking ($\beta = 0.156$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, diversity-seeking in activity was significantly and positively associated with only one aspect of cultural competence, which is the diversity of contact ($\beta = 0.388$, $p < 0.001$). We also found that the relativistic appreciation aspect of cultural competence was positively associated with both perspective-taking ($\beta = 0.155$, $p < 0.01$) and flourishing ($\beta = 0.158$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, the comfort with difference aspect of cultural competence was positively associated with perspective-taking ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$), but not flourishing. However, we did not find any significant positive associations between the diversity of contact aspect of cultural competence and either perspective-taking or flourishing.

To test the indirect paths, we used bias-corrected bootstrapping ($N = 2,000$) to estimate 95% confidence intervals (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). Results showed that cultural competence did not significantly mediate the indirect relationship between diversity-seeking and perspective-taking, and flourishing. We used the bootstrap method to assess the statistical significance of the hypothesized indirect effects, specifically examining whether each of the three aspects of cultural competence mediated the links between diversity-seeking and flourishing and perspective-taking. While all other paths were tested simultaneously in the structural model, only one path showed significant indirect effects on perspective-taking. The results of bootstrapping revealed that comfort with difference significantly mediated the relationship between diversity-seeking in learning and perspective-taking (with upper and lower bounds equated to 0.05 and 0.02, which were both above 0, $p = 0.002$). These findings held when accounting for all three covariates in the model.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to first inquire students' interests in seeking diversity in college, and also examine the structure and relationships that exist among college students' diversity-seeking, cultural competence, perspective-taking, and flourishing. Specifically, the study sought to explore how seeking diversity in different domains (e.g., activities and learning) influences students' levels of cultural competence. Additionally, the study aimed to examine how cultural competence impacts students' emotional and cognitive outcomes, such as perspective-taking, and their flourishing.

Students from this study presented a moderate level of interest in seeking out diverse perspectives and knowledge, both in learning and activity domains. Specifically, among the items measuring diversity-seeking in learning, viewing travel as an opportunity to learn about different cultures was the highest-rated activity, followed by talking to people from other ethnic groups to learn about their heritage, and enjoying learning about other cultures. However, it is important to recognize that promoting diversity-seeking may require tailored approaches that consider the unique needs and experiences of different student populations. Promoting diversity-seeking should be approached with a sensitivity to individual student needs to ensure inclusivity and equity in the learning environment.
Findings from this study suggest that students place a high value on learning about diverse cultures through experiential activities such as travel and engaging with people from different backgrounds. Previous research has also shown that study abroad programs had drawn interests from students and may benefit students’ cultural competence (Salisbury et al., 2013). However, it is important to note that other factors, such as accessibility and resources, may influence the extent to which students can engage in these activities. For instance, some students may not have the financial means to travel, and it is important to consider how this may impact their interest and ability to seek diversity. To create a truly inclusive learning environment, we must take into account the diverse backgrounds and prior experiences of students and provide tailored opportunities for them to engage with and learn from different perspectives.

Diversity-seeking and cultural competence

The study’s findings provided support for the direct effects of the relationships between diversity-seeking and cultural competence. Diversity-seeking in learning was found to be associated with all aspects of cultural competence, but diversity-seeking in activities was only found to be associated with one aspect of cultural competence—diversity of contact. This distinction in differentiated paths, as compared to diversity in activity engagement, indicates that learning other cultures from reading and intergroup conversations is more strongly linked with various aspects of cultural competence. Diversity-seeking in learning can increase cultural competence in relativistic appreciation (the extent to which students value the impact of diversity on self-understanding and personal growth) by providing individuals with exposure to different perspectives, beliefs, and values that are different from their own. This exposure can lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures and their unique contributions to society. Through engaging with diverse ideas and people, individuals can develop a greater appreciation for cultural differences, including the way people from different cultures perceive the world and interact with others (Salisbury et al., 2013). As they gain more knowledge about other cultures, individuals may also develop a greater sense of confidence in interacting with people from diverse backgrounds, which can help them become more comfortable with cultural differences and develop a greater appreciation for diversity (Quinn-Lee and Olson-McBride, 2012). Overall, findings suggested that diversity-seeking in learning is a powerful tool for enhancing cultural competence and promoting understanding and acceptance of diversity.

Diversity-seeking in activities was found to be associated only with diversity of contact. This result is consistent with Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis, which suggests that interactions between individuals from different cultural and religious background may reduce prejudice and enhance intercultural competence. It is possible that students have varying degrees of access and opportunities for exposure to diversity in different activities, such as events and/or religious ceremonies as measured in this study. Moreover, upon closer examination of the items measuring diversity-seeking in activities, it becomes apparent that there is a greater emphasis on religious ceremonies or services and televised programs related to different religions. However, the measures appear to overlook other important aspects of diversity such as race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. It is important to acknowledge and promote diversity in all its forms to create a truly inclusive learning environment that celebrates and values the differences among all individuals. As such, the current study provides limited observations regarding the relationship between diversity-seeking in activities and other dimensions of cultural competence. Therefore, future studies should consider a more comprehensive approach to measuring diversity-seeking to capture a more holistic understanding of students’ interests and attitudes toward diversity in order to examine and better understand how exposure to diversity in different domains may impact students’ cultural competence.
Cultural competence, perspective-taking, and flourishing

The relativistic appreciation and comfort with differences were found to be linked with perspective-taking. Relativistic appreciation involves recognizing and appreciating cultural differences and acknowledging that there are multiple ways of understanding and experiencing the world (Fuertes et al., 2000). This perspective can facilitate perspective-taking, which is the ability to consider and understand other people’s points of view (Bowman, 2009; Liu and Wei, 2020). When individuals have a relativistic appreciation of different cultures, they are more likely to be open-minded and curious about other people’s perspectives, which can help them develop empathy and understanding toward others (Liu and Wei, 2020). This, in turn, can facilitate their ability to take on different perspectives and understand the world from others’ viewpoints. When individuals are comfortable with cultural differences, they are less likely to feel threatened or defensive when encountering different perspectives or ways of doing things. This can make it easier for them to engage in perspective-taking, as they are more open to considering and understanding different viewpoints (Blaine and Brenchley, 2020). Reduced stress levels during intergroup interactions have been found to enhance cognitive flexibility and openness, leading to improved perspective-taking as a cognitive outcome (Blaine and Brenchley, 2020).

The relativistic appreciation was also found to be linked with flourishing. When individuals have a relativistic appreciation of different cultures, they are more likely to have a greater sense of connection with others and a deeper understanding of the world around them (Liu and Wei, 2020). This can lead to a greater sense of purpose and meaning in life, which is a key component of flourishing (Bowman et al., 2011). Furthermore, individuals with a relativistic appreciation may be more accepting and understanding of others, which can contribute to positive social relationships and a sense of community.

Interestingly, diversity of contact was not found to be associated with either perspective-taking or flourishing. Diversity of contact in this study gauges students’ interest in participating in diverse social and cultural activities such as whether students would like to join an organization that emphasizes getting to know people from different countries or would like to go to dances that feature music from other countries. It is possible that simply showing interests to diverse groups or individuals may not necessarily lead to improvements in these outcomes. Instead, it may be the quality of the interactions or the level of actual engagement with diverse others that is more important for promoting perspective-taking and flourishing. It is also possible that other two dimensions measured in this study play a more important role in the relationship between cultural competence and outcomes. Further research is needed to fully understand the complexities of these relationships.

Direct effect of diversity-seeking and indirect effects of cultural competence

This study found the direct effect of diversity-seeking in activity and perspective-taking. Engaging in diverse activities may expose individuals to new and different perspectives, which can lead to an increased level of perspective-taking. However, in the present study, no significant indirect effect of diversity-seeking in activity and perspective-taking was found through either of the aspect of cultural competence. The indirect effects of various aspects of cultural competence were only partially supported. Specifically, comfort with differences significantly mediated the relationship between diversity-seeking in learning and perspective-taking. Diversity-seeking in learning exposes individuals to different perspectives, beliefs, and values that are different from their own, which can increase their knowledge and understanding of other cultures (Bowman and Brandenberger, 2012). Therefore, they may become more comfortable with cultural differences and develop a greater appreciation for diversity (Jones et al., 2020). This increased comfort with differences,
in turn, can facilitate perspective-taking, which involves the ability to understand and take on the perspectives of others. This has significant implications on cultural competence promotion in higher education settings. It suggests that creating environments with offering learning opportunities, such as promoting diversity in curriculum and providing resources for cultural education and training about diversity, could possibly foster comfort with differences that help individuals engage in more meaningful interactions with people from diverse backgrounds, leading to improved perspective-taking.

**Implication**

Institutional improvements related to diversity and inclusion on college campuses remain a challenge as each college has its own existing policies, missions, curriculum, and diverse student population (Sanchez et al., 2018). Despite various challenges and unique change efforts, we believe that higher education should nurture a culture that can understand students’ needs and can benefit them in their continuous growth and well-being. Creating a campus climate survey is an important step toward understanding the needs and concerns of students from diverse backgrounds. Such surveys can provide valuable insights into the needs of the experiences that students seek related to culture and diversity on campus. By collecting and analyzing data from these surveys, universities can gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by students and identify areas for improvement.

This study sheds light on the cognitive and psychological benefits of seeking diversity for students. By actively seeking out diverse experiences, students can develop critical thinking skills, broaden their understanding of the world, and improve their cognitive flexibility. This aligns with the overarching goal of diversity education in higher education, which is to prepare students for participation in an equitable and just society. Therefore, it is important for higher education institutions to recognize the value of diversity educational opportunities provided to students and to ensure that it is integrated into their college experiences. Experiential learning, with its emphasis on active engagement and real-world application, has presented a direct association with perspective-taking than traditional theoretical learning (i.e., diversity-seeking in learning) in this study. This approach often involves learners directly engaging in activities that often foster deeper and memorable learning experiences (Akella, 2010; Kolb and Kolb, 2017). In other words, the direct diversity experience and the observation of the dynamics among people from other social groups (e.g., study abroad) may be more effective in helping students to form emotional connections that lead to profound changes in attitudes and behaviors compared to traditional classroom-based learning (Krishnan et al., 2017). Students who actively seek out these diverse activities often benefit from a more personalized and tailored learning experience. This not only allows them to challenge stereotypes but also helps develop vital social skills such as empathy and communication, essential for understanding and appreciating different perspectives. The observed significant association between the desire to learn about diversity and the three facets of cultural competence, which subsequently connect to the two outcomes, underscores a critical focal area for universities. It is evident that cultivating a genuine interest in learning about diversity can have ripple effects on cultural competence and overall emotional well-being. By providing students with opportunities to engage with diverse perspectives, institutions can promote the development of critical thinking skills, empathy, and emotional well-being.

While many colleges and universities have incorporated diversity courses into their core curriculum, merely adhering to formal coursework is not sufficient. A genuine understanding of diversity transcends not only in the classroom, but also outside of the classroom. For instance, instructors could assign experiential activities that students can participate outside
of the classroom to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds and increase cultural sensitivity (e.g., attend a social event in the local organizations/community different from students’ cultural backgrounds). In addition to formal courses, universities have a plethora of opportunities to augment their commitment to diversity. They can host diversity workshops, inviting experts, activists or individuals from different backgrounds to share their experiences. Such workshops often serve as platforms for teaching vital skills like cross-cultural communication. Another enriching initiative could be the introduction of cultural competency training sessions. These would familiarize students with diverse cultural norms and biases, and teach them effective strategies for communication across cultural divides. Furthermore, the establishment of diversity book clubs can encourage students to explore literature from diverse authors, covering themes related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, and more. To ensure these efforts resonate with students, universities should also incorporate feedback systems. It is also imperative for universities not only to introduce diversity initiatives but also to continually assess, modify, and perfect these efforts in response to student feedback and changing needs.

Limitation and future direction
There are some limitations of this study that are worth noting when interpreting the results. First, it is important to use multiple measures and approaches when assessing cultural competence. Cultural competence involves a range of skills and attitudes such as cultural knowledge, the awareness of one’s own biases and assumptions, the ability to communicate effectively across cultures, and the ability to adapt one’s behavior in different cultural contexts. While UDO can be a useful tool for measuring one aspect of cultural competence (Jesiek et al., 2012), it may not capture the full range of skills and attitudes required for effective cross-cultural interactions. Therefore, it is important to use multiple measures and approaches when assessing cultural competence.

The second limitation of this study is the reliance on self-reported data, which may introduce subjective biases and limitations in understanding students’ reports on various variables. To account for the potential influence of social desirability biases, we incorporated the Marlowe-Crowne scale (Reynolds’s Form C) to test for such biases in our study. The results of the correlation analysis between this scale and the variables in the model indicated that diversity-seeking in activities ($r = 0.106, p < 0.05$) and comfort with differences ($r = 0.172, p < 0.01$) were positively correlated with the Marlowe-Crowne scale, suggesting that participants’ answers to questions on these variables may be related to their social desirability scores. Similarly, perspective-taking ($r = 0.281, p < 0.01$) and flourishing ($r = 0.251, p < 0.01$) were also positively correlated with the Marlowe-Crowne scale, indicating that respondents’ social desirability scores may have influenced their reported levels of perspective-taking and flourishing. To further investigate this potential bias, we conducted a robustness check by adding the results from Marlowe-Crowne scale as a variable in the model and linking it to perspective-taking and flourishing. The results showed that the model fit and the significance of the path coefficients remained the same as in the presented model without including the social desirability measure.

Lastly, this study utilized a cross-sectional design, which does not allow for the testing of alternative models or the establishment of causal relationships between the variables studied (Kline, 2005; Trafimow, 2004). Future research could utilize experimental designs and multiple assessments of cultural competence to examine whether the levels of cultural competence change as students complete formal learning activities, such as diversity courses, and to observe any resulting increases in perspective-taking and flourishing. This would provide more robust evidence on the effectiveness of diversity-seeking in learning in enhancing cultural competence and positive outcomes.
Conclusion
This study found that diversity-seeking in learning is associated with all three dimensions of cultural competence and is a stronger predictor of cultural competence than diversity-seeking in activities. The study also found that cultural competence is positively associated with both perspective-taking and flourishing. Furthermore, the study identified that comfort with differences mediated the relationship between diversity-seeking in learning and perspective-taking. The findings suggest that nurturing diversity-seeking in learning could be a powerful channel for enhancing cultural competence and promoting understanding and acceptance of diversity. These findings provide valuable insights into the relationships between diversity-seeking, cultural competence, and positive outcomes and highlight the importance of diversity learning opportunities in higher education settings for promoting cultural competence and fostering acceptance and understanding of diversity.

References
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