Research Article

"STILL I SHINE": STUDENT PHOTOVOICE PROJECT ON RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN THE UNITED STATES

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Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts in Higher Education have been approached from the majority group membership, often not fully integrating input from marginalized groups. In this study we explored a public university students' view of racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion on campus. We utilized the Photovoice method, in which participants express their community's strengths and concerns, and promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through group discussions of photographs. Twenty students of different racial and ethnic identities from various majors and stages of study participated in the project. Each weekly session focused either on exploring the topic of ethnic/racial DEI on campus, learning, and practicing specific photography skills using smart phones, or on taking and discussing photos. Thematic analysis of students' photos and captions resulted in four main themes, Importance of Diversity, Privilege, Barriers, and Power of Education/Need to Fight for Equity. Students' written reflections revealed that working on this project increased their awareness of campus inequities, their self-esteem, provided motivation to stand up for themselves and others, and decreased their feelings of isolation.

Keywords: *Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Higher Education, Photovoice*

1. Introduction

Long-established systems of higher education that have privileged and catered to mostly white, male, able-bodied, cis-gendered, upper-class student and faculty populations have been identified as problematic in recent years (Jones & Kunkle, 2022). The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) challenged universities to "create and articulate a commitment to inclusion, fairness, and equality by developing inclusive environments that ideally cultivate diversity and celebrate differences and in which all people are welcomed, heard, and valued equally" (Worthington et al., 2008, p. 2). Since then, universities have been evaluated based on improving campus diversity[1]. Many institutions of

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[1] For the purpose of this manuscript, we use most common US higher education terms for student race/ethnicity. Majority/dominant/White refers to non-Hispanic/Latinx students of European descent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), are Students of color/ minority/marginalized include American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Black/African American, Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander, and Hispanic/Latinx https://www.uml.edu/institutional-research/enrollment-at-glance.aspx. We realize that these broad categories are problematic because they group different populations together and an increasing number of young people in the US do not identify with any of them.

higher education have embraced the call and worked toward increasing numbers of students from marginalized backgrounds, however, there are still needed structural changes and hiring practices that would better promote inclusion need to be improved. Institutions of higher education have acted as spaces that recognize issues of social inequality while simultaneously contributing to unequal distribution of resources and opportunities for a diverse body of students (Jones & Kunkle, 2022). Hence, even with an increased presence of marginalized students on campus, there is still a disconnect between university claims of diversity and inclusion and the experiences of minority groups (Rankin & Reason, 2005). This disconnection is likely because the need for diversity and inclusion from the perspective of students of color does not always mirror that of white majority and in many instances, institutions of higher education are not aware of their lack of diversity or their ineffectiveness in resolving diversity-related campus concerns.

In recent history, universities have presented diversity more for aesthetics than for actual cultural inclusion and are not designed for the inclusion of students of color as deep as the norms, décor, and spacing (Cabrera et al., 2016). Gonzales et al. (2021) claim that most inclusion efforts come short of creating deep cultural and structural change. They say that many participants often leave DEI trainings dissatisfied, "Whereas white people feel personally attacked in DEI trainings, people of color report that most trainings do not address the history and mechanics of racism (or any ism) and rely instead on shallow stereotypes to explain differences" (Gonzales et al., 2021, p. 447).

Marichal (2008) confers when he suggests that the idea and need for diversity may have created a system of "band aids" not looking for real reform but only searching for the appearance of diversity. In fact, "the language of diversity certainly appears in official statements (from mission statements to equality policy statements, in brochures, as taglines) and as a repertoire of images (collages in which diversity of smiling faces of different colors), which are easily recognizable as images of diversity" (Ahmed, 2012, pp. 51-2). Cabrera et al. (2016) argue that for there to be deep rooted cross-cultural integration and diversity, there needs to be an adjustment of the framework (Cabrera et al., 2016; Marichal, 2008), an ideological shift in all areas of the university. They argue that to achieve such a complicated intervention, institutions must go beyond the reactive "band aid" approach via the occasional workshops, seminars, professional development etc. Otherwise, the issues keep being pushed aside.

The majority, or the social group that holds the most power in a particular environment, assumes that they have the correct strategy and disregard the lived experiences of the minority, marginalized group members (McCoy et al., 2015). Several studies support the significance of the relationship between students' perception of institutional support for diversity and student learning outcomes. Students who have marginalized identities like racial-ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, and immigrants are less likely to fit in, or even expect to fit in, based on their experiences at these institutions (Stewart & Valian, 2017). For example, lack of institutional support for diversity creates negative learning environments for students of color (Rankin & Reason, 2005). A longer-lasting consequence of the marginalization is that members of these groups are less likely to become members of the faculty in those same institutions (Stewart & Valian, 2017) and thus perpetuating status quo.

DEI issues in higher education are anything but simple and it can often be difficult to determine where the problems with diversity reside. Problems have been identified in faculty, administration, and student recruitment or in curriculum and campus programming, which do not encourage cross-cultural interactions. A large portion of research surrounds the juxtaposition of experiences of white and non-white students. By categorizing them as such, researchers have been able to identify some stark contrast between white and non-white students that can aid in the comprehension of the struggles with campus diversity. Worthington, et al. (2008) suggest that white students have a more favorable perception of racial-ethnic campus climate and general campus climate. Simultaneously, white students express a higher level of discomfort with racially and ethnically diverse faculty than their African and Asian American peers, who express a desire for more faculty with their resemblance, which would increase their comfort and feeling of acceptance at the university (Ancis et al., 2000; Nguyen et al., 2017). White students also report significantly fewer instances of perceived harassment, less awareness of their racial privilege, institutional discrimination, and racial issues (Rankin & Reason, 2005; Worthington et al. 2008) and express more of a sense of belonging and feeling more respected by faculty and overall, more satisfied with their campus experience on college campuses. African American students, on the other hand, have experienced significantly more racial conflict on campus (Ancis et al., 2000; Glass et al., 2016). White students' lack of desire for interracial relations as well as a racially diverse climate can exacerbate issues with diversity especially when combined with ignored harassment (Worthington et al., 2008). It is thus not surprising that white students often find DEI interventions to be unnecessary, or "anti-white" (Rankin & Reason, 2005; Worthington et al., 2008).

An increase in segregation in high schools across the United States means that many (especially white) students have their first meaningful interracial contact when starting college (Rankin & Reason, 2005), which deepens the need for meaningful integration strategies for all incoming students. Glass et al. (2016) show that high school segregation contributes to white students' lower openness to participating in cross-cultural interactions than their non-white classmates of all races except Native Americans. Asian American and Pacific Islander students have expressed that they feel supported amongst each other and feel that there is some cultural interaction, but they too feel that the campus environment overall fails to practice inclusion (Nguyen et al., 2017).

Different views of diversity have also been found between domestic and international students of color. Griffin et al. (2016) found that black students self-identify as native black-American or black immigrant students. While both groups expressed that the campuses were not culturally diverse, black immigrant students had fewer complaints about racism and hostility than native black American students. Both groups agreed that even with the levels of diversity, there was "cliquish" behavior that only exacerbated the separation leaving non-white students dissuaded from wanting to engage in cross-cultural interactions (Griffin et al., 2016). These results show that how students identified ethnically and nationality-wise affected their perceptions of diversity. They also indicate that it is important to take into consideration immigrant status of students of color and more generally differentiate among groups of students of different race and ethnicity.

Faculty play a crucial role in making university climates inclusive for all students (Rankin & Reason, 2005). Nevertheless, McCoy et al. (2015) found that white teachers say that they do not get to work with students of color often, and when they do they try to be fair. They have expressed that the students of color they work with are not top students and that they have made concessions for them. From this colorblind perspective (Bonilla-Silva, 2021), faculty believe they treat all students the same, unaware of their unconscious biases (McCoy et al., 2015). This colorblind ideology has been linked to less inclusive teaching strategies (Aragón et al., 2017) and faculty's inability to identify their own changes in behavior hardly gives confidence to the idea that they could identify it at the university structural level (McCoy et al., 2015). Finally, a generalized statement that students of color are not top students or students of color are underprepared, is a subconscious preconception that essentially handicaps professors from giving students of color an equal and fair assessment (McCoy et al., 2015) and reflect the abstract liberalism frame, which ignores structural injustices in favor of meritocracy (Bonilla-Silva, 2021).

The reviewed literature shows that while many universities are trying to address lack of diversity and inclusion of students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, they often come from assumptions and a deeply rooted institutional structure that creates more problems than solutions specifically for students of color. The university in this study has identified improving diversity and inclusion as one of its top pillars in its strategic plan. A lot of DEI efforts at the time of this project focused more on symbolic actions like offering ethnic food in the cafeterias and exhibiting flags of countries students come from. With time, the university increased its efforts to recruit more students and faculty of color and discussions started about deeper efforts, such as DEI trainings for faculty and staff, curricular changes, etc. The primary author of this article was part of a university-wide DEI committee while, at the same time, teaching classes on social (in)justice and psycho-social effects of racism. What she heard anecdotally from students and what the committee was discussing seemed out of sync, so she decided to investigate students' experiences with DEI in more depth. Since the university was already collecting some quantitative data, the author wanted to capture students' voices with qualitative data that can illustrate issues in a deeper/more nuanced way (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The overarching research question of the study, which was included in recruitment materials, was, "How do students perceive and experience racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion at the university?

2. Project facilitators

The first author of this article, a social psychology professor, was the project initiating faculty. She was joined by a digital media professor/professional photographer along with an undergraduate research assistant from the psychology department. All three of us are immigrants from different parts of the world (Czech Republic, Egypt, Cambodia) and of different races/ethnicities, which allowed us to share our own varied perspectives and connect with a wide range of student participants. The second author of this article is White American has prior experience co-facilitating photovoice and has close relationships to a Latinx immigrant community. All of us are deeply invested in antiracist and pro-immigrant

work. The first author was dealing and coping with her mother's illness and death at the time of the project, which has emotionally and logistically complicated the project as well as the process of writing this manuscript.

3. Method

The project facilitators decided to use Photovoice to address our research question for several reasons. Since we were working with young university students, we took into consideration Rose's (2016) suggestion that "the visual is central to the cultural construction of social life in contemporary Western societies" and "young people in western societies increasingly interact with the world mainly through how they see it" (p. 2). In addition, Photovoice enables participants to show how they see their community's strengths and concerns; promotes critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through group discussions of photographs, "which allows participants to think in a new way about themselves and others in their community, creates a sense of belonging and enables participants to reach policymakers" (Amos et. al., p. 370; Wang & Burris, 1997).

Several studies in higher education settings have shown Photovoice to be an effective research tool to, for example, address issues of equity and inclusion in higher education from the perspective of female faculty (CohenMiller & Inekezova, 2022), to capture black students' experiences of transformation at the University of Cape Town (Cornell & Kessi, 2017; Cornell et al., 2022), to explore sense of belonging of indigenous college students in a predominantly white university (Minthorn & Marsh, 2016), experiences of college students with disabilities (Agarwal, et al., 2015) or student veterans in higher education (Tomar & Stoffel, 2014).

Since we wanted this research to inform the university's DEI efforts and potentially use the results as advocacy for change and allow participants to increase their personal development and critical awareness (Gaboardi, 2022; Miranda et al., 2021), Photovoice seemed to be the most appropriate methodology for this project, followed by thematic analyses of the data.

3.1. Participants

We recruited twenty university students to participate in the project through flyers posted around the university's common areas, such as libraries, dining halls, and coffee houses. The participants included students of color, white students, immigrant and international students, both graduate and undergraduate, from various majors including psychology, digital media, business administration, and political science. The participants identified as male /he (3), female/she (16), and nonbinary/they (1).

3.2. Process

The project required a long commitment and since most students in the university study and work, we decided to offer the project as a pass/fail credit-bearing course of two concurrent sessions, with ten students per group. The only way for students to fail was not to show up or take photos at all and they could withdraw until the last week of the semester.

Each group met once a week for 90 minutes for a large portion of a spring semester. Each weekly session focused either on exploring the topic of ethnic/racial DEI on campus, learning and practicing specific photography skills using smart phones, or on taking and discussing photos. The professor of digital media provided detailed workshops on photography using smart phones, to teach the participants how to take and edit professionally looking photos and express their feelings and attitudes. Like in Cornell et al.,'s (2022) study, our participants were encouraged "to reflect on the significance of representation as a political act, as well as the ethics of representing people and symbols in humanizing ways (p. 327). We spent time creating a safe/brave container (Arao & Clemens, 2013), where all of us could be vulnerable, honest, and provide support and constructive feedback to each other. We spent class sessions discussing our experiences of inclusion and exclusion on campus and elsewhere. For example, the research assistant brought up the university students' race and ethnicity (35% students of color). Students of color immediately shared how disappointed they were in the low level of diversity at the university especially since the university created a different picture when recruiting them. This was a surprise to many white students for whom the university was one of the most diverse spaces they had experienced. Slowly, most students of color started sharing experiences of exclusion on campus. Several students said that instructors did not call on them in classes because they could not pronounce their names, while others used nicknames to have chance to participate. When leaving the building where we met, everyone had to cross a busy street. A Dominican student mentioned that cars never stopped for them, while stopping for white students. Most white students were gradually realizing what to them prior invisible privileges they had on campus and most started noticing them during the project. Students of color were sad to hear as some white students shared their positive experiences with the campus police because several black students were harassed. While they were aware of this racism, it was hard for them to hear it from their white peers. Some of them became angry, which made some white students uncomfortable. Working with discomfort became part of the process. As the project progressed, all participants agreed that the conversations they were having were very important, helpful, and unfortunately rare. They got to appreciate this space where they can discuss their experiences, connect with others, and learn from each other about DEI. Students continued expressing their critical consciousness and understanding of their own and others' experiences and uncovered that they "were not isolated and individual incidents—but based on broader structural issues" (Cornell et al., 2022, p. 327). Through these facilitated discussions, the students started formulating their most prevalent feelings about inclusion and exclusion on campus and express them in photographs. Thus, the photos reflected the students' views as opposed to the students creating a narrative around photos they took. Once each student-participant took several photos, they shared them with each other and the facilitators, received feedback on them, which resulted in either taking more photos, making digital edits, or keeping them as they were presented. Their awareness and views kept evolving until the very end, when each student chose two photos they felt best represented their views on DEI at the university.

The culmination of the project was an exhibit, a key component of the photovoice method (Cornell et al., 2022). As the project was coming close to the exhibit, some students expressed reluctance to show their work publicly fearing some kind of retribution especially if they expressed negative views of DEI at the university. After a long discussion, these students

reached consensus that they would exhibit the photos but only if their names were not revealed. The remaining participants decided to do the same in solidarity and all chose to share only their race and ethnicity and sometimes their immigrant status. Once this decision was made by the students, the facilitators enlarged, framed, and arranged the chosen photos along with their captions at the university library. University administrators, faculty, staff, and students were invited to the opening where participating students had the opportunity to present their work to visitors. The attendance was excellent, and the project participants beamed with pride and confidence. The photos stayed in the library for two years and were thus likely seen by hundreds of people. The first author continues to share the photos and captions in her classes related to diversity, racism, and immigration issues. That they still resonate with students indicates that the university has not made enough progress in making it inclusive for all.

3.3. Data

We have collected three kinds of data for analyses, namely: photos, captions, written reflection papers, and recordings of several class sessions. Since the recordings ended up being of poor quality, we focus on the first two data sources in this manuscript.

Considering ethical considerations of privacy (Amos et al. 2012) and IRB instructions, participants were only allowed to photograph living persons in a way they could not be recognized. Hence, the photographs themselves are symbolic expressions/metaphors of the participants' views of DEI at the university. The participants used their conceptual thinking as well as their captions to express their feelings and their photos interpret and represent rather than just show their world (Rose, 2016). The metaphors students used were creative and varied widely. One student expressed lack of diversity on faculty and staff by photographing a bowl full of eggs, white on top, brown (some broken), on the bottom. Her caption explained that there are very few faculty and staff of color at the university unless they are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Another student illustrated how typical classroom structures interfere with student integration, by taking a picture of a typical university classroom with desks in rows facing the front with a professor's podium and whiteboard. She explained that while there are students from various backgrounds in classes, the set up does not facilitate interactions, conversations, and production of new knowledges.

3.4. Analyses

Three project participants conducted preliminary analysis of the photos and captions but because the majority of participants, including the research assistant, were graduating the same semester the research took place and were no longer available, we did not complete the analyses together. Due to the traumatic events connected to the time period of project, the first author of this manuscript put the data away for an extended period of time. When she was ready to revisit the data, her current coauthor came on board to help with the analysis and writing. We entered the photos, captions, and the written reflections into NVivo software (QSR International) for the purposes of data storage, management, and analyses (Holtslander, 2015) and conducted thematic analyses of the data. Since thematic analysis is not directly

connected to a certain theoretical framework, it's congruent with numerous theoretical frames and data-collection methodologies such as Photovoice (Braun & Clark 2006). It is particularly well suited when looking across a data set, rather than within a data item, such as one reflective writing or one photograph (Braun & Clark 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). "A theme is an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations" (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 82) derived from the data to inform the research question. Since the photos were reflections of the participants' views on DEI at the university, we focused on the captions/descriptions, which describe the students' feelings in detail, while the photographs expressed their views conceptually. Even though the research methodology was photovoice, the most important part of this method is the ongoing discussions which raise awareness and lead to critiques of establish systems, and advocacy for a cause. Thus, we felt it was acceptable to focus on the captions. Nevertheless, we considered the two together when conducting inductive thematic analysis, which is an analysis grounded in the data as opposed to a particular theory. While it is impossible to be purely inductive, since we are all influenced by our assumptions, biases, knowledge, and experiences, the inductive method stays close to the meaning of the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain inductive thematic analysis as "a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre- existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions (p. 83). This process is closely related to grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

During the inductive analysis, we first developed broad codes across the data in Nvivo, followed by focused coding, when we combined, integrated, and organized the most frequent or significant initial codes (Holtslander, 2015). More specifically, we followed the steps outlined by Nowell et al. (2016), which include "familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing a manuscript/report" (p. 4). During this process, the two coauthors worked independently with frequent debriefings, discussions, and reflections in between.

Then, we conducted deductive/hierarchical thematic analysis of the students' written reflective essays. We chose this methodology because the written reflections were guided by specific questions provided by the project facilitators, rather than being free writing. We simplified the guiding questions into higher order codes prior to engaging with the data (Nowell et al., 2016) and then developed more detailed codes to be able to differentiate between cases and compare across them.

4. Results and discussion

Captions & Photos

In the results and discussion section of photos and captions we highlight nine photos (figures) representative of the themes identified during the analysis. The four main themes, which emerged from preliminary analysis by several project participants and confirmed by separate inductive analysis of photos and captions include *Importance of Diversity, Privilege, Barriers, and the Power of Education/Need to Fight for Equity*. Said themes were found in the data of most participants.

Importance of Diversity

Figure 1. Color is beautiful and so is diversity
(Chinese Indonesian American student)

Woven throughout the data is the theme of the importance of diversity on campus and elsewhere. Participants noted that diversity "is our strength" and that persons at the university are characterized as "bright and beautiful" (Fig.1) due to said diversity. This student continued to "marvel at nature and its happy complexion…that nature would not exist without the diversity of its color" (Fig. 1).

Another participant stated that with "diversity, knowledge, understanding, and acceptance" there is a greater opportunity to learn from each other, which should be a crucial component to any educational experience. A white student athlete critiqued lack of diversity on her volleyball team (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. White athletics
(White Canadian international student)

Privilege

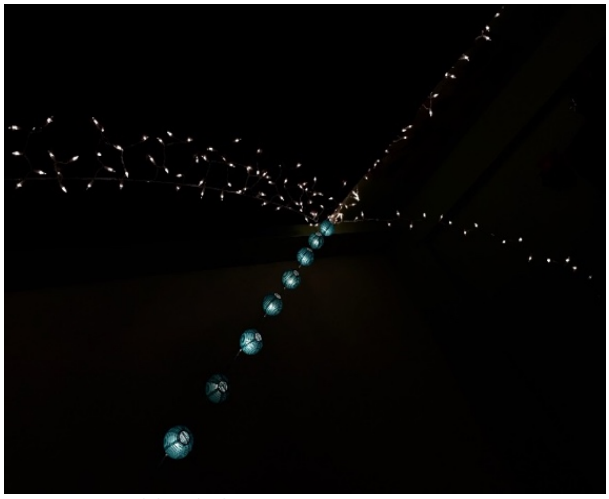

Figure 3. Hidden light
(Cambodian Chinese student)

While diversity was regarded as desirable, the existence of privilege, inequity, and exclusion were noted by many students as well. During the process of the project, both white and students of color became aware of white privilege and its role on campus and in the classroom. One participant of color noted that "White students get called on more often when they raise their hands," while students of color "have a hard time getting professors to even acknowledge [them]…" (Fig. 3).

Most white participants realized their privilege even with activities as (on the surface) simple as filling out a campus employment form. “Why,” a student asks, “as a white student, have I never felt any hesitation whilst completing university temporary employment demographic forms? Do students of color feel the same? Or do they worry about potential discrimination?” On the other hand, another white student did not see their privilege and believed she was disadvantaged on campus: “On campus, as a white student, I have to be careful what I say so that I do not offend anyone, instead of standing up and having my voice heard about something I believe in” (Fig. 4.). This participant potentially relied on the myth of reverse racism, which is the idea that “the Civil Rights Movement not only ended the subordination of communities of color in all aspects of social life but also simultaneously led to a similar subordination of Whites.” (Roussell et al., 2019, p. E6). These claims are often used to undermine DEI efforts.

Figure 4. Does the flag still stand for freedom if we don't feel free to be ourselves?"
(White American USMC veteran)

Barriers

Figure 5. Breaking barriers
(Latina student)

Intertwined with diversity and privilege are the barriers that confine students personal and intellectual growth. This Latinx student called her photo *Breaking Barriers* (Fig. 5) with a caption: “Some people give up their dreams because of challenges they face. This photograph represents my life in the United States. The snow represents the barriers such as language, freedom of speech, fear of success, and fear of judgments I have faced every day. The path in this picture is the one I have been shoveling at [university] in order to succeed as an immigrant student in the United States. I wake every day with my mind set up to fight the challenges of a first-generation college student in an immigrant family.”

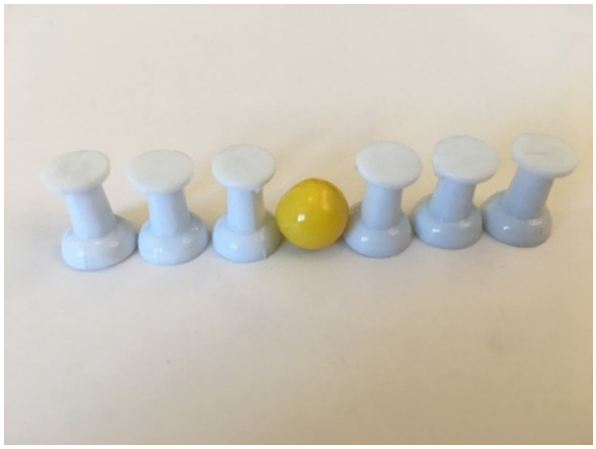

Figure 6. You're YELLOW
(Cambodian immigrant student)

Blatant, implicit, and institutional racism is present on college campuses, regardless of how diverse or progressive these universities are (e.g., Banks & Dohy, 2019; Blake & Moore, 2004; Cornell & Kessi, 2017; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013) and our participants have confirmed it. One student claimed that "Racism against students of color is still with us" (Fig. 6).

This Cambodian student, who was called *yellow* by their white classmates in their core class, decided to change their major and ended up pursuing one where students were more aware of social inequalities. The new major was not their first choice and did not promise as many employment opportunities with good salary as their first choice, yet the student saw the change as their only way to complete a college degree.

This kind of racism in the classroom also impacts students' intellectual growth, "because of my race, I'm afraid to speak up for myself especially in the environment where the majority of my classmates are white" … "Sitting in a…class with a majority of white students explaining the life of a person of color drains the energy out of *US [students of color].* They don't know how it feels to be *US."*

In acknowledging their privilege, some white students noted that while there are a multitude of social benefits in a college education, "… the word "equal" only reflects what we as a society choose to believe. The symmetry is superficial. The divide between the train cars and the people within them represents the division between people of [different] ethnicities on campus. They don't fully acknowledge each other, which can emit a sense of disengagement from each other socially and racially." (Fig. 7)

Figure 7. Public partition
(Irish American student)

Power of Education/Need to Fight for Equity

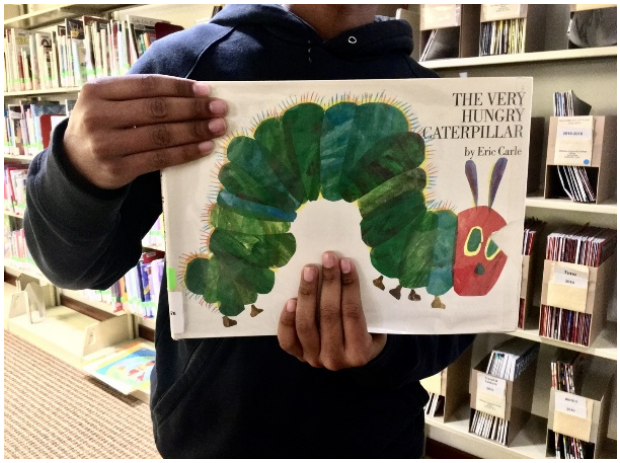

Figure 8. I am NOT a Worm
(Dominican student)

While students of color were or became well-aware of their disadvantages, they saw higher education as their way out of their lower status. They put the burden of fighting isolation and discrimination on themselves and believe that educational credentials are the best way to do so. However, "the onus of minimizing feelings of loneliness on campus should not fall entirely on those that are marginalized" and universities should strive to create safe campus that does not tolerate racism in any form (Banks & Dohy 2019, pp. 125-6).

A Dominican student, who called her photo *I am NOT a Worm* wrote "That's the reason I am here…education is my only way out of this stigma…earning higher education because I will fight stereotypes and I will prove them wrong." (Fig. 8).

Another Black/Dominican student expressed a similar sentiment: "…we, as minorities, have to fight for the same rights no matter what. We fight with our success, not our failure. Not with violence but with the education we get."

A Puerto Rican student expressed how difficult it was to "adjust to the predominantly white population at the university, which was so different from the Latino community I was raised in." She recognized her success in stating "…even though it has been hard, I still succeed" (Fig. 9).

Figure 9. Still I shine
(Puerto Rican student)

As these results show, faith in the power of education was palpable in the photos and captions of students of color and the allure of the American Dream was very much alive among immigrant students. Nevertheless, even though "higher education is frequently portrayed as an engine of social mobility and equity in American society, and it has played that role for many people. But colleges and universities fall short of that promise in many ways" (Editors of *Inside Higher Ed*, 2021, p. 6). Moreover, since higher education credentials in the United States have replaced high school diplomas in most entry-level jobs, students in social sciences need graduate degrees to find higher paying jobs (Rose, 2013). But the enormous cost of graduate degrees makes it impossible for most low-income families to obtain. In addition, the corporatization of higher education in the United States has been answering to the demands of the marketplace, not to students' needs. Giroux posits that "curricula modeled after corporate culture have been

enormously successful in preparing students for low-skilled service work in a society that has little to offer in the way of meaningful employment for the vast majority of its graduates" (Giroux, 2003, p.188).

Written reflections

As noted earlier, we used the guiding questions for written reflections and participants' preliminary analysis as the broadest deductive codes in their analyses. The questions included: "Why did you sign up for this project?" "How did you feel about the exhibit?", "What did you learn about yourself and your peers during the project?", "What will you take with you from the project?" and "What were the hardest and most fun parts of the project?" Not all students followed these guidelines, but deeper coding enabled us to uncover themes we found across the narratives.

The most frequent theme was **Not Being Alone**. During the project, students of color learned that their experiences are not as unique as they thought and even though the exclusion they faced was painful, they found solace in knowing that others had similar experiences. The following quotes illustrate these realizations: "The most salient one is that I learned that I am not alone. I learned that there are more people going through the same things that I go through every day." With this realization came some hope as they "learned that I am not alone and if I ever needed help, I can get it from my fellow peers and professors." (Brazilian Student)

Another common theme was **empowerment** as illustrated in the following quotes: "I learned that it was not okay to think that it is normal being treated different because I have an accent, a different tone of color on my skin" and

> "The most important thing of everything I learned about myself is that I am brave, and now more than ever I feel more competent, secure of myself; my knowledge, believes, and values but something even better is that I am willing to demonstrate that I am smart, and educated, in all sense, and that I am willing to embrace where I come from and I feel more secure of who I know I will become because I know my capacity, independently of what people think that are my limits." (Dominican student)

Some students also felt **increased willingness to change** and to **help others**:

> "I feel I have changed as person. I am more open to other people's views and opinions about race. I know I can't just get mad when people start speaking about race, I need to hear what they're saying and then express my opinion." (Haitian-American student)

> "The things I learned from myself that I did not realize before was how worried I feel about people who do not have the opportunity to express themselves. It … encourages me to do critical awareness around campus, to speak up and teach other students who are not able to see what we see."… "Now I feel that I have the compromise to stay here and help spread my knowledge; knowledge acquired through this amazing project. Even though I still don't feel that I belong here because of many prejudices that still exist

toward minorities (even among ourselves) I have gained so much knowledge through this project that I feel that is now my task to contribute, and help create a truly inclusive, diverse and "transformed" university." (Dominican immigrant student)

At and after the exhibit, some students felt that their "voices may (finally) be heard and that they mattered: "It's exciting that in some aspect, my voice will be heard. It feels like now I have reach on this campus, I have a presence and a view that matters." (Cambodian-Chinese student)

They overwhelmingly felt **proud and excited**:

"I feel exhilarated and thrilled to see the final product of what we've been working on …seeing all of the photos hung up on the walls and people taking the time to read each description made me feel like this project would have a lasting effect on some people. The exhibit opening made me feel proud to be a part of this project and know that I was able to learn so much from my peers and share each of our pictures together." (White Canadian international student)

"When I saw my work exhibited on the wall and framed I was in awe. It made me feel so good to know that my work was being looked at every day and people can relate to it. My heart couldn't stop smiling…" (Puerto Rican student)

These results show that involving students in projects meaningful to them empowers them and helps their engagement with learning and their community. They confirm the ability of Photovoice to allow participants to increase their personal development and critical awareness (Miranda et al., 2021). In addition, we believe that sharing photovoice results in a form of exhibitions "can offer students the opportunity to speak directly to policy makers, such as university deans and vice chancellors" (Cornell et al., 2022, p. 329). Unfortunately, the students' work was not considered in the DEI committee's discussions. The only time the head of the committee expressed interest in the project was when the first author of this manuscript mentioned that the project would be written up for publication. They wanted to be included in the preparation of the manuscript, likely caring more about how the university is portrayed than in improving students' experiences and the first author viewed this request as impingement on academic freedom and an indirect threat. She did not collaborate with the head of the committee.

Recommendations to the university

As stated in the literature review, a comprehensive approach to DEI is needed to create an inclusive community for students of all racial/ethnic backgrounds. Our results support this need and findings that "programs that have been successful in addressing opportunity gaps focus on creating feelings of belonging, implementing a culturally responsive curriculum, and considering the strengths of students" (Banks & Dohy, 2019, p. 125).

At the time of writing this manuscript, the number of enrolled students of color is exceeding the university's goals, but the challenge of meeting this diversity with proper

reform or training remains. This study shows that caring about and listening to students' voices can lead to increased sense of belonging to the university as well as higher self-worth and confidence, both crucial to successful college experiences that white students seem to encounter more often than their counterparts of color. The project showed that the university students are separated along racial/ethnic lines, nevertheless, students of color felt excluded and not able/allowed to grow to their full potential. Students of color did not feel connected to the white professors, who often ignored them in classes and often find themselves the only person of color in classrooms. Such situations are very isolating and do not allow the students to contribute to knowledge production. Since feelings of isolation can increase the likelihood of dropping out (Blake & Moore, 2004) and the retention of students of color is the university's major goal, the university needs to address structural racism and include curricular changes to increase students' sense of belonging**.** The university administrators need to work on general environment of inclusion and provide ongoing professional development of white faculty and administrators and spaces for regular conversations about inclusion from perspectives of various stakeholders.

Figure 10. Similar to this bridge, diversity and inclusion at the university remain in the dark, in need of more light and repair
(Haitian-American student)

Even though making recommendations for the university was not an explicit prompt, students conveyed recommendations for the university, both directly and through their metaphorical images. One student wrote "I feel that now more than ever it is so important to interact with each other and provide an inclusive environment for all, no matter what walk of life we may stem from." Another participant compared DEI at the university to a broken bridge, indicating the university needs to work harder on DEI (Fig. 10).

Other students suggested that "things are done too generically here, we need to be more colorful and add a little more creativity to new aspects and old ones" and expressed desire for the university to create more common spaces where "people of different backgrounds cross their paths as they seek solutions to similar problems. I wish there were more spaces on campus where everyone would feel welcomed."

Hiring more faculty of color has been a goal of many institutions of higher education and this student underlines its importance at this university (Fig. 11): "As a student of color, I have

Figure 11. Why so few at the top?
(Dominican student)

very few professors I can identify with. UMass Lowell lacks diversity in the faculty body and staff. The people of color who work here are mostly at low-level positions and those who attain a higher level usually have to go through more obstacles than a white person would. I wonder if this is due to the fact that people of color are seen as less capable, and less competent than whites."

We hope that the new administration and renewed DEI committees will take these recommendations into consideration.

5. Limitations and future research

There are numerous limitations to this research project. Similar to other studies on identity and diversity (i.e., Qin & Lykes, 2006), we focused only on one aspect of diversity, specifically on ethnic/racial diversity and inclusion in our study. We understand that everyone has complex identities which intersect in various ways in different ways and contexts. Some intersections were inevitably expressed in the data (student-parents, gender, immigration status, etc.), so we believe that an intentional intersectional study would likely produce even more complex results. Moreover, we only worked with 20 out of the almost 18,000 university students and did not have students from all majors and levels of study (i.e., engineering, natural sciences, math, Ph.D.). It is important to note that it was not our aim to represent or generalize to the entire student population. As we mentioned at the beginning of the manuscript, using broad categories to describe race and ethnicity (i.e., Black, Asian, Latino) is problematic as it groups diverse populations with different cultures and experiences (i.e., Chinese, Cambodian, Indian, etc.) together. In this study, the students self-identified mostly by their ancestry or country of origin (i.e., Dominican, Cambodian, Irish-American, etc.), not by the broad categories. Hence, in future only participants' preferred racial/ethnic identities should be used.

Another limitation is that we did not conduct detailed visual analysis of the photos. Since this is an emerging field in psychology, we will strive to implement innovative analyses such as value analysis utilized by Benevento (2022). We also believe it would be important to explore the students' feelings about (not) revealing their identities to wide audiences on campus, to locate the hesitation and fear in the power-dynamics of university setting. While we touched upon it in the process of this project, we did not have enough time to dedicate to it. Another limitation is the format of the project as a pass/fail course. We did not set to conduct the project as a class but due to IRB restrictions and student availability, it became the most feasible option. Conducting this kind of project as a for-credit course has the potential to perpetuate the instructor/student power dichotomy no matter how save/brace is created. The ways students participated was likely impacted by the facilitators' leanings in order to pass. We intend to rely more on participatory action research in our future work with students.

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