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Students' Perceptions of Diversity at Two Hispanic-Serving Institutions Through Pictures: A Focus on Structures for Serving

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Abstract

Beyond the basic criteria to become a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), which includes enrolling 25% Latinx students, the federal government has not established guidelines for better serving these students. Instead, educators at HSIs must submit applications for competitive federal grants that allow them to define and enact "servingness" in practice, which is a multidimensional way to think about how to educate and liberate minoritized students and with a need to transform the "structures for serving" them. In both research and practice, however, students at HSIs have not been given the opportunity to define servingness, or to even talk about what it means to be educated at a campus that is compositionally diverse. The purpose of this study was to explore how students at two HSIs in the Midwest perceive diversity through pictures, with a focus on the organizational structures that represent diversity. Using a photo elicitation methodology, which prompted students to take pictures of the structural elements on campus that represent diversity, and one-on-one interviews that allowed them to describe their pictures, students talked about diversity as reflected in art on campus, people on campus, and spaces on campus. Implications are offered for understanding servingess, and specifically the structures for serving, as perceived by students.

Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) are non-profit colleges and universities that enroll 25% Latinx students (Valdez, 2015). The federal government first recognized HSIs in 1992 and began allocating funds to these colleges and universities in 1995 under Title V of the Higher Education Act (Valdez, 2015). But beyond the enrollment criteria, the federal government has not established guidelines for better serving Latinx students. Instead, the designation is based on the compositional diversity of students, leaving educators at HSIs to define and enact "servingness" in practice, which is a multidimensional way to educate and liberate minoritized students and with a need to transform the "structures for serving" (Garcia & Koren, 2020; Garcia et al., 2019).

Since 1992, few researchers have engaged students in the process of defining servingness. In one study, Garcia and Dwyer (2018) found that students' identification with the HSI status varied significantly, with some believing that the HSI designation is a good thing, and others feeling like it is exclusionary. Still some thought the HSI designation was ambiguous, with little to no meaning at all (Garcia & Dwyer, 2018). Similarly, Gonzalez et al. (2020) found that students at one HSI had little knowledge of the HSI designation and doubted that it had any meaning, as the institution did not seem to embrace or promote it. These studies suggest that students at HSIs are rarely aware of the HSI designation, and they are not included in the process of defining what it means to be an HSI. The purpose of this study was to explore how students at two HSIs in the Midwest perceive diversity through pictures, with diversity serving as a starting point for understanding how they define servingess, with a focus on the structures for serving.

Conceptual Framework

Diversity, as defined by Squire (2017), is a "lexical tool characterizing the structural representation of multiple marginalized societal groups (not: white, male, European in ancestry, able bodied, native born, English language speaking, binary gender identifying, Christian, and heterosexual) in a given institution based on geographical context" (p. 731). HSIs are unique as they are compositionally diverse, with white students, on average, representing only 25% of the students enrolled at these colleges and universities (Espinosa et al., 2019) and low-income students being the majority of the student population (Cuellar, 2019; Núñez & Bowers, 2011). There is also diversity within the Latinx population at HSIs, with Latinxs identifying with

different ethnic groups such as Mexican American, Chicanx, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Central and South American, and mixed race Latinxs (Cuellar, 2019; Espinosa et al., 2019). There is also diversity by language and immigration status of students who attend HSIs (Cuellar, 2019; Núñez & Bowers, 2011). The compositional diversity in HSIs makes them ideal sites for exploring how students at these institutions perceive diversity.

In this study, we drew on Garces and Jayakumar's (2014) concept of "dynamic diversity," which they argue starts with a critical mass of diverse students on campus, but also requires contexts that disrupt historical patterns of exclusion and elevate a positive climate that allows for positive cross-racial interactions and the elimination of racial isolation, discrimination, and microaggressions. We used this definition to map on the existing HSI research about cross-racial interactions and racial isolation, discrimination, and microaggressions, as a way to understand how students at HSIs may perceive "dynamic diversity."

Cross-racial Interactions & Racial Tensions at HSIs

Cross-racial interactions in social, curricular, and co-curricular environments have proven to be essential, as they enhance educational outcomes such as cognitive and moral reasoning skills, civic engagement, and academic self-confidence (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014). Yet less has been written about *same*-race interactions, which is what the HSI research highlights. For example, Arbelo-Marrero and Milacci (2016) found that 10 Latinx students attending two HSIs in the Southeast reported positive same-race interactions with peers and mentors, which enhanced their overall sense of belonging. Similarly, students at one HSI in the Southwest reported that shared cultural experiences with same-race faculty, staff, and students enhanced their engagement and contributed to their overall success (Arana et al., 2011). Guardia and Evans (2008) highlighted how Latino men at one HSI in the Southeast found great value in same-race interactions with their peers, faculty, and staff, which ultimately enhanced their own racial identity development. Similar to the research on cross-racial interactions, these studies highlight how the environment at HSIs facilitates same-race interactions that can lead to positive outcomes.

A critical mass of students of color should also create the ideal conditions for decreasing racial isolation, discrimination, and aggressions (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014). But research has shown that despite the fact that some students have positive same-race

interactions at HSIs, others continue to have negative racialized experiences (Garcia et al., 2019). For example, Latinx students at one Hispanic-serving community college reported experiences with discrimination and bias in some student services offices (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016). Similarly, Sanchez (2017) found that Latinx students at HSIs and emerging HSIs (institutions that enroll between 15-24% Latinxs) in Texas and California experienced microaggressions in the form of racial stereotypes and physical and social segregation, both inside and outside the classroom. Sanchez (2017), however, reported that students attending HSIs with higher concentrations of Latinxs experienced fewer instances of microaggressions.

Non-Latinx students of color also have racialized experiences at HSIs, suggesting that their cross-racial interactions are negative. For example, Desai and Abeita (2017) provided a detailed description of the institutional microaggressions, exploitation, and commodification of Native culture experienced by one Dine (Navajo) woman attending an HSI in the Southwest. Serrano (2020) found that while Latinx men in his study, as members of the largest racial group on campus, reported a positive sense of belonging at one HSI in California, Black men at the same institution felt isolated as members of the smallest racial group on campus. This was complicated, however, when the same Black and Latinx men talked about specific spaces on campus, such as the classroom, where both groups felt that they were often perceived to be intellectually inferior (Serrano, 2020). Abrica et al. (2019), similarly found that Black men at one Hispanic-serving community college were not only perceived to be intellectually inferior, some were accused of cheating, and others had their intellectual property stolen by other (white) students. These experiences are inhibitors to the enactment of dynamic diversity at HSIs.

Contexts that Facilitate Dynamic Diversity at HSIs

With research suggesting that the racial climate continues to be negative at HSIs, despite the compositional diversity present within these institutions, there must be an effort to disrupt historical contexts of exclusion and isolation in order to achieve the benefits of dynamic diversity (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014). This is what Garcia et al. (2019) call the "structures for serving," at HSIs. Structures for serving include organizational elements such as mission and vision statements, compositional diversity of faculty, staff, administrators, and graduate students, curricular and co-curricular structures, institutional advancement activities, and engagement with the local community (e.g., Andrade & Lundberg, 2018; Garcia, 2018; Vargas et al., 2019). In

order to realize the benefits of dynamic diversity at HSIs, and even further, to reach true levels of equity, justice, and liberation, these structures, or contexts, must reflect the compositional diversity of the student body (Garcia, 2018). In this study, we sought to understand how students perceive dynamic diversity within the structures of the institution, rather than in their peer and staff interactions or in their experiences within racism, discrimination, and microaggressions. This contributes to the growing body of research about the structures for serving Latinx students within HSIs.

Methods

The data for this study came from a larger, multi-site case study examining how organizational members at three, four-year HSIs in Chicago make sense of their HSI identity. The strength of case study methodology is in the variety of data sources that can be used to understand the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2009). For the larger project, multiple forms of data were collected from various sources including one-on-one interviews with faculty and staff, focus groups with students, observations on campus, document reviews, and photo elicitation. For this article, we only used data from students at two of the three sites that participated in one focus group, as well as an optional photo elicitation, and second interview following the collection of their photos. We excluded the third site because we did not collect student-level data at that site.

The first site, Azul City University (ACU; a pseudonym) is a four-year, midsize, public, master's granting university. ACU is a federally recognized HSI with 33% of all undergraduates identifying (at the time of data collection) as Latinx, 10% as Black, 9% as Asian American, and 2% as mixed race. ACU has programs and services for Latinxs and other minoritized students, including a cultural center (Garcia, 2019). It also has curricular offerings that allow students to explore their social identities, and to develop a social justice orientation (Garcia, 2019). The second site, Rosado Private University (RPU; a pseudonym) is a small, private, master's granting university. It's an urban, comprehensive university that provides a professional, career-focused undergraduate education. It is also a federally recognized HSI, enrolling 27% Latinx students, and with nearly 60% of all students identifying as students of color. Yet RPU does not offer curricular and co-curricular offerings centered on Latinx ways of knowing or that allow students of color to see themselves in the curriculum or develop a social justice orientation (Garcia, 2019).

Sample

Sixty-three students participated in the larger project (n = 63). A total of 20 students opted into the optional photo elicitation, with 16 participating in a second interview. For this study, we only used data from seven of the 16, who were chosen based on their focus on structures for serving in their perceptions of diversity. Students identified their race/ethnicity and sex/gender through an open-ended question, so responses varied. They also chose their own pseudonyms.

Carmen is a Mexican American woman/female who was in a graduate program in education at ACU. Paige is an Arab American female who was in her junior year in education at ACU. Lili identified as a Hispanic female in her senior year at ACU majoring in social work. June racially identifies as white but ethnically identifies as a Spaniard. She was a graduate student in counseling at ACU. Stephanie is a Hispanic female in her junior year studying biology at ACU. Amy identifies as a mixed race male, including Black, Native, Columbian, and Irish. He was a sophomore majoring in business administration at RPU. Angelica is a Caucasian female who was a senior majoring in graphic design at RPU.

Data Sources

Following participation in a focus group, students were given the option to participate in a photo elicitation project. Photo elicitation is a method used to capture responses, reactions, emotions, and insights of participants through photographs and images (Copes et al., 2018). Photo elicitation is an effective method for flipping the researcher-participant power dynamic, as it allows participants to determine the data to be collected, and the insights to address (Copes et al., 2018). Moreover, it empowers participants to examine power structures that influence their own views and perceptions of the world (Boucher, Jr., 2017), which was essential in this study as we asked students to describe how dynamic diversity is at play within institutions that are historically committed to whiteness as power (Garcia, 2019). Banning et al. (2008) similarly used photos as a way to understand how diversity is portrayed through campus structures. Students were given the following prompt: "Take pictures of artifacts (places, buildings, structures, murals, art, and other 'things' on campus) that represent diversity, Latina/o/x culture, and/or your racial identity."

As recommended by the Institutional Review Board, students were discouraged from taking pictures of people. After taking pictures and uploading them to a phone app, students participated in a second interview, one-on-one via Skype, which focused on their pictures and further probed their understanding of how the institution enacts diversity. For the interview, we used an in-depth, semi-structured protocol, which allowed for direct questioning and emerging ideas, as guided by the participants' worldview (Merriam, 2009). Sample questions included, "Describe the pictures you took." "In what ways do your pictures describe what it means for an institution of higher education to serve Latina/o/x students and other minoritized students?"

Data Analysis

Audio files were professionally transcribed and then verified by at least one member of the research team. For analysis, we created a dataset that only included student-level data. The unit of analysis for this study was students, not institutions, as we sought to understand students' perceptions of diversity through pictures. We did not conduct a cross-case analysis, although we noted differences in the structures for serving at each site. We used thematic analysis, which is a qualitative process that can be used to make sense of multiple forms of data (Boyatzis, 1998). Codes were identified at the manifest level, meaning they were based on directly observable information (Boyatzis, 1998). *In Vivo* codes, in particular, were useful, which are codes based on what participants say (Saldana, 2013), and in this case based on what the students said about how they perceived diversity on their campus. After the first layer of analysis, codes were grouped together based on similarities and contrasts, and then pieced together to inform the three emerging themes, and with comparison to the pictures (Saldana, 2013; de los Rios, 2017).
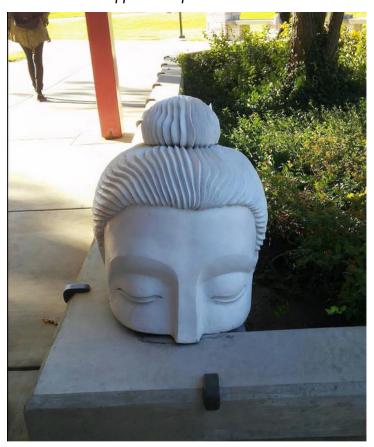
Findings

We chose six photos to demonstrate the three prominent themes that emerged: (a) art as diversity, (b) people as diversity, and (c) space as diversity. In this section we provide an overview of these themes, providing context that students shared through interviews.

Art as Diversity

Art is one way that participants suggested diversity is represented on campus. Art as diversity is a critical way to promote how campuses are embracing and supporting diversity

(Banning & Bartels, 1997). Yet, an obstacle in trying to create artistic spaces on campus is how to capture art that reflects the complexities of diversity among students (Pedrabissi, 2015). Lili, for example, took a picture of a sculpture on campus that to her was inspired by and represents the Asian community and culture (see Figure 1); however, she said that she did not identify with the sculpture and stressed that the art was not an accurate reflection of what diversity on her campus looks like. In discussing the picture Lili said, "I feel excluded in a sense, because those art pieces don't really have anything to do with me or Hispanics or Latinos' culture."

Figure 1

"Ten Thousand Ripples" Sculpture

Lili said that there are several sculptures like this on campus, yet she does not believe that they represent the Latinx community. For her, being at an HSI means that there should be representation of Latinx culture through art, in addition to art that represents the culture of others. She stated that if HSIs use art as representation of diversity on campus, there should be pieces that reflect all cultures.

Paige also took a picture of a statue that is located in the Cultural Center on campus (see Figure 2). Paige elaborated on how a statue could represent diversity, specifically when people are not the focus of diversity. In talking about the statue, Paige said:

> I thought it was really a cool way to show diversity in people without having to take pictures of people. Because I always thought of diversity as different individuals valuing each other, no matter where they come from or who they are. That's what I see in the statue, how they're all coming together even though they're all different people.

Figure 2

Sculpture that represents diversity

Paige used the photo of the statue to elaborate on how diversity does not have to be represented by physical people on campus, as art and sculptures can provide a feeling that diversity is valued on campus. This is an important concept, as diversity is often attributed to the number of students of color on campus (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014), not the physical structures and artistic expressions.

People as Diversity

Although this project did not allow students to take pictures of people, people as diversity was a salient theme. In their interviews, students frequently said that they struggled with the project because people are the most important ways that they see diversity on campus. Yet the participants were creative and found other ways to show diversity through their pictures. June took a picture of her professors' decorated door and said that she feels inspired when she sees it and other doors like it (see Figure 3). June stated:

I feel like it kind of—because every time I go past that door, I stop and read something and there's always something new or something interesting. It's [the door] always encouraging students to go on, to pursue their goals, to not give up; it encourages a lot of minorities who work with kids and stuff, like, if you're either having a bad day and something on that door relates to you, it's gonna help you, definitely.

Figure 3
Professor's door

For June, the messages on the door are relatable and motivating. Moreover, there is a sense of care that comes through the door decorations that can be important to diverse students as they search for supportive people on campus. She said that the door shows that the professor supports diverse students, and the range of issues that may affect them. This door, for example, has a sticker that says, "I'm an unafraid educator with and for undocumented students,"

showing the professor's support for undocumented students, which can be an important group of students for faculty at HSIs to support. June, however, claimed that she does not get this same feeling when she is in departments outside of her own, as it is common for the professors in her department to decorate their doors, but it is less common in other spaces on campus.

Angelica also said that diversity is represented through people, not just in the physical sense, but symbolically, as they create a sense of belonging, and a safe environment on campus. She also said that a lack of diversity, both physically and symbolically, is an important way to think about diversity. Angelica captured this with a photo of an empty hallway (see Figure 4). In describing the picture, she talked about the people whom she would have otherwise captured in the picture if she could have:

> I think a lot of it would be—I have professors that I really enjoy so some of 'em would be professors. Some would be fellow art students. Some would be just friends I've made along the way in different places. Maybe even our newspaper. Family is what we call it. Those people as well. Just kind of the people that have more of an impact on your life—on my life, personally, in school.

Figure 4
Empty hallway

Angelica said it was difficult to try to capture diversity without being able to take pictures of people because they had the biggest impact on how she viewed diversity on campus. The empty spaces can be a reminder of the importance of people as diversity on campus.
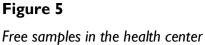
Space as Diversity

Participants also talked about spaces as representations of diversity. Spaces on campus contribute to diversity, but they are more than physical, as they have the ability to create feelings within students about diversity, and inclusion. For example, Amy captured a photo of himself in the school library, where he claims to see the most diversity on campus (picture not included to protect anonymity). Amy elaborated on what space means in terms of diversity, and specifically what it means to lack spaces that represent diversity, as he felt was the case on his campus:

> You're claiming diversity, and you're saying, "Hey, this is the school for it. We do this. We do that," but there is not actually a place for it. It's like you're only good for what you say on paper. Where is your action behind your words? You need a place for the stuff that you're saying that you're offering to people.

Amy stressed the need for physical spaces on campus that represent diversity. Amy suggested that the university is doing a disservice to students by failing to provide physical spaces where diversity is seen and felt, and therefore fails to support them.

While Amy felt like there was a lack of spaces that represent diversity on his campus, Carmen said that there were multiple spaces on her campus where diversity was represented. She talked about the cultural center as an important space, as it provided a physical representation of diversity, but expanded this idea by talking about the health center. Carmen captured a photo of baskets full of free hygienic items such as tampons and hand sanitizer that the health center provides to students. In her interview, she explained how the health center provided these products for students stating, "For me this is helpful because sometimes I don't have enough money to buy pads, buy large amounts of pads, like a big packet. It's just very convenient. I can run to the health office, get my pad, get my necessities."

Figure 5

Free samples in the health center

For Carmen, having spaces on campus that provide basic essentials for students is one way to serve diverse students on campus, and particularly low-income students, which is important for HSIs that enroll students who come from various circumstances. Having a health center where basic needs are addressed can be an important space for diversity, and for effectively serving diverse students.

Many of the participants at ACU talked about the cultural center as an important space for diversity, which in several ways incorporated the three themes into one. Stephanie took a picture of a mural in the Cultural Center and said:

The Cultural Center is always open and one of the best places to go and study. I don't enjoy studying in public places with other people or with anything, but that's the one place that I've actually found myself wanting to go and eat my lunch, to go hang out and study or something. Actually spend time there.

Figure 6

Mural in cultural center

The mural, which includes important historical civil rights activists from various racial-ethnic backgrounds, is an important expression of art as diversity (Banning & Bartels, 1997). Yet, the students did not talk about the mural as only art, and instead expanded on the importance of the location of the mural as a representation of diversity. The Cultural Center, as noted by Stephanie, provides students with a space to study, eat, and socialize. The Cultural Center also provides students with relevant trainings and workshops about social justice and leadership, along with acknowledgement and celebrations of cultural heritage months. This space also provides students with a kitchen, all gender restrooms, a lactation room, and additional study spaces, which Carmen said, are important resources for diverse students. Moreover, the Center houses the offices of full-time professionals on campus dedicated to serving diverse populations, which ties in the people as diversity theme. Overall, space as diversity is a powerful concept for students, which may include art, resources, and people as representations of diversity.

Discussion

Participants in this study perceived diversity through pictures in three ways: through art, people, and space. Art on college campuses can be used to represent diversity and empower

diverse students, as seen with the mural that several students captured in their photos. Art as diversity, however, is multifaceted and has the ability to push for deeper dialogue about diversity (Grenier, 2009). Lili, for example, stated that the "Asian" inspired sculpture on her campus made her feel as though her own Latinx culture was not represented, when in reality, the "Ten Thousand Ripples" sculpture is actually a Buddha head turned into an exhibit that was specifically created to foster dialogue about peace within various communities in the city. This form of art on campus may not be intended to serve as a cultural representation per say, yet aimed to create dialogue. Art can be used as both representation of diverse people and to provoke dialogue about larger issues within society while prompting critical thinking, creativity, and a search for truth (Pedrabissi, 2015).

People also contribute to diversity on campus, physically and symbolically. Diverse people on campus may suggest that the institution is committed to supporting students through their own racial-ethnic lenses, and in the case of HSIs, through language (Garcia, 2019). Although participants struggled to take pictures that did not include people, they found ways to represent the importance of people as diversity. This was creatively done by June, who took pictures of her professor's door, which could be a form of art as diversity, yet she described how the meaning and symbolism of the decorations on the door were important to her as a reminder of how her professors support diverse students. Even though they did not take pictures of people, participants stressed that people on campus are an essential aspect of diversity. Moreover, students talked about people in their interviews, stressing how various symbols such as art and signs are powerful expressions of how the people on campus create and contribute to an environment that promotes sense of belonging, a commitment to equity and justice, and physical and emotional safety (Banning & Bartels, 1997).

Diversity, however, can no longer only be compositional, as a true understanding of diversity must be enacted through contexts on campus (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014). McGregor (2004) states that space can make a difference to students and can be vital to supporting them. Spaces on campus that represent diversity are essential, yet participants suggested that HSIs should also think about the intentional expressions conveyed by these spaces. The most significant physical space mentioned by participants was the Cultural Center at one of the two sites, with students like Stephanie saying that the cultural center is a space where she feels excited to go because it gives her what she needs and wants as a student. Yet space as a form

of diversity is more than physical and includes the people who fill the space, and the artistic expressions within the space. Samura (2015) suggests that space is socially constructed in the way that people interact with one another, and that space is produced by what people do, which the participants stressed. Spaces that feel like racial diversity is excluded, however, are also important, as is the absence of space, as suggested by Amy (Samura, 2015).

The way students' perceived diversity suggests that all three themes are interconnected. Multiple students talked about the cultural center and its importance as physical representation of diversity. Yet students also talked about the art and the people inside the Center. This suggests that the ideal contexts for dynamic diversity at HSIs are layered. Creating a physical space is important; however, the feelings created within the space are essential, ranging from feelings of belongingness to feelings of empowerment that can be enhanced through art, murals, and sculptures, as well as people and resources provided. Diversity and servingness at HSIs must be represented in multiple contexts, across multiple structures for serving, and interconnected in meaningful ways.

Implications & Conclusion

This study makes an important contribution to HSI research by focusing specifically on the educational contexts, or structures for serving, that facilitate students' perceptions of diversity. Here we offer practical implications for HSIs to consider. First, HSIs must design and support physical spaces that have an expressed commitment to serving diverse students. This includes cultural centers, which have historically fostered safety and security for students of color on college campuses while enhancing and preserving their cultural knowledge (Patton, 2010). All spaces on campus, however, must support the basic needs of students at HSIs, especially the needs of low-income and potentially housing and food insecure students, which are a growing population (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). Our findings show that this support can and should be offered by health centers, counseling centers, student success centers, and more. Davila and Montelongo (2020), for example, argue that innovative learning spaces, such as computer labs and math tutoring centers, must also become spaces that effectively serve low-income and students of color at HSIs.

Second, HSIs must design artistic spaces and expressions that can serve as essential contextual cues for supporting diverse students. Art, including murals and sculptures, that are

centered on students' racial, cultural, and linguistic ways of knowing and being can be powerful. Garcia (2013) found that students and faculty at one HSI regularly referred to the ethnic studies murals found in one building on campus when talking about the institution's identity as an HSI. HSIs should utilize federal funding received through grants to develop spaces that validate students' races and cultures. For example, UTSA used Title V funds to design a center for first-generation and transfer students, and they were intentional about using warm and bright colors reminiscent of the Southwest, and hung pictures of cultural icons such as Frida Khalo (Rodriguez & Gonzales, 2020).

Finally, HSIs must recruit, hire, and retain faculty and staff on campus who have an expressed commitment to diversity, and to serving diverse students. The research is clear that faculty at HSIs continue to be predominantly white (Vargas et al., 2019), with calls to increase the diversity of faculty and staff on campus in order to facilitate servingness (Garcia et al., 2019). While some institutions now require a diversity, inclusion, and equity statement in their application processes, they should start to think more critically about *how* faculty show this commitment beyond a potentially performative statement that never results in action. In this study, we found a unique way that faculty expressed their views on diversity, through door decorations, which could easily be a part of the interview process for new faculty and staff at an HSI, with a prompt that would allow candidates to show their mock door decorations. Learning from this research, candidates could also be asked about the art in their offices, or to write up a mock proposal for a new mural on campus.

Future research should continue to explore art, people, and space as diversity at HSIs, rather than focusing so intently on cross- and same-race interactions, and students' racialized experiences. Moreover, photo elicitation should be used in the research process, as students perceive diversity differently than researchers, with students in this study showing us specific contexts that provide meaning as they think about how HSIs express commitment to diversity and servingness.

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