Perceived Lack of Diversity at the University of Michigan

and the Role of Interactional Diversity

Introduction

The University of Michigan administration places high emphasis on portraying the university as diverse. An entire section of the website umich.edu is dedicated to diversity at the University, including quotes from President Mary Sue Coleman, including, "Diversity is integral to Michigan's academic excellence" (University of Michigan). In 2010, during a fireside chat, *The Michigan Daily* quoted President Coleman as saying, "One of the reasons that I was attracted to come to Michigan in the first place was because of the commitment of the institution (to diversity)" (Swanson, 2010). However, without programs like Affirmative Action in place to regulate the composition of the student body, the administration lacks the ability to create a diverse campus. Moreover, while the administration advertises the University of Michigan as diverse and touts its many programs diversity-related programs, the term "diverse" is never fully explained. In one attempt to rationalize campus diversity, an "Open Doors" report, which found the University of Michigan to be 8th in the nation in terms of international enrollment, is highlighted (University of Michigan). Yet a large international student body does not necessarily mean these international students are ethnically or socioeconomically diverse. Students report exposure to racist and homophobic comments on campus, which culminated in October 2012 with the vandalism of the department of American culture, during which pictures of ethnic and sexual minorities were targeted. These actions may be a result of the disparity between the administration's rhetoric and the reality of campus diversity. It appears that the administration has reported the University's diversity in terms of the statistical and demographic diversity of the campus population, while ignoring interactional diversity, defined here as interaction beyond classmates with identities different from oneself.

Literature Review

Research has determined that interactional diversity leads to better critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as improved self-concept. In her dissertation, Jessica C. Mills investigated which environments best encourage interactional diversity and how various students respond to such environments. In 2009, she had students take a 10-minute online survey at Michigan State University. She asked students to answer several questions that would place them somewhere on the Interactional Diversity scale—a 10-point scale that assesses the frequency with which students interact with students from varying backgrounds. Ms. Walls found that levels of interactional diversity vary greatly between racial groups. White students were more easily influenced by environmental factors than other students. Black students were least likely to engage in interactional diversity, and mixed race students were most likely to do so. Mills also found that interactional diversity level was highly dependent on one's first-year roommate. White and Asian students were extremely likely to engage in interactional diversity if rooming with someone of a different race. The final result of this experiment was that classroom demographic composition is a very critical component of interactional diversity level.

One of the goals of fostering diverse campus environments is that the daily interaction with students from different backgrounds will promote interracial understanding and connection. However, it is not clear to what extent interactions and friendships are multiracial. Mary J. Fischer examines the impact of college characteristics, social distance felt toward other groups, and pre-college friendship diversity on the formation of interracial friendships in the first year of college. In 2008, Fischer, utilizing data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen, a national probability sample of nearly 4,000 white, black, Hispanic, and Asian first-time college students who matriculated into 28 selective colleges and universities in 1999, investigates how

these trends affect the formation of interracial friendships in the first year of college. The results show that while pre-college experiences and initial attitudes do have an impact on the formation of interracial friendship in college, campus racial/ethnic diversity is also important in predicting friendship heterogeneity. Minorities have higher predicted friendship diversity than whites, but this difference nearly disappears in the most diverse schools due to the interactive effects of school diversity on friendship diversity for white students. Thus, this research provides evidence of the social benefits of assembling a diverse student body and highlights the importance of maintaining this diversity in college campuses.

During an interview in *Against the Current*, Loretta Ross offers her perspective on technology and its relevance to permitting intersectionality in modern society. Importantly, Ms. Ross discusses the past struggle of combining different identities to allow people to see why minorities should work and interact with one another. Her example provides a perfect example of intersectionality: Ms. Ross identifies as both Black and a woman, so separately, each of these groups was not able to fully define her or address her needs in their entirety. This relates to campus life in terms of all the many student organizations around campus. Each organization is worried about their own events and issues pertaining solely to their groups. However, members of these groups have a variety of identities that interact and are expressed differently in the context of the organization, and which may not be addressed by these student groups.

The article "Hate Crimes on Campus: Racial/Ethnic Diversity and Campus Safety" explores the complicated relationships that exist between various races on college campuses. It discusses the different "tensions" that exist between different racial groups, and concludes that intentionally increasing the frequency of interactionally diverse encounters in the classroom and in residence halls can lower the instances of hate crimes on campus. Specifically, Stotzer and

Hossellman discuss the relationships of Whites with Asians, Blacks and Latinos in regard to racial tension and violence. The topic is especially pertinent to the recent vandalism in Haven Hall as evidence of hate crime at the University of Michigan. As reported in the article, as the number of "historically disadvantaged minorities," defined as Black and Latino students, increases in a student body, the incidence of hate crimes decreases. This may either be due to increased tolerance through understanding or through fear of retaliation.   Whatever the mechanism, the article makes a strong case for the importance of actively creating diversity on a college campus to safety. Moreover, the article cites evidence that interactional diversity both in and outside of the classroom, "resulted in higher intellectual ability, better social ability, and higher rates of civic interests." In essence, interactional diversity on campus improves academic function.

Additionally, there is evidence that interactional diversity may continue to positively impact students even after graduation. "Can Higher Education Meet the Needs of an Increasingly Diverse and Global Society? Campus Diversity and Cross-Cultural Workforce Competencies" is primarily about whether cultural diversity matters for students. Uma Jayajumar adopts a quantitative method (structural equation modeling) to test her hypothesis. Specifically, she investigates the relationship between white individuals' exposure to racial diversity during college and their workforce competencies after graduation. The data used for this research were collected from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the University of California at Los Angeles. The research results show that regardless of their precollege cultural backgrounds, students' post-college leadership skills and intercultural competency are positively related to the cultural diversity and racial climate of their college experience. The author concludes that

college cultural diversity may provide lasting benefits to students for their future career. These findings are consistent with previous works in the study of campus diversity.

In sum, the literature questions the outcome of different levels of statistical diversity in a campus setting. They uniformly report a benefit from a diverse student body, largely due to an increase in interactional diversity and increased understanding of intersecting identities. The benefit is twofold: there are reported gains in intellectual ability and workplace competence after graduation, as well as a decrease in intolerance. However, each of the articles uses a different metric for determining intolerance. This research is foundational to our understanding of the outcomes of interactional diversity on a college campus. Clearly, diversity is an effective tool in higher education for building understanding and preventing conflict, but this says nothing in regard to the problems identified at the University of Michigan. Further investigation is necessary to determine how the climate at the University of Michigan relates to this literature.

1. Methods

During our Collaborative Group discussions it was determined that the most effective methodology for testing the level of diversity awareness on campus would be through a focus group. In order to properly sample the collective campus opinion on this topic, it was decided to pool from three populations within campus: those involved in the IGR (Intergroup Relations) Program, those living within the North Quadrangle Residence Hall, and those living in other residence halls. It is believed that addressing these three groups will provide an accurate reflection of the awareness of students on campus in regards to diversity because these groups reflect the proportion of students who have explicit exposure to diversity awareness through the IGR Program, indirect exposure through the "International Impact"- themed North Quadrangle

Residence Hall, and who have had little to no explicit exposure as residents of the remainder of residence halls on campus.

The setup of each focus group entailed a pair of two members from our CG group, each of whom would address one of the aforementioned target populations. Through a process of brainstorming and group dialogue, it was determined what questions would be asked of the participants during the focus group sessions. Two questions would be open-ended responses, surrounding the participants' beliefs, expectations, and experiences of diversity on the University of Michigan campus, which were recorded by the CG members heading each focus group. Following that, there would also be a numerically scaled survey such that the results of the focus groups might also be quantifiable. The survey was composed of two questions: the first question asked the participants to rate (on a scale of 1 to 10) how diverse the Michigan student body is and the second question was an unrelated control question. The control question was implemented such that we could show, statistically, that the participants' results to the diversity question were indeed reflective of their opinions and not just random responses. In addition, funding was provided by the Global Scholars Program to procure incentive for participation, in the form of pizza and drinks. The focus group sessions were held, each lasting approximately an hour; the results were collected and the participants were thanked for their efforts. The collected results will be analyzed and described in detail below.

2. Results

The results of the focus groups performed under the Research Action Project are categorized based on each focus groups' target audience.

2A. Diversity in International Impact and Global Scholars Program Communities

The open-ended discussion questions of the North Quad focus group revealed that all participants have experienced just as much diversity on the University of Michigan Ann Arbor campus as they expected to at the time of their application. Of particular note is that many of the participants reported that they slightly underestimated the size of the Asian population on campus. As North Quadrangle hosts many international students, this perception of and salient remark upon the Asian community can be accounted by the largely Asian origin of the community members. Likewise in response to the question of how culturally diverse each their social network is, the participants strongly expressed sentiments of diversity within their social networks. Since North Quadrangle itself is a tight-knit community composed of a vast array of students from a multitude of origins, these results are justified as they pertain to the participants. The participants' reflections of the level of diversity of the entire student body of the University of Michigan falls in line with this trend, as their numerically graded response scheme (a scale of 1 to 10, strongly disagree to strongly agree) yielded an average of 7.4 points, the highest among all focus groups.

2B. Diversity in Non-theme Residence Halls

The open-ended discussion questions of the non-theme Residence Hall focus group showed results unique from those the North Quadrangle focus group in that the participants expressed a much more dampened experience of diversity on campus. An overarching sentiment was that diversity is based on one's perspective on race, how one categorizes race. A broader, and therefore looser, categorization of races results in less diversity because more of the student body will fall under the same racial classification and thus less diversity will be present. The opposite holds true as well; more stringent racial categorization results in an augmented

perception of diversity on campus. For example, categorizing race by continent as opposed to by country results in a dampened perception of diversity because the student body will be placed into only six columns. Suppose a certain percentage of the student body is categorized as European. This does little to address the diversity that exists in the realms of language, history, customs, culture, etc. It would appear that the percentage of students who were categorized as European, say 35%, are all the same, and likewise the percentages for the continent-based racial categories reflect that students are within them are the same. However, if you categorize race by country, then the number of categories increases and more diversity is reflected in the results of that census.

The participants further noted that a great deal of effort is involved in finding a diverse group of people to interact with, but positions of student leadership ease this process. Overall, the non-theme Residence Halls experience less diversity, as is evidenced by the score of their numerically graded response scheme (a scale of 1 to 10, strongly disagree to strongly agree), 5.6 points. This score reflects a somewhat-significant decrease in between the level of diversity experienced by the North Quad focus group and non-theme Residence Hall focus group.

2C. Diversity in Themed Programs (Intergroup Relations Course)

The open-ended discussion questions of the theme-Program focus group showed the greatest variability in that the participants expressed experiences of diversity in the extreme: great deals of it or an overwhelming lack of it. The general opinion of this focus group was that upon admission into the University of Michigan, they desired to find and be a part of a diverse range of people. The participants held the view that diversity is a good thing that permeates all aspects of one's life, even if they are not consciously aware of it. Variability in participant response arises over whether or not they have experienced diversity on campus. About half of the

participants indicated that the diversity "sold" to them, as incoming freshman, was completely absent. Others responded that diversity is rampant throughout campus and they thoroughly enjoy being a part of it. It is important to note that the participants who reported this view expressed it as stemming forth from their leadership positions such as being a Resident Assistant, etc. These results seem to match with those from the non-theme Residence Hall focus group; more research would need to be conducted to prove any correlation. Further, it is important to acknowledge that while diversity exists, at least on some level, on campus, it has not been a barrier to targeting based on social identity. A few participants reported that they have been discriminated against based on ethnicity and gender. It can be concluded that though diversity is pertinent to social justice, the right attitude to this diversity is just as important. The results of the numerically graded response questions were misplaced and therefore not available for this focus group.

3. Discussion

These focus groups were conducted to determine student sentiment regarding campus diversity. Administrative use of the term "diverse" to describe the University of Michigan campus prompted exploration into whether such rhetoric reflects student experience. Moreover, applicants to the University of Michigan are required to submit an essay explaining their role in a particular community and how their identification with that community will allow them to meaningfully contribute to campus. Before a student even steps on campus, he or she is likely to expect to find diversity as a result of these preparations. The question becomes whether these presumptions of statistical diversity on campus translate into diverse interactions once a student is admitted to the University of Michigan. Dialoguing with students permitted insight and clarification to the short-answer survey questions about their experience with diversity on campus. For instance, one respondent admitted that diversity was not important to her when she

was applying to colleges, and that a number of colleges tout themselves as diverse to the students applying to them. The sense, then, was that "diversity" is not necessarily a brand associated with certain universities, but an expectation.

The composition of each of the focus groups potentially lends insight to their responses. The Global Scholars Program is specifically designed to integrate students of diverse backgrounds to a single community. As such, these students presumably are able to interact with a diverse group of students with regularity compared to the rest of campus. Likewise, students who have been prompted to experience diversity and social justice on campus, as was the case with the Intergroup Relations students, would have greater exposure to the more diverse facets of the University of Michigan. The fact that the students leader participants felt a lack of diversity on campus may reflect their exposure to the campus mainstream; that these students do not necessarily focus their efforts on locating diversity on campus and may therefore be less aware of where it exists.

In order to experience diversity, one needs to actively seek it. Many students felt that in order for them to experience more diversity in their social networks and everyday lives they had to be part of diverse communities. For instance, many members of GSP actively sought to be in a diverse community when they applied to be a part of the program and thus had taken action to be part of a more diverse experience. Others stated that they joined groups or took on positions of leadership in order to further experience diversity. For example, some students were part of student governments and other organizations that allowed them to interact with diverse groups found around campus and thus sought to include diversity in their lives through their positions. All participants in the Intergroup Relations (IGR) focus group reported that campus diversity is important to them. In the words of one participant, "I think they try to claim that they are more

diverse than they are. If I am going to be totally honest, I look around and see mostly white students, which is disappointing because I want to be exposed to diversity and I don't feel like that is happening." Another student mentioned, "From my experience it is pretty diverse. Sure, some groups of people like to form cliques depending on their preferences and for whatever reasons, but that is inevitable wherever you go. Overall, Michigan is quite diverse." The sense was that since these students interact daily with groups of students with diverse identities, they are able to see how and whether the University reflects the diversity found in these groups, and therefore the composition of the groups plays a role in framing each person's perspective.

Leadership is an important aspect in experiencing diversity as seen again in the positions of those in student government and other organizations. Positions of leadership give these students the ability to interact with students of diverse backgrounds more frequently. Through their positions, they are in an advantageous position to break social barriers. According to one student, "when I try to talk about math or physics with my male friends, they mostly just laugh and roll their eyes. I feel that they think my ideas are not valid because I am a female and couldn't possibly know as much as they do." In this situation, leadership would be essential to break this gender stereotype. A leader would give everyone the chance to express their thoughts despite any type of discrimination they may feel from coworkers. A leader is in a position to break any barriers or issues of discrimination by providing others with the opportunity to work together. Overall, the more qualities of leadership one has, the more likely he or she is able to seek diversity through his or her position and interactions with other groups.

Among some of the students we talked to, a few stated that they had come from very urban settings that gave them more diverse backgrounds going into college. Others stated that they had come from smaller towns and cities where diversity wasn't so prominent. They said that

they felt the diversity at UM after they had applied. One student stated that "Ann Arbor is relatively diverse as a whole in my opinion when compared to the rest of the state," which further supports the argument for the importance of diverse backgrounds outside of school. As is evident, one's perspective on diversity is greatly determined by where he or she came from. Often, a more urban setting presents more people with more diverse backgrounds as opposed to a small town with few people of similar racial or ethnic backgrounds. Other aspects of diversity, such as social status and class, were also more present in urban settings according to a several students.

This study was limited in its scope. In total, 23 students were sampled, and although three different categorizations were used when sampling, the participants could not have represented all of the different identities on campus. Moreover, racial identity was not asked of the participants, so it could not be determined whether one racial group disproportionately felt that the University of Michigan is or is not diverse. Finally, participants were not given a definition of diversity, and may have been acting under different assumptions of its meaning while answering the survey.

4. Implications and Conclusion

Though the University of Michigan claims to be a very racially and culturally diverse school, our findings show that campus diversity is not necessarily "as advertised." Though most students that participated in our focus groups had some expectation of diversity upon joining the student body, we found a very wide range when it comes to how diverse they have found the campus to actually be. This depends on many factors, as is evident by our study. Though we only considered a few situations in our study (whether or not a student lives in a residence hall,

whether they live in a diversity-oriented program, and whether they participate in theme programs), we saw a very wide range of experiences over just these differences. We can therefore conclude that students' perceptions of campus diversity largely depend on the activities that students choose to participate in throughout their college careers.

Students who are actively involved in social justice and diversity-based extracurriculars generally feel that they have experienced more "diversity" than those who have not. This trend may be due to the fact that these activities draw diverse groups of students, or because the students are asked to think about diversity on a more regular basis. Either way, we can safely conclude that those students who seek out diversity in their college experience are more likely to find it. This finding can extend to apply in more than just a university setting; we can say the same thing about the workplace or any community.

We can also conclude that the University of Michigan's claim to an extremely "diverse" student body may need to be thoroughly examined before being advertised. Though the University can boast diversity in numbers, there may be more to more to the word "diversity" than simply numbers. Until the University can boast interactional diversity, a clear definition of the word should be used in its promotional materials. Incoming freshmen and prospective students should have a clear idea of what to expect from their University experience. Furthermore, more focus should be placed on promoting interactional diversity, rather than merely statistical evidence.

5. Reflections

Our group process worked well in some areas but could have been much better in others. Our collaborative approach consisted of delegating tasks the week of to be completed by the

next. Having a schedule and list of who's doing what was definitely a great idea but our group's communication and team responsibility hindered the effectiveness of our team's approach.

We met once a week almost every week since the beginning of the semester. We did not, however, start talking about the project until a few weeks after we began. Meeting once a week could also contribute to the lack of progress we've made with the project. Everyone has busy schedules so it seems as though this project was the last thing on people's mind, especially only having to think about it one day out of the week.

Our process could have also been better if we had everyone at the meetings and contributing the same amount. I don't think there's been a meeting this year where everyone in our CG attended. This makes it hard to check-in with students on their progress and also hard to delegate tasks. Overall, I think we managed through completing this project, but it could have been much easier and more organized if the communication within our CG was better and participation was stronger.

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