



# University Diversity Projects and the Inclusivity Challenge

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## Abstract

Growing numbers of women; Black, Indigenous, and People of Color; and low-income/first-in-family students attend U.S. colleges. Although sought after by universities eager to establish diverse campuses, many minoritized students still report ambivalence about inclusion at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Like many PWIs, Meadow State University (MSU) promotes commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Yet little is known about how students *perceive* institutions' DEI-related efforts. The authors conducted focus groups with 144 undergraduates to identify students' perspectives on what MSU is *attempting* and *accomplishing* in pursuing DEI goals. The authors find that MSU's goals encompass a set of loosely connected policies, practices, and behaviors they term *diversity projects*. The authors reveal gaps between MSU's intentions in providing *institution-led* diversity projects and respondents' perceptions of them, highlighting their largely symbolic nature. Students advocating for an institutional responsibility for inclusion stressed requests for concrete, *student-led* diversity projects that fulfill expressed needs, particularly for minoritized students.

## Keywords

higher education, diversity, intersectionality, race/ethnicity, gender

The proportion of U.S. university students who identify as members of marginalized or historically underrepresented groups has been steadily increasing over the past several decades. Women; Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC); and students who are low income and/or first in their families to attend college are sought after by predominantly White institutions (PWIs) eager to improve their diversity profiles. Universities have touted changes to policies and programs to improve student experiences; yet many minoritized students still report challenging campus climates. Diversity and inclusion efforts, in turn, are contested by a variety of actors—students, staff members, alumni, politicians—given the preference in the United States for “color-blind” policies, despite a social context that is not yet “postracial.”

We examine the campus experiences of students who embody one or more intersecting ethnoracial-gender identities. Our case study approach maps the equity challenges remaining for undergraduate students at a PWI committed to “excellence” in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).<sup>1</sup> Our

unique data set was gathered over a five-year period at Meadow State University (MSU),<sup>2</sup> a public, research-intensive PWI in the Appalachian region of the southern United States. We ask, (1) What actions, from students' perspectives, is MSU *attempting* with reference to its DEI goals? Then, we sought students' interpretations of what MSU is *accomplishing* with these efforts. That is, (2) How do students perceive, interpret, and engage with MSU's DEI programs and policies?

We use 36 transcripts of focus groups convened with MSU undergraduates along intersections of ethnoracial and gender identities, with a total of 144 participants over five years. Focus groups were convened by undergraduates who participated as research assistants for the first author.

<sup>2</sup>All names are pseudonyms. The first author used a baby-name generator to create pseudonyms that are culturally and/or linguistically similar to respondents' real names.

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<sup>1</sup>Meadow State University has received a national diversity award for several years running, a fact it touts as evidence of its DEI excellence.



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Respondents were asked about experiences at MSU, interactions with and impressions of the campus community, and the benefits and challenges they perceive related to ethnoracial and/or gender identities and their intersections.

Focus groups revealed that students' perspectives on and descriptions of university DEI goals indicate that they exist as sets of loosely connected programs, policies, and practices we term *diversity projects*. As with Omi and Winant's (2014) *racial projects*, from which we draw inspiration, diversity projects communicate actors' interpretations of the meanings of diversity, translated into actions and initiatives. Students themselves promote or engage in diversity projects; however, student- and institution-led diversity projects do not always align. Moreover, distinct diversity projects emerged among students, often varying by racial/ethnic and gender identity, and their intersections. At times, diversity projects are revealed as racial projects, as when White respondents advocated for color-blind policies. Other diversity projects, however, are not reducible to racial projects, as when respondents advocated for institutional support for Latine women, or for low-income BIPOC students.

Our serial approach to data collection concentrates on diversity projects that carry meaning for both respondents and MSU as an institution; that is, they persisted over time and were mentioned continually by participants. First, we focused on participants' perceptions, interpretations, and engagement with three *institution-led* diversity projects: MSU-sponsored student organizations; Div.com, a mandatory online diversity instructional module; and "diversity marketing," an umbrella term we use to describe university Web sites, flyers, and communications related to DEI goals. Like many PWIs, MSU promotes commitment to DEI goals. Yet we know comparatively little about how students *perceive* institutions' DEI-related efforts. We conducted site-based research examining MSU's online materials and other archival sources to contextualize institutional diversity projects. Next, we focused on students' communications about diversity projects they themselves were engaged in. Our methods revealed multiple *student-led* diversity projects, which we categorize into two narratives: *personal responsibility for diversity* and *institutional responsibility for inclusion*. Using an interpretive framework grounded in intersectionality theory, we analyzed focus group transcripts to shed light on variance in students' perceptions of the *meanings* and *effects* of institution-led and student-led diversity projects by race/ethnicity, gender, and their intersections.

Our findings are important because they reveal gaps between MSU's stated goal of providing a diverse, inclusive, and equitable campus experience and what students perceive these efforts accomplish. The disconnect between the institution-led diversity projects MSU offers and BIPOC (and some White) respondents' perceptions of them highlights their largely symbolic nature. Some of the most notable gaps appear between White and BIPOC students' interpretations of the meaningfulness of MSU's diversity projects, which

BIPOC students more often contrasted—unflatteringly—with administrative responses to blatantly racist and sexist incidents. Likewise, variance in students' engagement with diversity-related educational programming and organizations revealed complex experiences of intersecting identities and interlocking oppressions. Students advocating for diversity projects that promote an institutional responsibility for inclusion stressed their desire for concrete, responsive actions that fulfill expressed needs, particularly for BIPOC students. Our discussion concludes by engaging respondents' ideas for change. We assess whether and how "lessons learned" from MSU could be put into practice in the broader U.S. university context.

## Literature and Framework

### Overview

We review previous literature on campus culture issues at PWIs, sense of belonging during college, and institutional responses to campus climate, culture and belongingness challenges. Throughout, we consider what existing literature has to say about how and why student experiences vary both within and across intersectional identities. We close with an assessment of our guiding theoretical frameworks, situating our study's unique approach and contributions.

### PWIs, Climate, and Belonging

Historians of higher education in the United States have detailed how a system established to serve a tiny slice of the population—wealthy, Protestant, White men—has slowly opened its doors wider (Karabel 2006). Although now admitting a broader mix of students, most U.S. universities have maintained exclusivity on the basis of grades and other "meritocratic" qualifications, ability to pay, preferential treatment for athletes and alumni, and review systems considering subjective qualities such as "fit" (Stevens 2009). Many PWIs, despite maintaining predominantly White campuses, frame admission of "diverse" cohorts as a selling point that affirms academic exclusivity, while celebrating ethnoracial inclusivity (Byrd, Brunn-Bevel, and Ovink 2019; Nelson, Graham, and Rudin forthcoming). PWIs may use what Ford and Patterson (2019) termed "cosmetic diversity": manipulating statistics and advertising to give the appearance of ethnoracial diversity (Pippert, Essenburg, and Matchett 2013; Spoor, Jetten, and Hornsey 2014). PWIs may implement what Thomas (2020) called "diversity regimes": poorly specified "policies and practices that institutionalize an organization's commitment to diversity" yet function to "obscure, entrench, and even intensify racial inequality" (p. 143). These organizational moves preserve historically racialized practices—relying on standardized test scores, deceptive marketing, and "cosmetic" diversity projects—to support claims of meritocratic neutrality (Ray 2019).

Research has linked sociocultural integration during college to a range of important outcomes, including satisfaction (Ovink et al. 2022), academic achievement (Kuh et al. 2006; Tierney 1999) and postcollege careers (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development 2016). Although cultivating a sense of belonging during college—described as a feeling of *mattering*, or importance—provides benefits, not all students experience campus in the same way, complicating belongingness (Hurtado and Carter 1997; Johnson et al. 2007). Belongingness is not static, can be difficult to measure, and may vary by domain. For example, Nunn's (2021) investigation delineates three domains of belonging: academic, community, and social. Students who identify as women, BIPOC, or low-income or who exist at the intersections of these categories may have different perspectives on how welcoming campus is, compared with students who belong to one or more historically *overrepresented* categories: men, White, and/or high income (Byrd et al. 2019; Campbell, Carter-Sowell, and Battle 2019; Strayhorn 2018).

Thus, research shows a disconnect between PWIs' perceptions of DEI progress and how students experience campus culture(s). Moreover, students' social identities intersect in complex ways that mainstream DEI approaches may not be equipped to solve. PWIs often focus on improving compositional diversity, which “alone is insufficient in the cultivation of a welcoming climate” (Cuellar and Johnson-Ahorlu 2019:28). This is because such campuses “remain White spaces—where White norms, values, and cultural representations shape the student experience” (Nelson et al. 2021). Focusing on diversity “by the numbers” may help PWIs self-promote, while doing little toward inclusivity in everyday interactions, including psychological and behavioral dimensions of student experiences (Byrd 2021; Hurtado et al. 2012; Nelson et al. 2021).

### ***Institutional Responses: Diversity and Organizational Programming***

University approaches to diversity produce differential effects on the basis of their targets and objectives. For example, many PWIs implement targeted programming for minoritized students to alleviate challenges associated with underrepresentation in these overwhelmingly “White spaces” (Ahmed 2012; Embrick and Moore 2020). Comparatively fewer target overrepresented students to educate or change discriminatory behaviors. Diversity-focused programming influences not only the institutional climate but students' experiences with, and perspectives about, DEI (Ahmed 2012; Warikoo 2016). We consider current literature on universities' DEI efforts in three realms: university-wide initiatives, instruction, and the provision of resources for student-led DEI efforts.

Evaluations of university-wide diversity initiatives have found some positive effects for underrepresented students of

color (Patton et al. 2019). To take one example, Cerezo et al (2013) examined the “Latina/o Educational Equity Project,” designed to assist Latine<sup>3</sup> students with navigating negative campus racial climates and White spaces at three large PWIs. Its purpose was to “facilitate critical consciousness of race in higher education” (Cerezo et al. 2013). The programming, though emphasizing the well-being of Latine students, addressed structural issues that may hinder the university success of BIPOC students. University-wide DEI programming varies widely, encompassing efforts such as adopting a “diversity action plan” (Thomas 2020), hosting “welcome” events for admitted BIPOC students, and the like. Our knowledge of such programs' effectiveness is limited, however, and we know little about students' experiences with them (Patton et al. 2019).

Completing coursework focused on marginalized populations correlates with positive learning outcomes and increased engagement with racial issues (Warikoo 2016). Nuñez (2011) reported that Latine/Chicane undergraduates who took “Chicano studies” gained “opportunities to handle feelings of isolation...[and] develop more meaningful student-faculty relationships” (p. 639). Participating bolstered students' confidence in “countering negative Latino stereotypes and forming a sense of community” (p. 639). Less research has evaluated effects in higher education, but K–12 research suggests that such coursework is a potent source of belongingness, affirmation, and consciousness-raising (Dee and Penner 2017; Sleeter and Zavala 2020). For White students, ethnic studies coursework reduced bias, increased critical thinking skills, and produced “higher levels of thinking” (Sleeter 2011). Some universities require DEI coursework; MSU's version is an online instructional module, Div. com. The extent to which DEI coursework influences overall campus climate is unclear.

Higher education institutions may also try to improve DEI outcomes via resources to support “counterspaces,” including dedicated physical spaces (e.g., Black student unions) and student-led organizations in which minoritized students interact, organize, and commiserate (Ong, Smith, and Ko 2018). Student-led organizations can ease the college transition and provide leadership opportunities whereby marginalized students “help one another” (Jackson and Hui 2017:463). Yet providing resources for student-led efforts may do little to improve the behaviors or empathy of majority-group students toward minoritized community members. Researchers have documented Whites' adeptness at prioritizing their own comfort by avoiding participation in cross-racial interactions, maintaining “White ignorance” about minoritized

<sup>3</sup>“Latinx” is common in academia, but just 3 percent of those it is intended to describe self-identify this way (Noe-Bustamante, Mora, and Lopez 2020), and it is an anglicization unpronounceable in Spanish. We use “Latine,” a gender-inclusive term increasingly used in Spanish-speaking LGBTQ communities (Del Real 2020), except when describing prior research that uses other terms.

groups and Whites' complicity in keeping PWIs "White spaces" (Dalmage 2004; Embrick and Moore 2020; Mueller 2017). This "nonattention" from majority-group students cements social boundaries, leaving BIPOC students in particular feeling "misrecognized" or invisible (Walton 2019).

Universities have responded to diversity challenges in myriad ways. Yet comparatively little research has investigated *students'* perspectives on these efforts. Because research connects belongingness during college to important academic outcomes (Strayhorn 2018), and because PWIs have busied themselves with adopting diversity regimes (Thomas 2020) and implementing diversity projects intended to improve academic, community, and social belonging (Nunn 2021), we fill this gap by investigating student perceptions of and engagement with MSU's DEI efforts across three domains.

### Frameworks and Methods

One of the most broadly applied frameworks used to analyze the transition to college, Tinto's (1994) theory of student departure, has been the subject of critique for its insufficiency in predicting and assessing the trajectories of minoritized groups. In particular, Tinto's conception of student integration fails to capture the importance of contextual factors that govern whether students' attempts to integrate are possible given structural power relations that privilege students who identify as White, wealthy, and/or male. Moreover, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argued that the remedy introduced by White educators, "multiculturalism," is inadequate to the task of ensuring equity and inclusion. The "multicultural paradigm" offers a celebration of "difference," while usually failing to interrogate the unequal power relations accompanying racial/ethnic difference. Relatedly, Thomas's (2020) "diversity regimes" framework highlights how universities "value" diversity yet lack organizational consensus on its meaning, decentralize its delivery, and decline to specify diversity-related goals. Thus, regardless of whether diversity practices effect change, institutions "never fail to *do* diversity" (p. 16).

Critical race theory (CRT) positions race as a social construct and an organizing feature of everyday experiences. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argued that racialized inequality is "endemic" to life in the United States, and that race—in particular "Whiteness"—is treated as valuable property when, for example, it is extended to "good" (predominantly White) and "bad" (predominantly minority) schools. CRT refocused educators' attention on race/ethnicity as defining educational experiences, noting that Black and White students may have different experiences within the same institutions. Because PWIs were not designed with BIPOC students in mind, universities' assumptions that all students can—and should—conform to institutional expectations are increasingly met with skepticism. Indeed, recent research has evolved beyond considering how institutions

might help marginalized students adapt to existing structures (cf. Ovink and Veazey 2011), to instead investigate how PWIs might become *supportive institutions*. This shift places the onus on institutions to admit, retain, and ensure positive academic, social and community outcomes for historically minoritized students (Nunn 2021; Strayhorn 2018).

Intersectionality theory, which came into prominence in the 1980s and 1990s (Crenshaw 1991), considers how individuals existing at an intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and/or income (among other statuses) may experience privilege or marginalization, depending on context. Intersectionality theory therefore invites scholars to consider how and when, for example, a student majoring in a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) field may experience privilege and belonging along one axis (e.g., gender = man) while experiencing discrimination or invalidation along another (e.g., race/ethnicity = Latine).

Scholars have used Omi and Winant's (2014) racial formation theory to understand how racialized identities are not "fixed"; rather, they are continually "created," "transformed," and manipulated as part of sociohistorical, ideological, and political processes. *Racial projects*, particularly those initiated by dominant groups, may be used to support institutions' DEI reputations. We extend from Omi and Winant's conception to consider how *diversity projects* may be similarly used, in the context of a university whose administrators have acknowledged the existence of White privilege, affirmed the importance of both CRT and intersectional identities, and publicly addressed demands for supportive services for minoritized groups, including women, first-in-family, and low-income students. Some diversity projects reflect racial projects. Others are not about race at all but instead inform gender or income and class distinctions. Still others encompass intersections of race and class, race and gender, or all three identity categories.

The importance of using theories that allow complexity in the conceptualization of college experiences has introduced debate over methods of inquiry. Surveys may not accurately capture intersectional nuance, which theorists argue are experienced simultaneously, and relationally, not additively (Collins and Bilge 2016). Qualitative methods can better capture how and why intersectional identities matter to students' experiences. Focus groups, underused in the social sciences, afford respondents opportunities to share stories and relate them to broader patterns of experience in real time (McLafferty 2004). Focus groups sacrifice a degree of confidentiality yet offer the opportunity to discover shared experiences, and see them reflected, amplified, checked, or placed in context (Morgan 1996).

We use focus groups convened with undergraduate students to fill in the gaps in knowledge we have noted. Comparative focus groups allow us to consider differences both within and across racial/ethnic-gender intersections, and our serial approach to data collection homes in on projects that persist over time, rather than "one and done" interventions.



We contribute new insights into why ensuring campus inclusion remains challenging at PWIs. We reveal a disconnect between institution-led diversity projects—which BIPOC respondents perceive as mainly symbolic—and minoritized respondents’ desires to implement concrete, student-led diversity projects. Most White respondents accepted MSU’s self-administered diversity regime and institution-led diversity projects at face value, supporting diversity projects that fit a color-blind *personal responsibility for diversity* narrative. In contrast, BIPOC respondents advocated for student-led diversity projects exemplifying a critical and intersectional *institutional responsibility for inclusion* narrative.

## Methods

### Data

We use a unique data set: 36 focus group sessions with undergraduates at MSU (see Table 1). These data were collected over a five-year period by undergraduates who were trained in qualitative data collection methods as students in the first author’s courses. Students were given the option to become undergraduate research assistants (URAs) for the semester and to conduct focus groups with MSU students who identify as members of one of a set of identity categories. URAs completed human-subjects training, drafted interview questions, recruited participants, conducted audio- or video-recorded focus groups, transcribed conversations, and analyzed the results. URAs themselves worked in groups of two to four members. Participants, with one exception, were undergraduates and were compensated with a \$10 Amazon gift card. A few individual interviews were conducted because of scheduling conflicts. Interviewees were asked similar questions, so we include them in our analyses.

Working with URAs offered both benefits and challenges. URAs were similar in age and experience to participants, which helped establish rapport. URAs were insiders, often more knowledgeable about undergraduate experiences than the authors. Consequently, URAs added value by asking questions that the researchers might not have considered. Having less control over our data collection was a drawback; some URAs did not take the assignment seriously or failed to probe for meaningful responses the way the authors might have. In a few instances, URAs failed to assign unique identifiers, making it difficult to tell respondents apart. URAs’ papers were pedagogically valuable but varied in analytical quality. We stripped URAs’ transcripts of analytical notes and coded the data from scratch.

### Analytical Procedures

We had to decide whether to analyze at the group level, individual level, or both. Coding individuals as if they could be excised from group dynamics would be unwieldy and risked ignoring the benefits of doing focus group research in the

**Table 1.** Focus Group Demographics.

Group	Case ID	Year	Number of Participants
Asian men	AsianMen17	2017	3
	AsianMen18	2018	4
Asian women	AsianWomen17-1	2017	4
	AsianWomen17-2	2017	5
	AsianWomen19	2019	5
Black men	BlackMen16	2016	6
	BlackMen17-1	2017	5
	BlackMen17-2	2017	2
	BlackMen18	2018	4
Black women	BlackWomen15	2015	3
	BlackWomen16	2016	4
	BlackWomen17-1	2017	3
	BlackWomen17-2	2017	2
	BlackWomen18-1	2018	3
	BlackWomen18-2	2018	4
	BlackWomen18-3	2018	4
	BlackWomen19	2019	5
Latine men	LatineMen17-1	2017	2
	LatineMen17-2	2017	3
Latine women	LatineWomen16	2016	3
	LatineWomen17	2017	3
	LatineWomen18	2018	4
	LatineWomen19	2019	5
White men	WhiteMen15	2015	4
	WhiteMen16	2016	4
	WhiteMen17-1	2017	5
	WhiteMen17-2	2017	4
	WhiteMen18	2018	8
	WhiteMen19	2019	4
White women	WhiteWomen15	2015	3
	WhiteWomen16-1	2016	2
	WhiteWomen16-2	2016	2
	WhiteWomen17	2017	6
	WhiteWomen18-1	2018	4
	WhiteWomen18-2	2018	5
	WhiteWomen19	2019	7
Totals/range	36 groups	2015–19	144

first place. Of course, not all focus group participants agreed on every topic; in fact, respondents sometimes expressed opposing opinions. Coding at both group and individual levels carries a cost in terms of the researchers’ time, but we determined that selective individual coding was worth the effort.

We began with 45 transcripts and 176 individual participants, which we narrowed to a set of 36 and 144, respectively. We dropped two groups organized around a shared LGBTQ+ identity, one group organized with student athletes, and six groups organized with students with disabilities, comprising 32 participants. Although our future work

will discuss the important challenges communicated by these focus group participants, they were ultimately out of scope for the present study.

Transcripts were standardized in terms of presentation, with identifying characteristics removed, and uploaded to Dedoose, a cloud-based mixed-methods software package, for coding and analysis. Our team included five coders in total: both authors, two URAs, and one graduate research assistant. Our first URA organized the data and developed thematic categories with the first author as part of an independent study. Following her exit from the project, the authors standardized the transcripts and began open coding, developing a list of preliminary, descriptive codes. We coded the interviews with attention to themes salient to “fitting in,” or sense of belonging. We paid particular attention to the ways belongingness varies by race/ethnicity, gender, and other identities, and their intersections. For example, thematic coding families such as “institution-level effects” helped identify intersectional differences in broadly shared student experiences, such as joining student organizations.

We built our codebook over several weeks, checking in with one another as we suggested new codes, combined old codes, and consulted literature. When we reached a point of saturation—meaning that we ceased adding new codes—the authors brought in additional coders to provide a check on our process. One graduate research assistant and one URA independently coded transcripts, temporarily hiding codes applied by the authors to encounter the transcripts with less bias. Our codebook was updated; new codes were added, and existing codes were refined. Each group-level transcript was independently coded by two different team members. We worked toward intercoder convergence by talking over any differences and resolving them.

Second-round coding included a more focused examination to develop thematic codes related to our sensitizing concepts: theory-based ideas providing “directions along which to look” (Blumer 1969:148). Our process led us to focus on three areas of inquiry in particular: (1) students’ engagement with educational programming, organizations, and diversity projects; (2) students’ perceptions of institutional efforts; and (3) students’ intersecting identities and interlocking oppressions.

## Results

### Overview

In focusing our analysis on the three sensitizing concepts our analysis identified, we sought to answer our research questions: (1) From students’ perspectives, what actions is MSU *attempting* with reference to its DEI goals? (2) How do students perceive, interpret, and engage with MSU’s DEI programs and policies? That is, what do students think MSU is actually *accomplishing* with its DEI programs and policies? We answer the first question by providing background on

each of three diversity projects in turn: MSU-sponsored student organizations; Div.com, a mandatory online diversity training module for freshmen; and “diversity marketing,” an umbrella term we use to describe university Web sites, flyers, and other communications related to DEI goals. Within each section, we then turn to our second question, offering a discussion of students’ engagement with and perceptions of each of these diversity projects, including how students’ intersectional identities influenced the variance we discovered in their responses. We abbreviate students’ self-chosen ethnoracial-gender identities as follows: White men (WM) and women (WW); Black men (BM) and women (BW); Latine women (LW) and Latine men (LM); and Asian or Asian American women (AW), men (AM), and nonbinary (ANB).

Intersectional differences in perceptions led us to investigate an underlying question: when a deficiency in belongingness or campus climate exists, whose responsibility is it? We find that students whose identities align most closely with MSU’s predominantly White faculty, staff, and leadership more often located the responsibility for belongingness with the *student*. Those who identified as historically underrepresented were more likely to locate the deficiency in the *institution*. We refer to these narratives, which we heard repeatedly, as *personal responsibility for diversity* and *institutional responsibility for inclusion*. The narratives students related additionally varied intersectionally, sometimes in surprising ways, and often in response to local and national incidents.

### Actions Attempted: Support for Student Organizations

**Description.** MSU sponsors and/or provides resources for hundreds of student-run organizations. ClubFest, an annual fall semester fair promoting opportunities to learn about and join student-led organizations, is emblematic of the level of institutional support for peer-to-peer involvement MSU touts. ClubFest has existed for more than 10 years and consists of more than 700 informational booths, displays, live performances, and carnival rides. MSU created ClubFest to welcome back students and community members and to kickstart the academic year. Viewed as part of MSU’s diversity regime (Thomas 2020), ClubFest symbolizes institutional commitment to encouraging “diverse and inclusive communities,” while making students responsible for their implementation.

ClubFest is a highly anticipated annual event, and the ubiquity of MSU students’ involvement in MSU-sponsored student organizations was reflected in focus group discussions. Twenty of 36 focus groups discussed organizational involvement and support as a key feature of campus life. Within groups that discussed organizations, 100 percent of respondents within those groups reported belonging to at least one.

Our iterative coding process uncovered two key *chosen* belongingness factors: academic major and organizational involvement. These factors often strongly affected whether students who did not immediately feel “at home” within this large, intimidating university developed a sense of belonging at MSU. Major and organizational involvement additionally influenced the racialized, gendered, and classed contexts respondents found themselves navigating. A thorough discussion of students’ choice of major is out of scope for this article. In this section, we focus on students’ exposure to and choices to participate in campus-sponsored student organizations. Access to MSU-sponsored student organizations was often mentioned by White students as evidence that MSU is in fact a diverse campus, supports DEI goals, and provides “something for everyone.” In contrast, BIPOC students more often identified student-led organizations as havens from an unfriendly, majority-White environment. Thus, organizational engagement was a primary way BIPOC students enhanced, or compensated for, White-centric educational experiences at MSU.

**Engagement and Perceptions.** Organizational engagement helped students thrive, receive support, develop meaningful relationships, and positively enhance their college experiences. Organizations supporting identity factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, and their intersections were frequently cited by BIPOC participants as important for developing belongingness at MSU. As Payton (BW, 2015) put it, “I wanted people . . . who were like me, who resonated with me, who knew how I felt and how it was to be in my position . . . and who could communicate and . . . understand.” Outside of fraternities and sororities, White participants’ engagement with identity-focused resources was not as widespread as that of BIPOC participants.

Latine, Asian, and Black students’ sense of belonging at MSU was strongly influenced by the student-led organizations they participated in. Identity-based organizations helped marginalized students make friends with similar life experiences, providing support to aspects of their identities that may have otherwise gone unattended at a PWI. Finding friends who can relate to BIPOC struggles, accessing resources important to minoritized needs (e.g., authentic food, salons knowledgeable about Black hair), and finding relief from the White gaze were frequently mentioned benefits of identity-based organizations. As Ricardo (LM, 2017) stated, “this happens [finding Latine friends] because all of us know the same struggles.” One negative aspect also emerged: some minoritized students felt peer pressure to participate in groups that “represent” their ethnic/racialized identity.

Although BIPOC participants were more critical of MSU than White students, many credited MSU for providing the structure enabling the existence of supportive student organizations. Joyce (AW, 2019) put it this way: “This school has given me the best environment to express myself.” She attributed this feeling to MSU in general, while also naming

a specific organization (an Asian Christian organization) as key to her identity self-expression. Respondents who do not participate in any identity-based organizations nevertheless know, via ClubFest, that such MSU-supported groups exist. Many took comfort from that availability, and the sponsorship of belongingness represented by MSU’s heavy promotion of ClubFest, even when choosing not to participate.

Although some White participants agreed that identity-based organizations are important for BIPOC students, others felt that they divided BIPOC students from the rest of the population. As Aleta (WW, 2018) said, “I mean if you look at it like there are clubs designated to specific backgrounds. And that’s fine, like, but it also puts up that barrier of intermingling.” Within the same focus group, Ansley (WW, 2018) added her experience:

Freshman year they told me to go to ClubFest and I was walking through just like kinda learning everything about all the clubs, and there was one aisle and it was just nothing but, like, racial focus clubs, so there was Vietnamese, the African American and I just I didn’t feel, like, welcomed to approach those booths. If that makes sense. I could be wrong, I just didn’t feel that . . . my demographics met these clubs [*sic*].

This feeling, however, fails to consider *why* minoritized groups may desire to join identity-focused organizations, particularly at a PWI. Aleta and Ansley felt reluctant to join an organization that prioritized BIPOC communities’ feelings and experiences. They took an ahistorical view, drawing on color-blind logics to question such organizations’ necessity, and charged minoritized groups with making Whites feel uncomfortable (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Dalmage 2004; Warikoo 2016). Aleta and Ansley applied the *personal responsibility for diversity* narrative to minoritized groups, finding them lacking.

Another difference emerged between White participants, who were generally satisfied with the array of organizations available, and BIPOC participants, who had concrete suggestions for improvement. For example, BIPOC students noted that it was difficult to find mentors or counselors who shared their ethnoracial and/or gender identities. Jaden (BM, 2018) stated, “Instituting a resource for all students is obviously great, but that doesn’t always make them great for *our* [Black] community.” Black men sought more resources from MSU for Black students specifically, because their struggles are qualitatively different than White students’, because of White privilege, systemic racism, Black students’ overrepresentation among first-in-family students, and societal pressures, to name a few.

Intersectional differences arose in respondents’ assessments of how much MSU values different groups, measured by how much financial and structural support was offered for some and allegedly withheld from others. Latine women reported that MSU’s funding was not distributed equally. Ariana (LW, 2019) stated,

\$1,000 is what we were given to hold this [homecoming event] that's supposed to be for everyone on campus. But, they expect us to put in money too, but we don't have money. We have dues for our members, but that's to put on stuff for the members. And so, if we take that money, then we have to take away events and that's not fair to our members, and that's not an obstacle that sororities and frats have to face 'cause they have all this money and the school gives them money [too]. . . . I don't believe [MSU] is diverse and . . . you know, efforts are being made and stuff, but we're nowhere near close. . . .

Latine women wanted more organizations that addressed their identity and pointed out that the Latine cultural center was physically inferior to other groups' spaces. Additionally, Latine women in this group agreed, along with some White women, that ethnoracial organizations were siloed and ought to work together more.

Compared with White respondents, BIPOC students expressed greater urgency in securing resources for student-led organizations in order to feel a sense of belonging at MSU. An additional challenge was finding administrators to advocate for BIPOC groups. Aaron (BM, 2018) noted the differences in power and influence wielded by student-led organizations versus MSU:

Before we can acknowledge if there are resources or not, I feel like the people in power who can make these resources first have to acknowledge that there is an issue with the community on campus. . . . if the people in power don't take interest in those things, then it's not MSU helping our community. It's just us trying to help one another, and as great as that is, I can't really help Jaden get to a better position in life, because I'm on the same level as him. And, as much as I can uplift him, I can't really tell Jaden where to go for certain resources or help him with his mental health. We're both about to be looking for jobs, and I can't do a whole lot to help him, but people above us who organize job fairs, conferences, and things like that, could take a step forward in helping us.

BIPOC students felt a heavier responsibility to create, participate in, and sustain the kinds of supportive organizations necessary to their ability to thrive at a PWI. Yet, as Black and Latine men and women pointed out repeatedly, there are real differences in power and resources held by student organizations, versus MSU as an institution. Aaron's comments highlight how a critical approach that considers legacies of oppression, as well as intersectional differences in resources, reveals MSU's responsibility—and power—to rectify structural and institutional inequities inhibiting full inclusion (Collins and Bilge 2016).

**Summary.** Although many respondents averred that “everyone” can belong at MSU, some acknowledged that life at a PWI is “easiest” for White students, especially men. Cassie (WW, 2016) stated, “Yeah, [laughs] being a White female I don't particularly feel, like, oppressed or, um, uncomfortable usually.” Likewise, Jason (WM, 2019) shared,

I never felt like I needed to join an organization for solidarity, you know, there's like the cultural organizations, and I feel like a lot of those people, they join their organizations for advocacy or solidarity so that they can have somebody like them to talk to. And I've never felt the need for anything like that. I always feel like any organization I join, I feel like I can be a central part of.

Although White women discussed experiencing gender bias, White men were able to move through nearly all university spaces without needing to work hard to fit in. White men could be “central” to any organization. Obviously, exceptions existed; some White men lacked the money or inclination to join fraternities, for example. Yet even in spaces White men and women reported feeling out of place, some felt their comfort *should* be prioritized (Dalmage 2004). For example, Aleta (WW, 2018) said,

So, like, my roommate, uh, was African American and when she joined her sorority, which historically is an African American sorority, she was like “Oh you should join” and this and that and I'm like, your sisters don't make me feel welcomed, like, they don't want me to be in that sorority with you, just because you are accepted doesn't mean they want me there because historically it's not intermingled that way. . . . I think it's a problem . . . because we do put up those barriers, um, you know, with clubs and stuff.

In that same group, Crystal (WW, 2018) partially challenged yet ultimately validated Aleta's feelings:

I agree with you that, like, that could be . . . but they definitely, like, I still feel like they would allow you to join if you wanted to. . . . Not that that's a bad thing, but maybe the, like, title of it is also discouraging to join if you're not part of that group.

One focus group member's admission that identity-based groups made her uncomfortable opened the door for other members of the group to echo and amplify her feelings. Although some participants encouraged Aleta to think more inclusively—for example, naming White friends who belonged to a Chinese American student organization—this group shared a belief that it would be “rude, like discrimination” (Crystal's words) for student-led identity-based groups to disallow White membership. Similarly, Ariana and Nicky (LW, 2019) discussed how they “stuck out like sore thumbs” at a Black Student Union event and felt disappointed that the organization did not make them feel more welcome. Ariana bemoaned that, as she put it,

we isolate ourselves as minorities. . . . it's because sometimes we don't feel included among other people, but I do want more cultural groups to come together and mix and that's why at least our [Latine] organization is trying to do that because we are minorities. We should stick together. . . .

The idea that Black spaces should be more inclusive was a minority view. Yet the fact that it surfaced in two



groups signals that Warikoo's (2016) "diversity bargain" concept—that Black presence provides "diversity" for the benefit of non-Black students and that organizations that keep students from "mixing" are antithetical to DEI goals—resonated with some. Moreover, Aleta exhibited (and Crystal validated) White women's discomfort with spaces that center Black women, demonstrating how Whites' prioritization of "comfort" contributes to continued "White ignorance" and color-blind ideology (Dalmage 2004; Mueller 2017). Aleta externalized her discomfort, rejecting her roommate's personal invitation to join a Black sorority on the grounds that the sorority sisters were the ones creating "barriers."

Overall, when referencing student-led organizations, White students more often agreed with the *personal responsibility for diversity* narrative; that is, in sponsoring identity-based groups, MSU was doing everything required for students to develop belongingness at a PWI. BIPOC students more often opined that MSU bore an unfulfilled *institutional responsibility for inclusion*. Black and Latine participants viewed student-led organizations as important havens within MSU that, because of unequal funding, still failed to fully support minoritized students' needs at a PWI. Yet, as Black men pointed out most forcefully, student-led organizations would never wield the same power and influence as MSU as an institution. For BIPOC students, MSU's sponsorship of student-led organizations provided symbolic support but did not fulfill MSU's institutional responsibility for achieving concrete DEI goals.

### Action Attempted: Div.com

**Description.** Div.com, implemented in 2016, is an online instructional module about DEI for first-year, transfer, and graduate students. The requirement to complete the module is less strongly enforced for faculty and staff members. Div.com is intended to be a common learning experience on DEI topics and must be completed within two months of enrollment to avoid holds on students' accounts. This diversity project supports MSU's DEI-related "Community Guidelines"—a key part of MSU's "diversity action plan" (Thomas 2020), included in syllabi and posted around campus—by demonstrating the responsibility to contribute to a respectful and inclusive workplace that eschews racism and sexism. The module complements DEI requirements set by the graduate school and students' academic programs. Div.com metrics, including learning outcomes and participant feedback, are not publicly available.

**Engagement and Perceptions.** Tracy (AW, 2017) characterized inclusion efforts at MSU as, "Lots of talk...very little action." She specifically mentioned Div.com as one of a suite of "really cheesy" programs. Tracy noted negative reactions to Div.com:

Whenever a new thing is released, people will talk about, "Oh, haha, did you hear about that [Div.com] program, it's such a joke, right? Haha!" and then...that will spark a lot of negative comments from the people around you which is almost more uncomfortable than these people just ignoring the issues.

Hanh (ANB, 2017), a participant in the same group, agreed and added that they found such programs "gimmicky," expressing doubt that they "will actually translate into real action." Although Div.com is meant to fulfill MSU's DEI education requirements, ultimately, the module's teachings are up to students to implement (or not) in daily interactions. Once students "pass" the module, within their first week at MSU, adherence to the module's lessons is neither tested nor referenced again. For participants who reported experiencing racist or sexist behaviors and microaggressions, MSU's attempts to "educate away" systemic problems was inadequate. Aaron (BM, 2018) shared:

I feel like even when certain things do happen, people in power won't actually acknowledge that they're racist, they kind of just talk about "free speech" and "maybe we should just educate them on why certain things are offensive." That's not how you encourage communities of color to be successful. The way that I feel would be helpful is people in power acknowledging like "that was a racist comment," or "we do not tolerate in any way, shape, or form racism on this campus." And then following that, implement programs that specifically help [BIPOC students].

Div.com and other instructional efforts being treated jokingly, as Tracy mentioned, led not only to White students' evading responsibility for absorbing their lessons but to further microaggressions when students derided them in front of BIPOC students. Whites' evasive and dismissive behaviors left marginalized students feeling misrecognized and ignored (Mueller 2017; Walton 2019). Just one respondent of color, Miyah (BW, 2016), expressed a positive view of Div.com. Miyah thought Div.com represented "a good step in understanding at least a little about [others'] cultural background. And like, making sure that you're not racist." However, Judith, in the same group, found Div.com "pointless....I doubt 90 percent will take it seriously." For context, these conflicting views were recorded during the first semester Div.com was rolled out, a week following the end of the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, during which virulently racist and sexist stereotypes became political talking points.

One DEI instructional effort Black men and White women participants mentioned MSU *could* implement would be to require DEI-related courses. MSU requires very little distributional coursework; students can easily evade DEI-related courses outside their majors. Michael (BM, 2016) made this point:

MSU doesn't do a good job getting students out of their comfort zone. The two colleges that MSU gets [the] most money [from are] the College of Engineering and the College of Business, right? So it's like [in those colleges] you're not expected to learn anything outside of your field, you know, you might take these [distributionals] but you still get to choose what you want to take, it's not like MSU requires you to take [coursework] that pushes you out of your comfort zone....

Participants specifically mentioned sociology and ethnic studies courses as eye-openers that allowed them to learn about other cultures, check biases, and reduce harmful stereotypes. As Judith put it,

if we have things like mandatory class forums...I feel like that'll be more beneficial because even if you're forced to go to it and you're not really listening, you're sitting there so y'know...something's gonna go through your head...hearing people talk about their situations and problems might trigger something within you for you to, like, become more understanding.

Previous research affirms students' contention that ethnic studies coursework benefits both BIPOC and White students and encourages critical, structural interpretations of inequalities (Sleeter 2011). Failing to require meaningful DEI instruction gives majority-group students license to ignore communities outside their comfort zone, remaining comfortably "color-blind" (Dalmage 2004; Mueller 2017; Walton 2019).

**Summary.** Participants characterized Div.com as the *least* MSU can do, in terms of institution-led diversity projects, to force students to learn about DEI issues. Angela (AW, 2017) wondered how the lessons of Div.com "would actually play out." As an example, Angela asserted MSU's much criticized refusal to dismiss a teaching assistant [TA] who expressed support for White supremacy on Facebook; "with this whole TA incident...MSU kind of is being hypocritical...I think they want to include diversity but then they're on the side of White supremacy." When asked if MSU has made "any policy changes that have improved or negatively changed your experience," Kiana, Dione, and Sahara (BW, 2018) could not name any; yet, they easily listed racist and sexist incidents that MSU had not responded properly to: "the lacrosse situation," "the logo change," "that thing...where they misused the picture."

For BIPOC participants, Div.com did not make MSU's climate more equitable; rather, it was a diversity project symbolizing that MSU "cares" about DEI. Placing Div.com in context with unsatisfactory responses to documented racist and sexist incidents, Black participants concluded that MSU is unwilling to take concrete actions to effect meaningful change. As Kiana (BW, 2018) put it, "they're building diversity and stuff like that, they always say they're making plans, but the plans are not executed, if that makes sense. They're

not executed *properly*." Kiana and Dione agreed that "the only people that are making changes is the Black community itself. Not really the school." Kiana later reflected, "It's always us, ya know? If we had the school backing us up, it could happen." MSU's tepid approach to educating White- and male-identified students about racism, sexism, and other DEI topics leaves minoritized participants feeling that the administration is not a dependable ally, and that the community must fend for itself with student-led diversity projects that focus on concrete actions.

### Action Attempted: Diversity Marketing

**Description.** MSU uses diversity marketing as a tool to attract students. "Diversity marketing" includes pamphlets, Web sites, and advertising that prominently feature BIPOC students and faculty members. Diversity marketing falls short as a meaningful diversity project when it *overrepresents* images of BIPOC in promotional materials, leading to "cosmetic" rather than meaningful diversity (Ford and Patterson 2019). Prospective BIPOC students exposed to overrepresentative diversity marketing reported culture shock upon discovering they had to search hard for people who share their background and interests.

**Engagement and Perceptions.** Multiple focus groups discussed MSU's attempts to "sell" the Black and Brown experience to prospective students, resulting in misrepresentation of minoritized populations. Esther (AW, 2019) noted, "student affairs would use a lot of pictures of people of color to promote this, like, false image, like this misleading image of [MSU] having more diversity than it actually has." Latine women expressed being underrepresented in advertisements, leaving them feeling overlooked. Four groups—AM, AW, WM, and WW—discussed an incident involving a photo of Asian students portrayed as international students; the featured students were U.S. citizens. Black students reported overrepresentation, charging MSU with providing inaccurate depictions of the Black population at MSU. Philip (BM, 2018), an MSU student photographer, said, "I hate having the fear that I can't take photos of people of color or Black people because my photos will be used in the wrong ways." Jaden, in the same group, shared:

everyone knows about the whole marketing of diversity and inclusion, and you log onto an MSU Web site and there's a Black kid and 95 percent of the time *we know*. And it's great to market us, but it seems like the way it's done is as a token to try to [say] "Hey, we're this diverse school, we're inclusive, go look at our Web site." "Oh, they are diverse, I see a picture of this Black kid on their Web site." Sometimes it feels like we're just here to be seen, like a false presence almost, false appearance.

BIPOC participants engaged with diversity marketing by scrutinizing it; diversity marketing was a weathervane

pointing to MSU's true intentions regarding DEI goals. Mostly, BIPOC participants concluded that MSU cared more about perceptions, and was not serious about creating an equitable climate. Participants' perceptions align with Thomas's (2020) concept of "staging difference," in that BIPOC students, faculty members, and staff members were posed—quite literally—as visual markers of MSU's commitment to diversity.

White students less often discussed representation in MSU's media, reinforcing our finding that White students did not typically look for visual signals to determine whether they could belong or to discern the percentage of MSU campus that resembles them. Two White groups were exceptions; participants discussed marketing materials critically and agreed that MSU misrepresented its diversity. Annemarie (WW, 2018) referenced the photo of Asian Americans misrepresented as foreigners: "things like that happen here and I don't think that's okay." Crystal, in the same conversation, added, "I heard that MSU [had a high] ranking for diversity among colleges, [but] when I got here, I didn't feel that the impression that I was given in high school... was the reality." Scott and Travis (WM, 2019) seemed cynical about MSU's diversity marketing, yet somewhat sympathetic:

**Scott:** I almost feel like they overadvertise diversity...it's almost like they're like, "fake it till you make it."... Maybe not the best step, but it may be a step, I guess....

**Travis:** Maybe because they recognize that they lack diversity. They really want to try to push, "we're trying, we're doing all this stuff, like, we're getting more diverse," and it's like very, very marginally more diverse....

**Scott:** "Fake it till you make it," is pretty much what it is.

**Travis:** Yeah, I'd say so.

**Scott:** I feel like that's what a lot of like, organizations and businesses do; they advertise it until they actually have it.

In attempts to make sense of lackluster DEI initiatives, BIPOC and White participants stated that maybe if MSU keeps trying, they will eventually become diverse; as Scott put it, they perceived MSU's attitude as, "fake it till you make it."

**Summary.** Participants' responses demonstrate empirically that students see through "cosmetic diversity" and "staged difference," finding reality not as pretty as advertised (Ford and Patterson 2019; Thomas 2020). As Jaden (BM, 2018) told us, they depict "what MSU wishes they could accomplish." Students of all groups also agreed that MSU's campus experience "doesn't *feel* like what they advertise on the Internet" (Gordon, BM, 2017-2). The disconnect between MSU's celebration of diversity via marketing and students' negative perceptions of these depictions leads us to ask,

Whom is this diversity project serving? As researchers have argued, universities increasingly see racial diversity as a selling point (Ford and Patterson 2019; Thomas 2020; Warikoo 2016). MSU's several-year streak in winning a national diversity award is heralded each year via Web site announcements festooned with photos of BIPOC students. Diversity marketing, participants perceived, might attract BIPOC students, or at least reduce fears they would be "the only person like me" on campus. These efforts ring hollow when BIPOC students experience discrepancies between promises and reality. White students' more sanguine assessment suggests that this diversity project is aimed primarily at White viewers. In line with Warikoo's (2016) findings, White students at MSU have positive opinions of diversity, as long as their own dominant presence is not threatened. White students welcome the benefits of diversity projects unless they cause "barriers to intermingling" or result in Whites' losing out on being "a central part of" all aspects of life at MSU.

## Discussion and Conclusion

### Overview

Focus group participants reported multiple actions that MSU engages in to make students feel included. These efforts, which we term diversity projects, represent MSU's attempts to live out—or at least broadcast—its DEI values. Our study focused on three institution-led diversity projects: required diversity training, financial and structural support for organizations serving DEI needs, and diversity marketing. These diversity projects were chosen because they resonated with multiple focus groups over five years. Overall, participants reveal a disconnect between the university's attempts to provide a diverse, inclusive, and equitable campus environment, and how institution-led diversity projects were received by students.

Focus groups varied in their assessment of what MSU's DEI-related efforts are accomplishing. According to Latine, Asian, and Black student groups, the mandatory diversity training is ineffective, support is not equitably distributed, and advertisements do not accurately represent MSU's student populations. Black, Latine, and Asian/Pacific Islander participants broadly agree that DEI efforts at MSU are lackluster—even embarrassing sometimes—and, on the whole, ineffective in fulfilling MSU's *institutional responsibility for inclusion*. Black, Latine, and Asian group participants acknowledge that the university has taken steps but perceive that those steps are not having the impact MSU claims. Black men, Latine men, and Latine women agreed that MSU's inclusion efforts and diversity initiatives are a "work in progress" and that "they are trying." Latine women would like to see more funding for concrete diversity projects, including organizations to specifically support Latine women, increasing diversity among faculty and staff members, and collaborative cross-group interactions and solidarity. Asian women



reported the most ambivalence, noting the steps MSU has taken, yet also heavily criticizing inclusion efforts as “hypocritical” in light of perceived inaction toward racist and sexist incidents. White women and men, although often critical, nevertheless expressed the most positivity about and alignment with institution-led initiatives, and one group (WM, 2018) agreed that “institutionally, they’re kinda doing all they can do.” Most White respondents affirmed a *personal responsibility for diversity*—that is, White students more often agreed that it was not MSU’s responsibility to ensure that students felt included.

The picture that comes into focus, on the basis of participants’ interpretations of and engagement with diversity projects, is of a university keen to communicate DEI as a community value yet not wholly committed to concrete actions, even when facing serious threats to its legitimacy as a caring, DEI-focused space. On the whole, BIPOC participants felt that they were on their own to create community for themselves, and that the administration did not take their concerns seriously. As Aaron (BM, 2018) put it,

we don’t ever see the people who can directly make change...speaking to us about our experiences. This focus group’s great, but who’s really going to...hear the frustrations that we have on campus and really do something about it?

Yet, notable differences emerged within and across ethnoracial groups as to whether the university bore a responsibility to improve students’ experiences and ensure inclusion.

### Takeaway 1: Intersectionality Matters

Previous literature led us to focus on two key factors that affect belongingness in college: racial/ethnic and gender identity. These factors are typically ascribed; most respondents considered them fixed prior to entering MSU. Whether and when participants feel a sense of belonging at MSU depends heavily on intersectional differences in their experiences of inclusion and marginalization, interactions with others, and campus and administration responses to racist and sexist incidents. Likewise, students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of MSU’s DEI efforts depend up on participants’ location in the matrix of domination with respect to racial/ethnic and gender identity (Collins and Bilge 2016).

Overall, White and BIPOC students had very different interpretations of institution-led diversity projects. Interpretations varied intersectionally by gender, with White women most often accepting projects at face value and Black women reporting the highest levels of disenchantment. Participants’ differing interpretations led us to assess an underlying question: when a lack of belonging exists, who is to blame? Participants (mostly White women and some White men) reporting antipathy toward institution-led

projects locate the deficiency in marginalized individuals, subscribing to a *personal responsibility for diversity* narrative. These participants reasoned that MSU had laid the table, so to speak, and all BIPOC students needed to do was to claim their place, an epistemic maneuver Mueller (2017) calls “willful colorblindness.” In contrast, BIPOC students—Black women in particular—identified multiple ways White students continued to hoard institutional opportunities and structural resources *despite* the existence of institution-led diversity projects. BIPOC interviewees more often located the deficiency in MSU’s commitment to real change, questioning why concrete, *student-led* diversity projects were sidelined. White women and men, with some exceptions, were not on the same page as Black, Asian, and Latine women; the latter groups more often called for an *institutional responsibility for inclusion*.

Men generally had more positive interpretations, yet we found intersectional differences among participants identifying as men, with Black men expressing the least confidence, and Latine men the most, in MSU’s diversity projects. One group of Black men (2018) spoke candidly about experiencing male privilege, agreeing with Carl that “I feel that we’re [Black men] put in an awkward position, and that’s unfortunate, but there is someone below us—the Black women. Honestly, they work 10 times harder than us...” One group of White men candidly discussed White privilege, yet they—and most groups of men—avoided admitting any gender-based privilege, instead relating fragility narratives such as feeling limited by a “fear” of offending women.

Our intersectional and CRT lens reveals how participants’ intersectional positionality—and, relatedly, their differential experiences on campus—connected to their interpretations of the extent to which MSU bore responsibility for rectifying structural inequalities, and whether institution-led DEI initiatives succeeded in doing so. Participants differed on the first question, with Black women and men, Latine women, and Asian women more often answering “a great deal” and White women and men more often responding “only a little.” However, the participants of all groups were nearly united in answering “no” to the second question, with just one focus group (WM 2018) responding positively to MSU’s diversity projects and communication efforts. Even this group, however, admitted they seldom meaningfully *engaged* with institution-led diversity projects; their positive interpretations sprang from the projects’ visibility rather than any direct experience of their impact. We find it telling that MSU’s diversity projects resonated most positively with White men, the group least “marked” at MSU as racialized, gendered, and classed beings. The visibility of MSU’s institution-led diversity projects, their decentralization, and the lack of explicitly articulated DEI goals, allowed majority-group students to evade knowledge of how their dominating presence influenced campus culture and placed the onus on minoritized students to “find their place.”



## Takeaway 2: Converging Institution- and Student-Led Diversity Projects

Participants see MSU implementing institution-led diversity projects, but as Philip (BM, 2018) put it, “there’s intent versus impact. . . . It’s great to have resources there, but they’re not always tailored to fit.” Multiple BIPOC focus groups commented that MSU fails to meaningfully reach out to BIPOC students to ascertain their needs.

Participants of color, and some White students, agreed that MSU can do more to recruit nonathlete BIPOC students and provide resources to retain them. A growing percentage of the student population hails from wealthy metropolitan areas, rather than the surrounding rural towns and counties. Black, Latine, and White participants equated diverse communities with poor communities, showing a tendency to identify poverty as a root cause of lagging diversity numbers. Regardless of whether this is accurate, an effective recruitment and retention diversity project addressing intersections of race/ethnicity and income/class, from participants’ perspective, would focus on nonathlete, low-income Black and Brown students in rural and suburban areas. Successfully retaining recruits from these populations, participants opined, requires increased financial and structural support.

Living Learning Communities (LLCs) were one institution-led DEI effort that BIPOC students cited as highly effective. Black faculty members, staff members, and students pushed for a culture- and identity-based LLC. In 2018, MSU approved Kijiji (“village” in Swahili), an LLC that provides cultural enrichment, support for academic excellence, and a safe “home” space for Black students to destress and find belonging. As Carl (BM, 2018) said, “When I go to class, I’m the only African American student in my calculus [class], so when I’m not in Kijiji, I’m like, ‘This school is “eh.”’ But when I’m back at Kijiji, I feel like I’m at home.”

What further sets Kijiji apart from typical LLCs is that it is (1) for Black *and* non-Black students interested in experiencing Black culture and (2) a structured LLC that requires participating in a class, weekly meetings, and programming such as workshops on self-care and budgeting. Kijiji invites non-Black students to learn about and experience Black traditions and practices, encouraging meaningful cross-racial interactions (Byrd 2017). Kijiji exemplifies possibilities for *convergence* of university- and student-led diversity projects that fulfill an institutional responsibility for inclusion. The result is a small-scale yet potent community-building effort that is authentic, engaging, and well resourced.

## Limitations

All sociological endeavors have limitations, and ours is no exception. Our use of focus groups as a method offers both affordances and constraints. The camaraderie and information sharing, as well as participants’ sense of finding like-minded peers whose experiences resonated with their own,

were some of the benefits. However, focus groups raise the specter of groupthink. Much as researchers have documented how interviewees may seek to provide responses they think interviewers want to hear, focus group participants may seek to impress other group members or the convener. We worked to reduce this risk by having peer conveners who were fellow undergraduates.

A limitation of using undergraduate conveners was losing the ability to control how focus groups proceeded and the quality of interviewing techniques and transcripts. These challenges were mitigated by the learning goals achieved by undergraduates participating in research and, we expect, the greater frankness of responses from not having a faculty member present.

Finally, because we did not conduct observations or interview administrative representatives, we rely on students’ reports about the events they describe. We view this as a mild limitation, however, because our intent was not to uncover “the truth” about MSU’s diversity projects. Our goal was to explicate students’ perceptions of and engagement with diversity projects, and our research methods reflect our aims.

## Future Directions

As DEI issues and universities’ attempts to address the legacies of White supremacy and cisheteropatriarchal structures within their institutions continue to evolve, researchers should continue to investigate the effects of institution- and student-led diversity projects, identifying disconnections and opportunities for convergence. Orientations toward DEI goals will continue to change on the basis of shifting political landscapes. The work of interpreting their meanings and effects must continue and should be informed by the perceptions, experiences, and engagement of the constituencies most affected: BIPOC students, faculty members, and staff members living and working in these institutions.

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