ACCURATE OR ASPIRATIONAL? A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

OF ONE UNIVERSITY'S REPRESENTATION

OF STUDENT DIVERSITY

by

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Abstract

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When approaching diversity within higher education, colleges and universities champion diversity initiatives as significant goals. Prospective students may choose colleges based on the aspirational role model, which inspires individuals who see themselves in visual representations (Allen & Collison, 2020). A 2013 *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* study analyzed how 165 higher education institutions each portrayed racial and ethnic diversity of their student population. The study found that a majority of institutions presents inflated images of diversity to prospective students who were significantly different from the current student body (Pippert et al., 2013). This data is representative of findings from numerous studies exploring diversity misrepresentation in marketing and recruitment tactics. However, further

examination of this issue reveals a more challenging ethical dilemma, which may not have a practical solution: higher education institutions pursuing actual vs. aspirational depictions of diversity in university rhetoric. Loyola Marymount University (LMU) is among a number of national universities that faces this ethically restricting binary construct. In this thesis I analyze LMU's visual representation—including its depiction of diversity, interviews from LMU staff members and insights from my experience as an administrator at LMU—to advance the conversation and understanding of the challenges a university has with representing diversity.

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INTRODUCTION

Attention to diversity has been a prevalent focus and initiative within colleges and universities, beneficial for enhancing students' educational experience, and a critical aspect in the marketing and recruitment for higher education. The U.S. Department of Education reports diversity in higher education improves economic and educational opportunities for students of color, but diversity also provides social, academic and societal benefits for all students. Presently, there is more prominent discussion, strategy, and attention on diversity within higher education due to increased awareness of educational inequities and demand for change (Clayton, 2021).

Marketing and recruitment play a vital role in diversity initiatives for colleges and universities—specifically in visual representation via websites, banners, ads, and social media—which are handled by external agencies, consultants, and/or internally by administration. Prior to increased awareness of educational inequities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous studies reported diversity issues in higher education's visual representation. Many of these studies were published in journals that specialize in higher education, marketing and diversity; the primary focus of these analyses compares whether university rhetoric (both visual and text) aligns with the actual numbers or demographics of the university. Overall, universities tend to aggregate, inflate or omit racial demographics on their websites differently from the actual student

demographics and standard race categories reported to federal education

departments (Ford & Patterson, 2019). In addition, selective universities with

lower rates of ethno-racial student demographics tend to enhance their visual

representation of diversity more so than less selective universities with higher

rates of ethno-racial student demographics (Holland & Ford, 2021). These studies

allege how the tactics and utilization of diversity in visual representation used by

universities misrepresent and mislead the external audience. However, these

studies fail to consider the rationale behind these visual representation decisions

or present concrete alternatives. Therefore, further examination of this issue may

reveal a more challenging ethical dilemma taking place, which may not have an

easy solution.

The dilemma comes down to universities/colleges in pursuing actual vs.

aspirational depictions of diversity. It is necessary here to clarity what I mean by

the *actual approach* and *aspirational approach.* They are terms coined for this

thesis based on my synthesis of related scholarship on the tactics and practices for

visual representations and depicting diversity. I define the *actual approach* as

using images that accurately represent or portray the reality of a

person/organization/place. I define the *aspirational approach* as using images that

present the aims/aspirations/values of a person/organization/place. Figure 1 is an

image that breakdown these two approaches by terms, visual representation,

higher education, and pros and cons.

ACTUAL VS. ASPIRATIONAL APPROACH

ACTUAL
- Associated Terms: accurate, real, reality
- Visual Representation: images that accurately *represent* or portray reality
- HE & Diversity Scenario: display the accurate or actual representation of the current student body demographics
- Pro: ethical and accurate portrayal of the student demographic (what you see is what you get)
- Con: hinders increasing diversity, exclusivity

ASPIRATIONAL
- Associated Terms: aspire, values, aims
- Visual Representation: images that *present* the aims and values
- HE & Diversity Scenario: display the university's goals/aims/values represented in the student body demographics
- Pro: effective and attractive portrayal of the desired student demographic (to increase diversity, must show diversity)
- Con: may not be reflective of the current student diversity, misleading
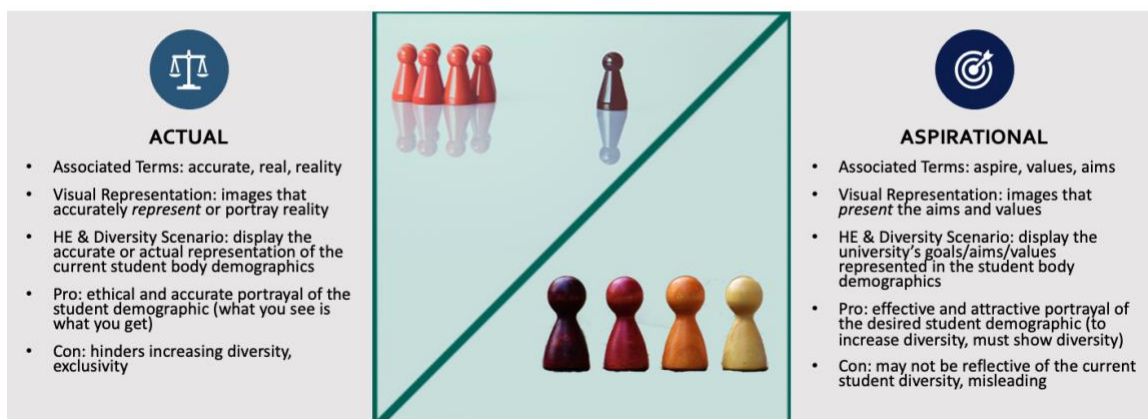
Figure 1. Breakdown of the actual approach and aspirational approach.

There seems to be only two competing options for institutions in terms of rhetorical choices: 1) display a less diverse student population that is more accurate to the current student demographic (*actual*); or 2) display a diverse student population that may not reflect the current student demographic (*aspirational*).

Using the actual approach depicts a more accurate representation of the university's ethno-racial student body, even if that means displaying a less diverse student body. Basically, if a university or college has a student population that is predominantly comprised of white males, the visual representations would show images of mostly white males to be accurate. The reasoning behind the appeal for this approach lies in how it depicts an actual and accurate majority of the student body to the intended audience (prospective students). A prospective student might

expect or believe that the students represented reflect the current student body demographics at the college or university. An argument against using this approach is that for a university to obtain a more diverse student body, displaying images of one type of student demographic (like white males) means that prospective students from a different demographic are less likely to apply to a university where they do not see themselves represented in the student body. In such a case, the university risks becoming less diverse.

Alternatively, the aspirational approach consists of three parts: 1) portraying that the university is diverse; 2) attracting diverse prospective students; 3) presenting the university's values and commitment to diversity. When a university utilizes the aspirational approach, it may potentially depict a more diverse or equal representation of the university's ethno-racial student body, even if the actual student demographic does not align with what is being visually displayed. Ideally, this means displaying a variety of students based on gender, race and ethnicity to show the university is diverse, regardless of whether the depiction is accurate to the student body. One aim is to attract a more diverse student body—potentially increasing overall diversity—so that in the future the aspirational becomes a more accurate representation. Another aim is to present their values and commitments to diversity through the aspirational approach— conveying the message "we believe the best educational environment looks like this; a core part of our mission is to make this image a reality." Thus, universities

are driven by pragmatic and optimistic concerns around diversity. A consequence of this approach may result in potentially misleading prospective students with an inaccurate depiction of the current demographics. A student may identify or see themselves in the represented students, only to find that once enrolled they are not surrounded by a similar community as portrayed. This could cause the student to feel alienated and regret attending the university, among other consequences.

Extensive research on visual representation, diversity, and marketing in higher education tend to primarily focus on statistics and examine the accuracy of a university's demographic representation. Ultimately these studies portray universities as conceptually good or bad due to their diversity recruitment tactics. However, there is little research on the ethical dilemma that universities face when utilizing actual vs. aspirational depictions of diversity.

The main aim of the study is to advance the conversation, create understanding of the challenges higher education experiences with diversity in visual representation, and examine why this dilemma has not been thoroughly acknowledged or addressed. In addition to a literature review, this thesis includes a case study of Loyola Marymount University (LMU) that rhetorically analyzes LMU's visual representation, and considers my personal experience as an LMU administrator, bolstered by additional interviews from LMU staff members.

Chapter 1

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Chronicle of Higher Education and *Inside Higher Ed* note how institutional marketing seems to target diversity by featuring visual aspects such as an individual's race, gender, and ethnicity. In a 2017 article for *Inside Higher Ed,* Rush University's director of marketing, Rebecca Darmoc, identified a common trend in higher education when it comes to diversity marketing tactics to make recruitment objectives: "Hispanic female – check. Black male – check. Native American – check. Is this how your marketing department decides whether advertising and communications are focused on 'diversity?' If so, you're in the majority. And you're wrong." Darmoc (2017) suggests that higher education marketing aims to both attract and recruit underrepresented/minority students, but it requires portraying diverse student images. However, this act could be interpreted as the university fulfilling a diversity demographic checklist. She further argues that this tactic creates a superficial problem with displaying diversity in higher education.

It is not only higher education news articles but also scholarship on aspirational vs. actual representation of a diverse student body in higher education that support Darmoc's claim on institutions' uses of superficial portrayals of diversity. These studies analyze universities based on whether their representation of diversity is accurate compared to their current student demographics. The

following literature review considers this claim on institutions' recruitment tactics around diversity in four sections: benefits from a diverse campus; aspirational role model implementation; diversity representation issues in higher education; and challenges of visual representation.

Benefits from a Diverse Campus

Higher education institutions may differ in size, resources, affiliations, values and academics, but all share the belief that diversity among students, faculty, and staff provide many benefits to their community. For example, in a chapter from *Compelling Interest: Examining the Evidence on Racial Dynamics in Colleges and Universities*, Jeffery Milem (2003), professor and dean of the School of Education at the University of California in Santa Barbara, discusses the ways that universities have begun to intentionally address diversity. He remarks that since the early 2000s, institutional mission statements have increasingly "undergone a process of rather dramatic transformation…[affirming] the role that diversity has in enhancing teaching and learning in higher education" (2003, p. 1). Due to the nature of mission statements serving as institutions' public pronouncement for their aims, values, and purposes, the increasing incorporation of diversity in mission statements does show their aim and potential commitment to diversity.

Milem's (2003) chapter also includes a statement endorsed by presidents from 62 research universities from the Association of American Universities on the importance of diversity in higher education: "We believe that our students benefit significantly from education that takes place within a diverse setting…If our institutional capacity to bring together a genuinely diverse group of students is removed—or severely reduced—then the quality and texture of the education we provide will be significantly diminished" (p. 3). The quote proves that institutions and institutional leaders are dedicated to pursuing and increasing diversity in higher education. These institutions chose to pursue diversity based on the benefits a diverse campus offers. According to a 2016 U.S. Department of Education report, a diverse student body is desirable not only for "improving the economic and educational opportunities for students of color, but also for the social, academic, and societal benefits that diversity presents for all students and communities" (p. 5). Increased student diversity benefits institutions by enriching the educational experience for all students, preparing all students for the workforce, challenging harmful stereotypes, and establishing connections with a growing segment of the college-age population.

It's not only the U.S Department of Education that recognizes the advantages of a diverse campus; The American Council on Education (ACE) Board of Directors released a statement on the importance of diversity and the educational experience, stating, "we learn from those whose experiences, beliefs,

and perspectives are different from our own, and these lessons can be taught best in a rich diverse intellectual and social environment" (2012). Many studies like these reiterate that when students engage, interact, and learn from and with racially and culturally diverse peers, they encounter a high-quality educational experience that promotes positive learning outcomes (American Educational Research Association, 2003; Chang, 2003; Warikoo, 2016). Thus, diversity enhances the educational experience, which is a benefit for students, faculty and staff, and university administration alike. When students have positive experiences, the university thrives; thus, creating a space that promotes positive learning outcomes, especially through diversity, seems to be a priority in conversations about diversity in higher education.

One such positive learning outcome from having a diverse campus is improvement in communication and cognitive processing for students. According to the Century Foundation, "students who interacted with racially and ethnically diverse peers showed significant gains in cognitive skills, such as critical thinking and problem-solving" (Tsuo, 2015). In other words, a diverse student population leads to an enhanced educational experience that is socially and academically beneficial for all students. Another positive outcome is challenging stereotypes: "For many students, regardless of whether or not they identify as part of a minority or culturally diverse population, the college will challenge predisposed stereotypes or norms that may have been developed during adolescence" (Brown,

qtd. in University of Florida: College News, 2020). When students communicate and engage with students from varied backgrounds, there is more opportunity for cross-racial understanding that may confront preconceptions and biases, allowing for personal growth and tolerance, and the breaking down of stereotypes.

The importance and benefits of diversity go beyond higher education institutions. For example, a *Forbes* survey in 2011 found that 85% of the professional respondents noted that diversity is crucial for their businesses. In fact, Frederic Roze, chief executive officer of L'Oreal added, "diversity fosters creativity. We need to generate the best ideas from our people in all levels of the company and incorporate them into our business practices" (Forbes, 2011, p. 5). Thus, we can assume that, in the same way, a diverse campus will ensure that students are more prepared for the workforce. The American Educational Research Association brief states that student body diversity "better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce and society, and better prepares them as professionals" (qtd. in Grutter v. Bollinger, 2003, p. 18). Hence, a significant benefit of colleges and universities with a diverse student body is that they help foster and build communities that reflect the diverse demographics of the nation and its workplaces, which ensure that students can be successful outside of their postsecondary experience.

Regarding the nation's demographics, the Center for American Progress reports that more than 50% of babies are people of color in 2012 and projections

show that by 2050, there will be no racial or ethnic majority. In order to remain financially viable, universities and colleges need to actively reflect this diversity or risk detracting prospective student and negatively impacting future revenue (in the form of tuition).

Overall, then, there are numerous studies that proves having a diverse student population enriches the educational experience and benefits students; these studies show that diversity increases intellectual abilities (like critical thinking), communication and interactions; promotes racial understanding; prepares students for a more diverse reality; and reduces prejudices and stereotypes. Therefore, diversity is desirable.

Aspirational Model

Many universities and colleges choose the aspirational approach for depicting diversity in order to increase diversity. A 2013 study in the field of marketing for higher education by Pippert et al. (discussed more thoroughly in a later section) argues that "it takes diversity to recruit diversity, presenting an image of what you would like to become is important" (p. 276). Due to this need for recruiting diverse applicants, higher education institutions' marketing utilizes the *aspirational role model* (which is a different concept from the *aspirational approach*) to highlight the accomplishments of current students and former students (alumni) within promotional materials, such as brochures or websites

(Allen & Collisson, 2020). In higher education marketing, the aspirational role model refers to a device by which a prospective student sees an image of a current student or alumni as a role model they aspire to become based on desired and similar attributes (Allen & Collisson, 2020). Basically, the aim is for a prospective student to see or identify themselves in the portrayed role model and think, "yeah, I want to be like that guy." The aspirational role model is only part of the *aspirational approach*, as the aims for the role model deals more with identifying, attracting and appealing to their target audience based on specific attributes (such as similarities in race, gender, cultural values).

Allen and Collisson's (2020) study, "Do aspirational role models inspire or backfire," examines whether the *aspirational role model* is effective for prospective minority students applying to a university or college. They state, "aspirational role models in marketing can inspire prospective students of color to make similar enrollment and academic decisions and potentially increase their interest in learning more about a college, but this impact hinges on whether the prospective student perceives a sense of similarity with the role model" (2020, p. 11). The aspirational role model can have positive or negative effects, depending on whether the model is seen as similar to or different from prospective applicants. The more similar the aspirational role model is with oneself, the more likely one will assimilate rather than contrast (Allen & Collisson, 2020). The study included 151 participants collected from a crowdsourcing website (used in

social sciences to recruit diverse samples), and evaluated through a screening process, and verified as prospective minority college students. Allen and Collisson (2020) created role model profiles from stock images—similar to higher education marketing materials—that included the racial minority and majority. Accomplishments and merit were randomly assigned to each profile. The participants were at first randomly assigned these generated profiles, then strategically matched based upon similarities in gender and race with the profiles. Allen and Collisson (2020) found that the aspirational role model is efficacious— prospective minority students were more attracted to universities when presented with visual representations that they saw themselves in or that aligned with their identity.

On the other hand, Allen and Collisson (2020) caution against false portrayals of campus diversity. They state, "Critically, effective college marketing is without purpose if student experiences once enrolled at the institution don't align with their expectations based on what is portrayed in promotional messaging" (2020, p. 13-14). Essentially, Allen and Collisson (2020) argue that the purpose of the aspirational role model (and thus, my aspirational approach) should be reflective of the experience; otherwise, it becomes misleading and alters perceptions of the university by the prospective students.

General Challenges of Visual Representation

Several studies claim discourse comprises both verbal and visual representations, but Meyer et al. (2013) argue that recent scholarship has yet to explore the visual mode of meaning/representation. In Meyer et al. 2013 study "The Visual Dimension in Organizing, Organization, and Organization Research: Core Ideas, Current Developments, and Promising Avenues," they define visual representation as a mode to construct and express meaning. While visual representation is a more accessible form of communication or language than text, it does not mean that a ubiquitous image has the same meaning for all individuals across cultures, regions, nations, etc. (Meyer et al., 2013). Just as with text, visual representation can "individualize communication," meaning that it can convey and project identities and values stemming from culture, community, and society (Meyer et al., 2013, p. 496).

There are few studies on the pitfalls of creating or interpreting visual representation. Meyer et al. (2013) state that, historically, there have been more studies and regulations around verbal and textual language, but the studies and regulations on visual meaning (or representations) are bound to increase as its use and relevance in society grows. While the scholarship and regulations differ between visual and textual representations, there is a similar dynamic in intent and interpretation/meaning with the creator/author/speaker and the viewer/reader/audience for both representations.

The creator has intentions with representations, but regardless of those intentions, the audience may or may not comprehend and interpret the meaning in the way intended (Bresciani & Eppler, 2015; Ford & Patterson, 2019). A complication with visual representation in higher education, as Ford and Patterson argue, is that institutions are not required to "account for positions and potential interpretations of those who will receive their messages" (p. 101). In other words, universities can (for the most part) portray what they'd like and are not necessarily accountable for (mis)interpretations of their messaging by prospective students. Ultimately, due to the power/freedom institutions have and the nature of visual representation, the creator's intention can significantly alter the audiences' reception and understanding of the visual message.

Misleading Yet Accurate

While many universities and colleges use the aspirational approach, many studies analyze an institution's visual representation of diversity based on whether it is accurate and reflective of the student demographics. Thus, there is an argument for universities to use the actual approach for depicting the diversity of a student demographic. However, there are implications even if a visual representation is measurably accurate. A prime and extensively analyzed example of this is with statistical graphic representations.

Bresciani and Eppler's 2015 study "The Pitfalls of Visual Representations:

A Review and Classification of Common Errors Made While Designing and

Interpreting Visualization" focuses on the precarious area of statistical graphic

representations. Visual representations dealing with statistical data, typically

graphs or charts, may display accurate information but can mislead audiences.

They argue that the cause of a visualization problem derives from the encoding or

the decoding. For encoding, the creator could intentionally or unintentionally

mislead, while for decoding, the audience may misinterpret the visual

representation (Bresciani & Eppler, 2015). The most difficult problem to discern

and prove is the intentional/unintentional manipulation of the visual by the

creator.

Ford and Patterson's (2019) study (discussed further in the following

section) identifies three practices of depicting ethno-racial categories data on

university websites. One identified practice universities use is *aggregating*—

combining two or more races or race categories into one—which may lead an

external audience to compare one race category to a group made up of multiple

race categories. Ford and Patterson (2019) use Boston College's admissions page

from 2017 as an example. Under the section titled "Undergraduate students by

gender, ethnicity, nationality," a pie chart depicts ethnicity, with 30% being a

combined grouping of African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American,

and the 70% being presumably White (2019, p. 105). The information is

technically accurate. However, the audience might see this combined group percentage and conclude that students of color constitute a higher percentage of the study population than they do. Ford and Patterson suggest that universities, as creators, "report aggregated student racial groups in order to hide (or reduce the emphasis on) the small presence (or entire absence) of some ethno-racial groups" (2019, p. 106). There is no way to prove Boston College is using aggregation to intentionally promote diversity and hide/reduce attention to some ethno-racial groups/categories, thus misleading the audience.

Race: Classifying through Visual

In addition, visual representation becomes even more complicated when depicting people, who possess racial, ethnic, and gender identities. A specific example comes from a 2013 study by Pippert et al. (examined more extensively in the next section), where they analyzed college and university visual representations of students. Much of their analysis relies on categorizing students by race and ethnicity by visual assessment—looking at a photo and labeling the students' potential race. Due to this method, much of their study could be invalid or inaccurate. They do acknowledge that "because the classifications were based primarily on skin tone, which may be inaccurate because of bias or misinterpretation, extreme caution was taken when deciding if a subject in a photograph could be reasonably labeled as one of the five [predetermined race]

categories" (Pippert et al., 2013, p. 268). While their study focuses on assessing if institutions accurately represent their student demographics, they lack accuracy due to their reliance on visual indicators of race. This study is significant, because it proves that when people assess images of individuals, they rely on identifying attributes as indicators, like associating skin color with race. Additionally, due to the data being ambiguous, it comes back to this ethical issue of the reliance on accuracy where visual representations are not dependent on accuracy.

In *Racial Formation in the United States*, authors Omi and Howard (2015) break down the theory of racial formation. They explain that the social construction of race and racial meanings are "understood as part of a universal phenomenon of classifying people on the basis of real or imagined attributes…a vast summation of signifying actions and social structures, past and present, that have combined and clashed in the creation of the enormous complex of relationships and identities that is labeled race" (2015, p. 12-13). To put it another way, Omi and Howard (2015) suggest society identifies and classifies attributes of a person in determining race, some of these attributes are visual, and some of these visuals are ambiguous. Due to this, there are many challenges when depicting race through visual representation.

However, Omi and Warrant (2015) argue that race is ocular—associated and connected with vision despite these complexities. Beyond the U.S., defining and identifying race is different across regions and nations, which "underscores

the fact that race is a fluid and flexible social concept" (Omi & Warrant, 2015, p. 13). Still, people worldwide are constantly making visual assessments and assigning meaning from their specific social settings. Visual cues allow for quick categorization, and this process is used to "justify subordinate status, unequal treatment, to structure oppression and exploitation in numerous ways" (Omi & Warrant, 2015, p. 12). The following section explores some of the practices and complexities higher education institutions face with how they depict race and ethnicity in visual representation.

Issues with the Representation of Diversity in Higher Education

In searching for studies about colleges and universities using aspirational vs. actual depictions of diverse student populations, many studies were from journals on marketing and diversity within higher education. These studies measured whether the representation was accurate and reflective of the institution's current student demographics. Due to many of the universities and colleges inconsistently representing and reporting student demographics on their websites, these studies utilized the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) for analyzing student demographics, specifically the race categories (Ford & Patterson, 2019).

Universities and colleges are required by federal mandates to report their statistics on current student demographics and follow the U.S. Office of

Management and Budget (OMB)'s standard for reporting students' ethnicities and races into eight stipulated categories (Ford & Patterson, 2019). These reported statistics are collected, analyzed, and published for public accessibility on the IPEDS database/website. Many studies refer to these race and ethnicity categories as *ethno-racial categories*.

The following studies analyze the different recruitment materials and visual representations (images) in comparison with the reported student demographics; their findings suggest that higher education institutions are trying to appear more diverse than they are in actuality.

Inaccuracy in the Representation of Student Diversity

Many studies either utilized a 2013 study in the *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* titled "We've got minorities, yes we do: visual representations of racial and ethnic diversity in college recruitment materials" by Pippert et al. Prior 2013, few studies addressed this symbolic representation of diversity in college campuses (Pippert et al.). These sociology faculty members examined 10,000 photographs used in recruitment materials (like brochures) from 165 institutions to assess whether the symbolic portrayal of racial and ethnic diversity accurately represented the student demographic. Pippert et al. claim that institutions "employ a considerable amount of visual rhetoric as a means of conveying particular messages" (2013, p. 262). In order to decipher the effect

universities are trying to convey through visual rhetoric, Pippert et al. analyzed

these viewbooks since it serves as a "preferred conception" of an institution for

prospective students (2013, p. 262). The 165 institutions were selected through a

variety of college/university ranking sources—such as *U.S. News & World Report*

and *Princeton Review*—and categorized the images based on the portrayed race or

ethnicity and compared it to the correlating university demographics.

Pippert et al. (2013) found a "reversal of representation," which refers to a

practice in which universities overrepresent students of a specific race or ethnicity

and underrepresent the majority the majority demographic. Specifically, they

noted that "not only were colleges and universities inaccurate in their symbolic

representations of race and ethnicity, they defined 'diversity' selectively" (2013,

p. 278). Pippert et. al argue that many universities were inaccurately representing

their student body demographics and typically featuring one racial demographic

over others. Essentially, their argument exists to make evident the dilemma. Thus,

this is significant for my study because Pippert et al. (2013) argues it is more

important to accurately portray a university's student body than misrepresent the

current demographics to prospective students. Since prospective students factor a

university's image into their decision process for attending a university, there is a

concern about the implications of misrepresentation.

Cosmetic Diversity through Manipulation of Standard Race Categories

Similarly, a 2019 study in the *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* titled "'Cosmetic Diversity': University Websites and the Transformation of Race Categories," by Ford and Patterson, analyzed 158 institutions' websites to assess how universities manipulate the representation of ethnicity and race categories to enhance their appearance of diversity. Their rationale for this analysis was to examine why universities and colleges were not simply reproducing the data on ethno-racial categories reported to the federal government on their institution's websites. Ford and Patterson (2019) examined each university's racial and ethnic data that a prospective student might easily encounter—like an "about us" or admissions page—and compared it to the standard ethno-racial reporting categories stipulated by the federal government. They found that most universities with a majority White student population and an underrepresented population of ethno-racial minorities deviated from the standard ethno-racial reporting categories when representing their student body. These universities would change or manipulate how they represented the ethno-racial categories and data on their websites as compared to the format required by and the federal government. It is worth noting that no stipulation requires universities to represent their students' ethno-racial data on university websites the same way they report them to the federal government. These less diverse

universities would typically deviate from the standard ethno-racial categories by practices of omitting, adding, and aggregating race categories on their websites.

Omitting a race/ethnicity category means that the university often did not include it in the data representation on the website. Ford and Patterson noted that about "40% of university websites omitted the White category from their representations of the student body composition" (2019, p. 103). They argue that the practice of omission is an attempt to deemphasize the White student majority on the campus by focusing on the non-White categories. The implications of this practice might include the following: insinuating Whiteness is "unraced" or "race-less"; normalizing the White category as standard; or portraying the university to be less White (Ford & Patterson, 2019, p. 105-106).

For aggregation, Ford and Patterson (2019) found some institutions would combine the non-White ethno-racial categories into one category, like "minorities" or "under-represented minorities," so that students of color visually fall into a larger group. They argue that "aggregation operates much like omission in that the practice serves to preserve Whiteness in its position as normal and centered" (2019, p. 107). While aggregating may enhance the appearance of a campus's diversity, it also suggests that institutions view student ethnicity and race as a White/non-White binary (Ford & Patterson, 2019). Additionally, it befuddles the audience/reader as it does not precisely communicate the ethno-racial composition of the student population (Ford & Patterson, 2019).

Lastly, adding the ethno-racial categories was the most common practice across the sampled universities (Ford & Patterson, 2019). Ford and Patterson (2019) found that 81% of the sampled universities add "international students" to the ethno-racial categories on their websites. The federal government standard for reporting race/ethnicity categories does not separate international students into an individual category (Ford & Patterson, 2019). This is because nations differ vastly in the classification of race and ethnicity compared to the standard for the U.S. When a university utilizes addition with international students, it becomes even more complicated as international students may be aggregated into U.S. ethno-racial categories or become a category on its own as "non-American citizens of any race/ethnicity" (Ford & Patterson, 2019, p. 107). The implications from addition practices are similar to omission and aggregation in that they potentially confuse the reader/audience as to the student body's demographics and support the White/non-White binary construct (Ford & Patterson, 2019).

Ford and Patterson's (2019) study challenges other studies and articles that assume universities only want to appear more diverse by suggesting universities are trying to attract more diverse students. Their findings indicate that while universities' intentions are essentially good, these representation practices of omission, aggregating, and adding ethno-racial categories are only "cosmetic solutions" (2019, p. 108). These actions and recruiting tactics fail to address the substantial problem of racial disparities in access to education.

The More Selective the University - The More Diversity is Depicted

Lastly, a 2021 study in the *Journal of Higher Education* titled
"Legitimating Prestige through Diversity: How Higher Education Institutions
Represent Ethno-Racial Diversity across Levels of Selectivity," by Holland and
Ford, assesses whether universities and colleges at differing selectivity levels vary
in their representation of ethno-racial composition. Holland and Ford (2021)
utilized a similar approach to the Ford and Patterson study by assessing how
universities deviated from standard categories. They applied the 2017 Barron's
College Admissions Selector Rating to 278 universities to classify colleges based
on level of selectivity before analyzing the race/ethnicity representations
accessible on the universities' admissions webpages. Holland and Ford (2021)
found that the sampled universities value and represent diversity differently based
on level of selectivity. Specifically, selective universities tended to enhance their
level of diversity on university websites more than less selective universities. This
is consequential as it identifies selective universities as more likely to use the
aspirational approach and less selective universities as more likely to use the
actual approach for depicting student diversity. Since there are many marketing
and recruitment strategies that differ across universities, recent studies like these
shed new light on some of the marketing and recruitment approaches that differ
across universities, which previous studies did not address as thoroughly.

Diversity is Desirable but Difficult

Even though many of these studies are by faculty members at various universities, researchers did not incorporate their perspective as an employee of a university. Due to this, the studies address institutions' representation of diversity from the perspective of an external audience (like a prospective student), distinctly separate from the perspective of marketing administrators that handle representation for the university. Rather, their viewpoint is that of an external reader viewing how the institutions seem to use racial diversity as a "commodity in the marketing of higher education" (Pippert et al., 2013, p. 275). Institutions may not necessarily be acting maliciously or unethically to mislead intentionally but using diversity to attract and recruit prospective students.

Their findings suggest a common trend at four-year colleges and universities in which the student population is depicted as more diverse in order to attract applicants from underrepresented groups. These studies suggest that less diverse universities tend to use the aspirational approach for depicting diversity. In contrast, more diverse universities are less likely to practice omitting or adding race categories.

There are many benefits from having a diverse student body. Whereas diversity is desirable for higher education, becoming more diverse remains elusive—leading to institutions using the aspirational approach and misleading

messaging. The consequences of this messaging can include student attrition and feelings of alienation once enrolled at the university (Ford & Patterson, 2019).

These studies were limited in numerous ways. For example, they did not analyze prospective student feedback on diversity mixed messaging, suggest how universities should represent ethno-racial data, offer alternatives to the aspirational approach, or incorporate institutions' rationale for their diversity marketing practices. The studies seem to concede that diversity messaging is "more representative of the diversity goals, not the reality on campus" (Holland & Ford, 2021, p. 5). On the other hand, none of the studies interviewed or approached these universities to gain insight or understand the rationale for why a university might be utilizing the aspirational approach.

The significance of these studies is in revealing that there may be more to learn and understand about the rationale for and implications of depicting diversity in different ways. As mentioned by Pippert et al., "If appearing welcoming to all students or simply aspiring to be more diverse without constraining the definition of diversity was the true goal, the race-specific patterns [such as inflating portrayals of Black students] in the data would not have surfaced" (2013, p. 276). Pippert et al. and the other studies claim that for higher education to be diverse in portrayal, their marketing should have an equal representation of race and gender, while also condemning universities for defining diversity upon visibility alone. Not only does Pippert et al. contradict their own

claim—as their study evaluates universities depictions of diversity through their own flawed visual assessment—these studies in general fail to suggest alternative tactics or consider the rationale as to why universities may choose to over depict students of a specific race. If a university is lacking Black students but wants to change that, then they would use more visual representations of Black students with the aspirational role model in order to attract, admit, and enroll prospective Black students. The same goes for any other race, ethnicity and gender disparities at an institution. The limited scope of these studies, which focus primarily on the inaccurate visual representation in higher education, fail to consider any alternative methods or rationale involving depiction.

Regarding the race-specific patterns, like the White/non-White binary, the studies do analyze how these practices are a direct result of and a potentially superficial response to the more significant issue of racial inequities and underrepresentation occurring in higher education. The question is whether there is a better way to depict diversity?

While these studies examine the accuracy of diversity representation from the outside, my thesis will examine decisions about how to represent diversity from inside the university. In order to provide this insider perspective, I utilize my personal experiences working in university administration; rhetorically analyze that institution's diversity representation and interview people who make decisions about how to depict diversity for the institution. This research matters

because there is momentum behind DEI initiatives and a need to consider the

ethical implications of how diversity is depicted.

Chapter 2

CASE STUDY

Loyola Marymount University (LMU) is a private, Jesuit, four-year

university in Los Angeles, California, with roughly 10,000 students (graduate and

undergraduate). During my time as an administrator at LMU, the

Communications Manager and I were primarily responsible for the Frank R.

Seaver College of Science and Engineering's website. The website is critical in

recruiting prospective students. The National Association for College Admission

Counseling found that "80% of American college students reported that college

websites were a primary site of information when they were looking for a college

and making college decisions" (2007). Due to websites' accessibility and visual

representations of institutions, they are a potent site of rhetoric in higher

education.

This thesis stems from a conversation between the communications

manager and me while we were working on the website. We were revitalizing the

informative text, images, and layout of webpages used by the college and

associated departments. The departments would notify us of potential stories and

student achievements to highlight. We could not spotlight every student in the

college, so we had to be selective in displaying a diverse array of students, careful

not to over-represent any gender, race, or ethnicity. We would consult with the

registrar's student database to confirm major, name, student status, and necessary

demographics whenever we featured a student on the website. The rationale behind this was to confirm that individuals were in fact students in the featured department and that we used preferred pronouns in the story.

Once, we encountered a dilemma related to the selection of students to spotlight in images and feature stories. There were two spots for featuring students on a department home page. We had selected a student for the first spot but were torn between two others for the remaining spot. Both students had exciting research projects that would potentially interest prospective students and that highlighted some of the research occurring in the department. By cross referencing the student's information from the registrar's student database, we found that both students identified as the same gender but differed in race.

After many discussions, it came down to what we wanted to convey as a college that celebrates diversity. We decided to feature the student who differed in race and gender from the one we had already selected. The rationale was that depicting these students would benefit the college by depicting a diverse student body at LMU and attracting prospective students. We both agreed it was more of an aspirational approach since the highlighted student demographics did not accurately represent the associated department's current demographics. We justified that it was better to present a diverse selection of our current students rather than selecting students that would accurately represent the demographic, like having a majority of the images reflect the student majority. We were aiming

to increase the department's diversity and become less aspirational and more actual in the future. However, we still had mild concerns, as we knew the depiction misrepresented the department's demographics.

From this conversation and the experience of selecting which students to spotlight, I became aware of this ethical dilemma in deciding how to represent diversity in publicity materials. Many scholars only examine a university's student demographics to assess the accuracy of depictions and representations. While this assessment method works well in terms of accuracy, it fails to consider the rationale universities have in choosing aspirational depictions over actual depictions. The advantage of rhetorically analyzing a university's representations allows for consideration of the situation, context, and intended audience for images. Moreover, this case study includes interviews with two staff members at LMU who are involved with depicting diversity. These interviews give insight, elaborate on the motivations for aspirational depictions at LMU, and demonstrate how LMU leadership's goals inform the visual representation of student diversity.

Analyzing LMU's Rhetoric on Diversity Representation

From the president, senior administration, and trustees, the direction and aims of an institution start with leadership's direction and flow down to academic and administrative departments. The means of communicating these aims comes in the form of strategic plans. Strategic plans create a vision for the university that

breaks down the goals into sections: objectives, reasoning, and steps to achieve the objectives. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), strategic plans can lead to institutions planning and implementing changes to meet their goals through funding, policies, and procedures. LMU states that the purpose of a strategic plan is to "articulate a shared vision of the university's future to orient its collective efforts and to identify the most important strategies, goals, and actions for the instruction to take in order to realize that vision" (2021). Essentially, leadership generates strategic plans to guide the university's approach to achieving what they deem necessary changes for improving both day-to-day and long-term operations.

LMU's latest initiatives, communication, and strategic plan for 2021-2026 are responding to heightened awareness of institutional racism and exclusion in higher education, an awareness related to broader recognition of racial injustice sparked by the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. The President of LMU wrote a letter to the community responding to these issues and promised to make changes by taking responsibility for eradicating systemic racism at LMU. President Snyder made three commitments related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) that are interwoven with the new Strategic Plan of 2021-2026. Both academic and administrative departments are charged with making changes within their respective units.

By rhetorically analyzing the president's letter, the strategic plan for 2021-2026, and the Seaver College website, I consider how each of these texts attempts to influence their intended audiences.

President Snyder's Letter

As mentioned, LMU's President Snyder wrote a letter on June 16, 2020, to the LMU community in response to recent acts of anti-Black racism (view the letter in Appendix A). The letter's central claim is that LMU will need to work to eradicate systemic racism at LMU and take responsibility for institutional complicity through a set of actions. Snyder states that LMU will "increase the diversity and inclusiveness of our LMU community and commit resources to do so" by "recruiting and retaining Black students" and students from other underrepresented populations. To the LMU community, this meant LMU would be taking steps internally to increase support for DEI initiatives, especially the recruitment of more diverse students, staff, faculty, and leaders. The letter did not include elaborate step-by-step procedures or a breakdown of how these actions would occur. However, due to it being a brief letter, the aim seemed to be holistic.

The letter was widely dispersed and closely read since the president and his words hold power and authority as the university's figurehead, representative, and leader. The words were supposed to guide and reflect the university. This letter was made in June 2020 and had a significant impact on the university's

initiatives and aims, which will be apparent in my examination of the strategic plan, college website, and interviews.

Many in the LMU community would respond positively to the push for more diversity, inclusivity, and equity at the university. The letter promises transformation and accountability while charging the community to take steps to meet these aims. With emotionally charged language like "oppression," "white supremacy," "injustice," and "killings of Black people," the letter evokes the empathy and anger of the community for the actions happening both outside and inside the university. Additionally, the letter makes a call to action with phrases like "eradicating systemic racism," "commitment," and "accountability" that the LMU community would understand as calling for more than empathy.

Overall, the letter conveys a sense of positivity that would resonate with many from the LMU community. Nonetheless, the community would not necessarily buy into the president's promises of change. The language lacks guarantees or a specific plan, which might result in slow or superficial development. The audience for President Snyder's letter may agree with or think positively of the discourse and promises made. However, as Cole and Harper (2017) argue, there is a tendency for university presidential speeches across the nation to say the right things or promise change while failing to address the deeper issues occurring.

LMU Strategic Plan

"Creating the World We Want to Live in" is LMU's strategic plan for 2021-2026 that was informed by the community, composed by the Strategic Planning Steering Committee, approved by the LMU president, and adopted by the Board of Trustees. The strategic plan is structured overall in four parts: the context for the plan, the vision/aims for the LMU's future, three commitments or values to rationalize approaches, and five initiatives that stipulate the actions for implementation. The plan is publicly available, but the discourse suggests it primarily targets LMU employees, emphasizing leadership, faculty, and staff. This is evident in the context of the plan being created by the steering committee, incorporating faculty and staff focus groups. Additionally, the plan integrates second person point of view by addressing employees as "we" and mentioning students as "they." The strategic plan is specifically for faculty and staff who will be responsible or involved with executing portions of the plan.

The strategic plan responds to both systemic racism in higher education and the letter circulated by the LMU president calling on the community to "eradicate systemic racism" and act. The central claim for LMU's strategic plan is to "articulate a shared vision of the university's future to orient its collective efforts," and the plan supports this aim by identifying "strategies, goals, actions for the institution to take in order to realize that vision" (p. 3). Overall, the strategic plan addresses many broad aspects and objectives, but this rhetorical analysis will focus on diversity initiatives, specifically representation and

recruitment language. The first strategized approach deals with anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion. The rationale for this approach suggests this is essential to "widening our appeal and to enhancing our educational quality and creativity" (p. 8). In order to carry out this commitment, LMU's strategic plan states:

> This commitment encourages us to pursue actions that will:
> - Increase the diversity of our LMU students, faculty, staff, and administrative leadership, ensuring accountability by identifying specific goals and metrics and tracking and reporting progress.
> - Give particular attention to specifying increases in BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] representation in all populations (p. 8).

This portion of the plan conveys that widening LMU's appeal and enhancing LMU's educational quality by increasing diversity and BIPOC representation will support LMU's commitment to DEI and eradicating systemic racism. Through words like "widening our appeal," "increase the diversity," and "increases in BIPOC representation," there seems to be an emphasis on actions of recruiting. While the plan does not directly state who will be responsible for increasing diversity or BIPOC representation, it implies that those responsible for recruiting and depicting diversity (like marketing and admissions staff members) will need to make changes in their duties to widen the appeal of LMU. Indirectly, this could impact the audience (prospective students) who views depictions of diversity in publicity materials.

Essentially, there are three groups who are impacted by this portion of the strategic plan. The first would be the faculty and staff not directly involved with recruiting and representation. They would in all likelihood agree with the diversity initiatives, as it is beneficial for the LMU community become more diverse. As mentioned, a diverse college campus enhances the culture, learning environment, status, and rankings of a university. Although these faculty and staff would welcome the successful recruitment of a more diverse study body, they would not necessarily be in a position to question how the university achieves this goal.

The second group affected would be the staff members involved with recruiting or depicting students through mediums like the website. While most would agree with the aims of anti-racism, there is sure to be some uncertainty about what it means to "pursue actions" that "increase the diversity;" specifically BIPOC representation. Unless previously informed by their department or leadership, these implicated staff members might wonder what changes would need to occur in their current duties to support the plan's actions and aims. Since the nature of strategic plans means change, any person involved with actions mentioned in the plan would need to change their role/responsibilities to meet the new aims. As this group is already involved with recruitment and representations of the student population, they might interpret the plan as suggesting that their

work is lacking. Or they might worry that their responsibilities could increase without additional support.

Additionally, it may be hard for staff members to measure success. The strategic plan does not address how to execute the action items or how to measure the success of execution. A potential positive outcome of incorporating these initiatives within the plan is that they will prompt departments and staff members to find ways to address areas or need in the university.

The third group affected is prospective students who will be on the receiving end of efforts to increase BIPOC representation. Since there is pressure to increase BIPOC representation at LMU, a result might be increased depictions of BIPOC students at LMU through materials or mediums like the website. As websites are one of the most publicly accessible resources for recruiting materials and images of current students at a university, BIPOC representation might be increased in images, stories, statistics, and texts throughout LMU's website. As many of the studies regarding diversity representation have stated, this could lead a prospective student to believe the university has a higher percentage of BIPOC students than it does.

This is significant, as the strategic plan guides faculty, staff, and students for the next five years. Executing the plan requires staffing, allocation of funds, initiatives to follow, and buy-in from the university community, as they will have

to redirect their work toward realizing the mission of the plan. If the community fails to understand or buy into the plan, it will fail.

Although the strategic plan does not specify how it will be executed, such specificity is not customary in a strategic plan. What I think is important from this analysis is that the strategic plan emphasizes increasing diversity and BIPOC representation. This implies that those staff members who deal with hiring, recruitment, and representing the university—will need to do more in their roles to achieve this goal.

Seaver College Website

While the LMU president's letter and the strategic plan are both responses to the events in 2020 and aim to address systemic racism at LMU, the Frank R. Seaver College website has existed for over two decades and is constantly changing each year. Having been involved with Seaver College's website development and updates, I can confirm that the website changes regularly to reflect current events, research, faculty, students, and staff. The elements that shift most frequently on the website tend to be images, event listings, and stories. The website has seven department pages encompassing numerous undergraduate and graduate programs, research programs, faculty and staff profiles and general information about the college.

Due to the quantity of content Seaver College's website covers, this rhetorical analysis will be limited to the College's home page, particularly that of the "Seaver Profiles." Most of the home page contains visual representations of the people, places, and events on campus. For example, the home page features a welcome, profiles of Seaver College students, highlights of the community, and statistics about the college (see Figure 2).

Seaver College of Science and Engineering offers a rigorous academic experience to ambitious students committed to lives of meaning and purpose. We welcome you.

Seaver Profiles

Biochemistry
International student leads team studying COVID-19
Meet Lianlen Joy Go Distor

Mechanical Engineering
Engineer enjoys problem solving and collaboration to help others
Meet Amanuel Matias

Systems Engineering
Graduate student's utilizes real-world academic experiences to work at Northrup Grumman
Meet Bryan Calungcagin

Health & Human Sciences
Seaver Alumna is elected Harvard Medical School Student Body President
Meet LaShyra Nolen

Seaver Highlights

Life Sciences Are at a Pivotal Moment
VIEW RECAP

LMU-Led Team Wins NSF Convergence Accelerator Award
READ MORE

Computer Science App Assists LMU Loyola Law School's Project for the Innocent
READ MORE

Biology Major Earns National Scholarship for Promoting Diversity in STEM
READ MORE

Seaver By the Numbers

21.8
Average Class Size

1,200
Total Undergraduate Students

86.9%
Student Receiving Financial Aid

102
Full-Time Faculty

Figure 2. Copyright 2022 by Loyola Marymount University. Seaver College Home Page.

Retrieved in April 2022 from https://cse.lmu.edu/.

The page claims at the top of the image that Seaver College's purpose is to offer "a rigorous academic experience to ambitious students committed to lives of meaning and purpose." These images depict various smiling individuals involved in academic work, such as conducting science or engineering lab work.

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The images on the home page convey student diversity, representing different genders, ethnicities, and races. It presents a glimpse into Seaver College experiences, from working with peers and faculty, to researching in labs, to presenting projects. The president's letter and the strategic seem to have had an effect on the home page. Specifically, the four "Seaver Profiles" depict students who present as BIPOC. The implication is that Seaver College is home to a higher percentage of BIPOC students.

While the website is publicly accessible, the intended audience is prospective students. Since prospective students use a college's website as a primary source to learn more and decide where to apply/attend, college websites are a crucial recruiting tool for universities and colleges (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2007). A prospective student viewing Seaver College's home page might be attracted to the website's organized structure, clean images, and minimalistic text. Since the website also appears credible by using images of actual students, faculty, and alumni, they may buy into the academic experience Seaver College is presenting. The images convey values of community, learning, and friendship, as evidenced by the smiling faces, group interactions, and symbols of education (such as computers and lab coats). Since colleges and universities tend to be unfamiliar to prospective students, images must align with prospective students' values and desires. One of the most urgent concerns for prospective students is whether they can see themselves in one or

more of the images displayed. Suppose a BIPOC prospective student saw themselves represented in one of the "Seaver Profile" students. In that case, they might be more willing to attend Seaver College, believing it had a strong representation of BIPOC students. Having a wide variety of visual representations increases the likelihood that prospective students will see themselves represented.

These visual representations convey how the college wants to be perceived, what the college aspires to, and what effect it wants to have on prospective students. From the limited text and images alone seen in Figure 2, Seaver College desires to be perceived as having diverse students and experiences. Simultaneously, the college aims to attract more diversity. This is not to say Seaver College is not a diverse college, but it still aims to increase diversity further. The significance here is that prospective students may be led to believe Seaver College is more diverse than it is. The website's visual representations can potentially mislead its intended audience of prospective students.

What Does All this Rhetoric Do*?*

The president's letter, the strategic plan, and the Seaver College website convey a complicated message: due to a lack of diversity, LMU will need to demonstrate diversity, which in turn will increase diversity. According to the letter, racial inequities exist at LMU. Thus, one pillar of the strategic plan is to increase diversity. One of the ways to increase diversity is through representation

of BIPOC students. The Seaver College home page depicts four BIPOC students in its student profile section.

In other words, LMU uses visual representation in a way that is mostly aspirational. This is evident in the strategic plan for LMU, titled "Creating the World We Want to Live in." LMU seems less concerned about accurate representation of current student demographics, as such accuracy might not help the institution realize its aims.

Interviews with LMU Staff Members

While rhetorical analysis can shed light on how texts and images influence audiences, interviews with those who produce texts and images can reveal intent. At LMU, the marketing and communications (MarComm) department is primarily responsible for developing and maintaining the website. They work with each department to generate content, map the layout, coordinate photography, and make regular updates.

This section includes interviews with two staff members: Jennifer and David.[1] Jennifer and David both work with the MarComm department, and their roles involve depicting diversity for LMU. The main distinguisher is the academic areas of each college/school. Jennifer supports The Frank R. Seaver College of

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[1] *Jennifer* and *David* are pseudonyms for the two interviewees to protect the identities of the individuals.

Science and Engineering and the associated departments of science, mathematics, physics, and engineering. David also supports the School of Education that comprises teacher preparation (elementary, secondary, special, and inclusive education), educational leadership, psychology, and counseling. Both positions deal with internal and external audiences and handle the college/school website, newsletter, social media, stories, photography, advertising, and messaging.

The main aim for incorporating interviews in this case study of LMU was to give context and insight into the rationale that influenced the staff members' decisions for the website – particularly for pursuing diversity depictions. These interviews provide insight into the rationale and context for a university's visual representations.

Both interviews were conducted via ZOOM (video conference) and audio recorded (with each interviewee's consent) to help with accuracy. Jennifer's interview took place on March 18, 2022, at 2:00 p.m. CST, and David's interview took place on March 25, 2022, at 1:00 p.m. CST. Each interview was about 50 minutes and consisted of the same 14 interview questions for each interviewee (see Appendix B). The interview questions focused on each participant's role, their decision-making process when it comes to aspirational vs. actual representations, and how the influence of leadership and recruitment needs factors into their decisions.

Role in Depicting Diversity

For the Seaver College of Science and Engineering, Jennifer handles advertising, stories, and the college website, among other responsibilities. Jennifer is responsible for not only selecting each image but also for deciding what message each image is intended to convey. Jennifer shared, "I think about diversity a lot in what I do…we need to be careful and considerate with the images that we choose." She is conscientious when it comes to images of students, claiming her goal is to show a varied amount of gender, diversity, and ethnicity. Jennifer further shared that she feels both LMU and Seaver College use the aspirational approach, stating:

> There's an increase emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion so we want to show that we do have a diverse student population. The numbers are not necessarily there to support it. But we want to show in images that we do have students of different ethnic and genders that make up our campus. We want to show prospective underrepresented students that we do have minority students…the goal in showing diversity is to attract diversity.

Jennifer clearly ascribes to an aspirational approach, as she states explicitly that she chooses images not out of a concern for accuracy but rather from a desire to recruit diverse students.

David handles the same duties as Jennifer, but for the School of Education. When it comes to depicting diversity for the School of Education, David shared that the school has a diverse student body representative of the

demographics of California, so the team behind visuals is able to use the actual

approach. David shared their goal when portraying diversity:

> We are looking at everything we do through the lens of DEI and making
> sure that we capture diversity in all the ways that it means: racial, gender,
> economic, sexual orientation, ability and disability… When you look at
> our demographics, we are way more representative of the actual
> demographics of America and California…Most of what I try to do is
> accurately represent the school. In terms of racial diversity, it doesn't tend
> to be so hard to accurately represent.

Essentially, David suggests that portraying diversity in images is not about

distinguishing what is visible but involves more aspects than just physical

identities. Additionally, David employs the actual approach as the School of

Education has a racially diverse student population.

Both David and Jennifer have very similar roles in using a broad array of

images to represent current students of varying gender, race, and ethnicity at

LMU. They both emphasize the care and conscious effort that goes into their

selection of images. However, they use different approaches due to the different

demographics for each school.

Despite the different school and approaches, they both agreed that their

roles require showing diversity for recruiting diversity. Jennifer deploys

aspirational role model so that prospective students can see themselves at LMU.

Similarly, David uses the actual approach but also deploys the *aspirational role*

model, stating, "if you can't see it, you can't do." He argues that if prospective

students do not see themselves in the images, they are less likely to come to LMU. These administrators must navigate somewhat conflicting goals: represent what is happening in the college, but take steps to change what is happening in the college. Since prospective students heavily utilize the *aspirational role model*, Jennifer and David select such role models.

Rationale and Challenges in Aspirational vs. Actual Approach

Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) schools across the nation tend to struggle with maintaining gender and ethno-racial diversity. Seaver College is no different. Jennifer shared that the engineering departments in Seaver College have a diverse ethno-racial student demographic but are disproportionately male. In contrast, the science departments have a roughly equal mix of male and female students but are not as ethno-racially diverse.

Due to this, Jennifer shared that she uses the aspirational approach to attract students and demonstrate that the college does not have a *standard* type of student: "We want to have students that show creativity and personality, that there isn't one standard type of student at LMU…these photos do reflect some sort of reality at LMU, it is not a complete falsehood." The challenge with the aspirational approach for Jennifer revolves around planning and placing

photography. Before the new DEI initiatives, Jennifer would go into a class and

take pictures. But now it is different, she states:

> It requires more effort and skill with placement and coordination to make
> sure that images are inclusive…making sure the classroom has a balance
> of gender, race and ethnicity. I have to coordinate with photographer with
> the aim to convey the current students but not overrepresent one race or
> gender in the images of students.

Jennifer often conveyed in the interview that when it comes to DEI and

visual representation, there is constant planning, assessment, and reassessment

taking place. In other words, without consideration and planning, the images on

the website could potentially overrepresent one type of student and attract that one

type of student.

In contrast, David shared that the School of Education has less of a

depiction issue than other schools/colleges within LMU due to their diverse

demographics. However, he shared that while he deploys the actual approach for

most of the student representations, one area where they use an aspirational

approach is gender, as there are more female students in the School of Education

than males. This is common throughout all higher education in the U.S., with 60%

of all students being female (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center).

He shared that, at times, they do not have a male picture they can use on

their website resulting in the use of a stock image (purchased image, not of an

LMU student) to maintain their strategy of depicting diversity. He elaborated

further, stating:

> One area where we don't so great is gender diversity. This is not unique to School of Education but within higher education in general; it tends to have a higher female percentage. Attracting more men would be beneficial…The idea of balance and equality is tough because you have a certain goal you're trying to achieve, and ideally your pictures reflect where you want to be going without becoming a thing of it being a lie. It really becomes a judgement call for the decisions we make there.

In other words, David is saying there is a challenge in balancing the need to

attract prospective students with the need to be accurate. David also mentioned

that setting up photography requires a substantial amount of time and conscious

thought about what message they are conveying through the images.

Ultimately, David and Jennifer mentioned that there is a balance in dealing

with actual and aspirational approaches for visual representation. They may use

the aspirational approach to help increase diversity where it's lacking while

simultaneously trying to avoid misleading prospective students. Alternatively, the

actual approach requires just as much conscious thought; as David stated,

"whether it's an individual image or a collective of images, they all portray a

message." While they use different approaches for their units, both David and

Jennifer stated that they spend a lot of time planning, assessing, and analyzing the

portrayal of LMU through images.

Influence from Leadership and Prospective Students

When it comes to leadership, Jennifer mentioned that there is an emphasis from the marketing and communication department to actively assess if they are showing ethnicity and racial diversity in the photos they are using. When asked if she thought the aspirational approach would be a problem for incoming and prospective students, Jennifer states:

> LMU does have students from many demographics, the images are showing current/actual students not stock photography. We have the resources, programs and scholarship that cater and support underrepresented students…I think it [DEI and depicting diversity] is important to talk about it because if we don't, it could recede…From my perspective as a staff member, I want my boss to know that while it requires more work and effort in depicting and pursuing DEI in my role, but that I do feel it is necessary and important.

Jennifer conveys that she does not see an issue in LMU using the aspirational approach in targeting prospective students, as they do have students from different demographics. Additionally, the college can support incoming underrepresented students from underrepresented groups. Still, the aspirational approach does require more work of Jennifer.

Similarly, David stated that marketing and communications encourage them to constantly assess their work in visual representation; also, LMU's leadership and the strategic plan guide her department:

> We want to follow the strategic plan, *Creating the World We Want to Live in*—the world that LMU says it wants to live in is a more diverse and just world, and that's what we try to reflect in our communication. The hope is

that the practices of the school meet up with those words, but for sure in
the MarComm role, our job is to be very mindful of those things, even if it
means more work.

Essentially, the principles and mission of LMU are something the staff members
like David are trying to support and convey to their external audience. However,
David does express concern about the risks of an aspirational approach.

It's important to work on because if you are a person in a marginalized
community, and you're led to believe one thing through pictures and
words, then later your lived reality is different than what was depicted—it
would cause a lot of frustration and can create a feeling of being let down.

In conclusion, both David and Jennifer mentioned that depicting diversity
presents many challenges, both internal (following leadership and meeting
initiatives) and external (attracting but not misleading prospective students). They
shared how higher education is highly competitive, so they must recruit
aggressively to meet diversity goals. Whereas their approaches to depicting
diversity are different, they both have to spend a considerable amount of time
each day analyzing the verbal and textual messages/representations they are
responsible for communicating to both external and internal audiences. They both
believe that visual representations are crucial today, especially for the aspirational
approach. These interviews reveal insights that go beyond current scholarship's
exclusive attention to public-facing media.

CONCLUSION

Diversity is desirable in higher education. However, becoming a more diverse institute is not simple. Scholars like Ford and Patterson (2019) have conveyed that it takes diversity to attract diversity. Thus, to increase diversity, universities need to recruit diverse applicants by using the aspirational model. As reiterated by the interviewee, David, "for students to come to a university, they have to see it in order to want to be it." Even more complicated is the visual representation of race. Omi and Warrant (2015) claim people assess and associate others based on visual attributes such as skin color—which can add to complications with equality, biases, and inequities—based on the ocular nature of race.

Both visual representation and race deal with visual complexities. The conversation surrounding higher education's visual representation of student diversity exemplifies these visual complexities. Studies from journals on higher education, marketing, and diversity examine whether institutions accurately represent their student body demographics in their visual images. Results show that most four-year colleges and universities use the aspirational approach in depicting their student population and thus inaccurately represent current student demographics. Many researchers argue that the aspirational approach is a superficial response to the more significant issues of racial inequities and a failure to recruit students from underrepresented groups. These studies argue that

institutions should prioritize *accuracy* rather than the *aspirations* of the institution. However, these studies have not bothered to investigate the motivations behind misleading representations of student diversity. Prompting the question: is it better to accurately reflect the university at the cost of being exclusive and non-diverse, or to show the university's aspirations to become more diverse while potentially misleading?

I recommend the aspirational approach as the best solution of the two approaches for right now as the goal for LMU and other universities is to increase diversity, so that one day the aspirational approach for diversity may no longer be necessary becoming actual approach, even though the actual approach may be the most ethical, truthful representation. This is solely due to the goals of the representations. Why? It comes back to my choice back at LMU. It's better to depict diversity and start the change of making the campus a more inclusive community; to welcome all types of student demographics, rather than accurately portray the current student demographics and risk coming across as exclusive, monocultural and unwelcome. For universities to change their demographics, they need to commit to that change through actions. A university's visual representation is one of those actions. There currently is not a better solution beyond these two approaches. There is not clear approach that is both ethical and useful for depicting diversity and attracting diversity. Recommendation is to (as interviewees note) to be as ethical in the aspirational approach as possible.

Making sure that while the values and goals for the university are being presented, it doesn't stray too much from the reality of the current university experience. For example, if a university is made up of 90% White students, it should not use a flyer or marketing material that only portrays Black students. This portrayal does go against the reality of the university experience.

My study is one of the first to examine this dilemma, as the current studies primarily focus on accuracy in representation. There doesn't seem to be a noticeably published conversation around the challenges universities face in dealing with the balance of intention and reality for visual representations of student diversity. This thesis is not meant to condemn the current scholarship or any institutions' practices of depicting diversity. Nor suggest that any of these recruiting and representation tactics to increase diversity will solve the issues around the systemic racial disparities and inequities in higher education institutions. The primary aims for this study is create awareness and understanding around the challenges universities may be facing with depicting diversity, but also shift how other studies examine university's approaches for portraying student diversity.

Appendix A

LMU President Snyder's Letter

Beyond Words

June 16, 2020

Dear LMU Community,

I am honored to serve as your president as we uphold the values and mission for which we stand. In my letter "Speaking Up and Taking Action," I promised that our reflection would lead to action. The killings of Black people—of Rayshard Brooks, Tony McDade, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and many others—resulted from anti-Black racism. Today, I share the work dedicated to eradicating systemic racism at LMU and addressing the histories and systems of injustice perpetrated against people of color, while also taking responsibility for our institutional complicity in the perpetuation of white supremacy.

Action Through Listening and Learning

- On June 3, at the "Racism and Trauma in the Modern Moment" forum, hosted by Intercultural Affairs and attended by more than 600 community members, we learned important lessons from the voices of LMU's Black students and faculty. Among the concerns: we need more Black faculty and Black therapists, and we need to be more proactively anti-racist.

- On June 6, while participating in a Black Lives Matter demonstration organized by LMU students, I was reminded that the police violence and

systemic racism that infects our society by killing Black people is a system in which I, as a white person of privilege, am complicit.

- And last Thursday, on June 11, when I hosted the first of what will be regular meetings with Black student leadership, I learned that we have much to do to support our Black students to increase inclusivity and equity.

I am grateful and humbled by our Black community's leadership and willingness to impart its experiences, pain, and anger; I am not in a position to understand fully how exhausting and burdensome it must be, especially given the persistent nature of experience in a racist society. Amidst this understanding, LMU's duty to our Black students, faculty, and staff is, and will remain, steadfast. We are committed to a process of institutional transformation that addresses systemic racism and oppression.

Action Through Sustained Institutional Change

We will address systemic oppression and anti-Black racism in a comprehensive manner that demonstrates that Black lives matter. I am holding all levels of leadership accountable to ensure the following commitments:

- We will increase the diversity and inclusiveness of our LMU community and commit resources to doing so.
  - o We will hold ourselves to a higher standard of accountability, using an equity scorecard to document progress in recruiting and

retaining Black students, faculty, staff, and executive leadership. We will make the same commitment for members of other underrepresented populations.

- o We will add hiring for mission and inclusive excellence training for search committees and entire units for executive leadership and key staff positions, and we will accelerate efforts to increase the racial diversity of our governing boards and university leadership.

- We will assure that our organizational climate and culture are anti-racist, equitable, and inclusive, with particular attention to anti-Black racism.
  - o All units at LMU will analyze their infrastructure, policies, and processes and will report their findings and steps for change to the LMU community.
  - o We will increase our capacity to address and eliminate systemic racism and oppression and to build a more inclusive, equitable community through education and training. Units will be accountable to report commitments, action steps, and progress to the community.

- An LMU education must be unequivocally inclusive and anti-racist.

- o We will encourage the faculty to move toward a more inclusive, decolonized curriculum that addresses systemic racism and oppression.

- o We will mobilize resources to increase integrated curricular and co-curricular collaborations and partnerships for greater understanding and awareness of how systemic oppression is manifested across different sectors, issues, intersectional identities, and communities.

Ongoing and Imminent Actions

- As a result of feedback from the Racism and Trauma virtual forum, Ethnic and Intercultural Services and Student Psychological Services staff, including two Black therapists, Tracy Shaw, Ph.D., and Kristin Howard, L.M.F.T., are now available to address student concerns.

- We are increasing resources for cross-unit partnerships that will equip students for action and advocacy in the community as well as increase connection, engagement, and partnerships with the Black community in Los Angeles.

- This fall, we will begin a three-year President's Leadership Initiative to educate the community on systemic oppression and what an anti-racist education and climate entails, building on the Implicit Bias Initiative,

which was founded in 2016 and has continued since. A forum will be held in fall 2020 to launch the initiative.

- We will change the art and images in University Hall as part of a broader effort to ensure that LMU reflects more inclusive and diverse representations of our shared history and community, under the guidance of the Committee on Public Art and Images.

- As announced on April 6, LMU waived the ACT/SAT requirements for 2021-22 academic year applicants; we will extend this moratorium to include 2022-23 academic year applicants as we explore ways to further our commitment to access and equity in admissions.

- We established a feedback form for community members to share ideas or perspectives on how LMU may work towards an anti-racist, inclusive environment and education.

Day of Reflection and Action

This Friday, June 19, 2020, Juneteenth, the commemoration of the end of slavery, will be a paid university holiday. For our LMU community, I ask that it be a day of reflection and action. I ask that each of us attends a Black Lives Matter protest, volunteers for a social justice organization, donates to a bail fund, calls our representatives to demand that they support initiatives that seek to end police violence, registers to vote, or expands our understanding through reading or use of other media. I ask that on this day we learn about the lasting impacts of slavery,

including the lies associated with inferiority and supremacy, and that we pledge to create an organizational culture and institutional climate that honors Black lives. Please visit Intercultural Affairs' [Anti-racism and Inclusion Resources](#) page and the William H. Hannon Library's staff-curated [Black Lives Matter resource guide](#). Human Resources will share more information about the Juneteenth day off tomorrow.

Action through Accountability and Assessment

Intercultural Affairs, led by Vice President Jennifer Abe, will track and report our progress in a systematic, ongoing, and transparent manner that keeps our institution and its leadership accountable for these outcomes. Intercultural Affairs will seek close partnership with Black faculty, staff, undergraduate, graduate student, and alumni leaders, along with representatives from the Black Faculty and Staff Association (BFSA), the African American Alumni Association (AAAA), LMU Loyola Law School's Black Alumni Chapter (BAC), the Black Law Student Association (BLSA), and the Umoja Alliance, among others. While the assessment process will be guided, vetted, and informed by this diverse representation of Black LMU community members, we must ensure that the burden of leading this effort does not fall solely on those members–every member of the LMU community is responsible for helping to change the system and culture of the university. Analyses and equity scorecard reports will be generated by each college/school and division, in collaboration with the Intercultural

Advisory Committee. LMU will continue to refine its commitments with the abovementioned group of representatives from our Black community to ensure that their goals and concerns are prioritized.

As is so with all of American society and culture, our pathway to justice, and its clear goals, will require renewed and reformed reflection, conversation, commitment, and action. We must be sure that each of us holds each entity of our community—person, organization, program—accountable. We need to be open to calling out what needs to be called out, and accepting what others witness in our behaviors and actions as loci for revision. As actors within our larger society, we must do the same. Let us champion dignity. Let us champion justice. Let's get to work.

In solidarity, strength—and, always, love,

Timothy Law Snyder, Ph.D.

President

Appendix B

LMU Staff Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little bit about your job at LMU. What do you do?

2. How does "Diversity" come into play with your position? Does your role deal with depicting diversity (specifically of depicting the student body within their ethnicity, race and/or gender)?

3. I have come across a study in the *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* that "compared the actual racial and ethnic diversity of 165 higher education institutions with how they portrayed diversity in recruitment materials," finding majority presented inflated images of diversity to prospective students that were significantly different than the actual student body. Do you think this is the same for LMU? Does LMU portray inflated images of diversity in recruitment materials like the website?

4. Many studies seemed to echo that universities tend to portray racial and ethnic diversity of the student body that is "aspirational" or inflated – does this seem like a problem or something else from your role/perspective? Is there a deeper issue occurring - if so, what?

5. What is your goal or your interpretation of LMU's goal in depicting diversity? Or another way to phrase it, what do you understand is the purpose of depicting diversity at LMU?

6. Have there been instances or difficulties you have experienced when it comes to visual representation of the student body at LMU to the public/external audiences?

7. Have you faced any challenges with depicting diversity? How is it beneficial? Is it not always beneficial?

8. Do find it difficult to depict diversity? Does it seem like the only options are aspirational depictions (display a diverse student population that may not reflect the current diversity dynamic but aims to attract a more diverse student body) or actual depictions (display a less diverse student population that is more accurate to the current diversity dynamic but may be less attractive)?

9. Is there guidance or recommendations from the Deans of the Colleges, MarComm (Marketing and Communications), Admissions, Senior Leadership, or external consultants that you follow for depicting diversity?

10. Do you think there is another way to depict diversity that LMU should be doing? (Is there an alternative or different "solution"?)

11. Do you feel that this is an ethical dilemma or something else? Is it worth even discussing?

12. Do you think that other people at LMU or even outside LMU are aware or even view depicting diversity as an ethical dilemma?

13. With the new changes in the Anti-Racism Project (2021) within the new Strategic Plan for all departments – what is your department attempting to do to address DEI and how it deals with diversity in visual representation?

14. Is there any other information you'd like to add?

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