

# A Tale of Two Settings: Rethinking Methods and Approaches for Diversity Research

Michelle Samura, *Chapman University*

*In order to better understand the range of experiences of diverse college students, scholars engaging in diversity research must be mindful of our methodological assumptions. Existing research on environment and space suggests that the concept of a “setting” is not neutral or static. In this article, I emphasize the need to consider campus spaces as dynamic and fluid. I also suggest that depictions and reports of studies’ settings should capture diverse perspectives because different populations can view a single setting very differently. A singular version of a research setting may be inadequate. I offer an example of how one setting can be viewed in very different ways and reported in a way that captures the difference. The disconnects between institutional perceptions of campus space and students’ perceptions of a setting may offer greater insight into how diversity is experienced and understood by different constituents.*

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Several years ago, a former student from my ethnic studies class inquired about my research on Asian American college students. After listening to me describe my work and explain how I was developing methods and approaches that would emphasize students’ perspectives, he paused for a moment and then offered this thoughtful reply: “Yeah, that makes sense. We always read and hear about what different people have to say about Asian Americans. We learn the history and discuss the issues, but it would be nice to have someone listen to us. To hear the story from our end.” Even now, as I reflect on the student’s comments, I am reminded of the importance of students’ voices and perspectives in higher education research, especially for research on diverse populations on college campuses.

In order to capture diverse perspectives, scholars engaging in diversity research must be mindful of our methodological assumptions. We also need to develop updated approaches and methods, as needed, to better understand the

range of experiences that diverse groups of students may have. In this article I focus on one element of research methodology that often is assumed to be a given: the setting. Existing research on the related topics of environment, setting, and space clearly indicate that space is not neutral (Massey 1994; Harvey 1996; Lipsitz 2007) or static (Knowles 2003; Neely and Samura 2011). As such, depictions and reports of studies’ settings should capture diverse perspectives because different populations can view a single setting very differently. To illustrate this need, I begin by discussing the value of considering campus spaces as dynamic and fluid. Then I offer an example of how one setting can be viewed in very different ways and reported in a way that captures the difference. I share two versions of a study’s setting. One version is written in a traditional research format, and the other as a reintroduction of the setting as presented and understood by the students in the study. I conclude by discussing the implications of this perspective for future diversity research. In particular, the disconnects between institutional perceptions of campus spaces and

students' perceptions of a setting may offer greater insight into how diversity is experienced and understood by different constituents.

### On Space

Research from a range of disciplines such as architecture, geography, urban planning, sociology, and anthropology indicates a recursive relationship between people and space (Soja 1989; Keith and Pile 1993; Gieryn 2000; Gruenewald 2003; Knowles 2003; Lipsitz 2007). Critical geographers contend that the social is spatially constructed, just as space is a social construct (Harvey 1993, 1996; Massey, 1993, 1994; Kobayashi and Peake 2000; Tickamyer 2000). As such, space is not neutral (Soja 1989; Massey 1994; Tickamyer 2000). Many people assume that their meaning of space is uncontested or apparent (Massey 1993). However, meanings of space can differ from person to person.

In my research on diverse college students' experiences, I have developed and used the term "college space" to highlight spaces within the specific context of higher education (Samura 2016a, 2016b). I define college space as the interaction of existing practices and norms that are established by both student culture and institutional policies. College space encompasses connections between past and present meanings of higher education, as well as relationships and interactions among people and places. I also make a distinction between physical and social college space so as to distinguish between tangible, concrete environments (i.e. physical space) and various types and levels of relationships between people and/or places (i.e. social space). Social phenomena have physical manifestations in college space, and vice versa.

I draw upon two frameworks that connect space and race and are particularly useful for examining racial diversity on college campuses. The first is Knowles' (2003) concept of "active archive." According to Knowles (2003):

Space is an active archive of the social processes and social relationships composing racial orders. Active because it is not just a monument, accumulated through a racial past and present – although it is also that – it is active in the sense that it interacts with people and their activities as an outgoing set of possibilities in which race is fabricated. (P. 80)

From this perspective, space is more than merely a backdrop in which things happen. Space is comprised of layers of racial meanings. It is informed by past histories and present realities, which in turn, contributes to future possibilities.

The second framework that emphasizes the value of considering the fluidity of space is the theory of "racial space" proposed by Brooke Neely and me (Neely and Samura 2011). We built upon race-space connections made by Knowles (2003) and others (e.g., Delaney 2002; Gieryn 2000; Lipsitz 2007) and identified four key characteristics of space that also are key characteristics of race. Both space and race are contested, interactional, defined by difference, and fluid. In a supposedly "post-racial" era, these analytical overlaps of space and race enable researchers to uncover and examine in-depth issues of space that may also be issues of race. The element of our theory that is particularly useful for researching diversity in higher education is how space is historical and fluid. Meanings of race and space shift over time. Current meanings are informed by past meanings and will, in turn, inform meanings of space and race in the future. For example, in another publication I examined a phenomenon of a basketball court in a predominately white university's recreation center (Samura 2016a). The space drastically changed in composition and types of experiences depending on the day and time. In particular, the basketball courts on Saturday nights were mostly occupied by Asians, and this changed the dynamics and meaning of the space. If a researcher were to focus on such a

space, how would s/he report the study's setting? Would there be multiple versions of the setting?

### Two Versions of a Study's Setting

Given that space is an active archive and fluid, reporting on a singular version of a study's setting could be considered insufficient. To illustrate this point, I offer two versions of a setting from my own research. The mixed methods study focused on emergent meanings of Asian American racial identities among Asian American college students (Samura 2011). I used data from a large-scale multi-campus survey of undergraduate students' experiences, student-created photo journals (Collier and Collier 1986; Suchar 1997; Knowles and Sweetman 2004; Margolis and Pauwels 2011; Samura 2016c), and interviews (Kvale 1996). For the interviews and photo journals, I used a non-probability purposive sampling technique to recruit undergraduate students who self-identified as "Asian" or "Asian American." A total of 36 students participated as interviewees or photo journalers. Interviews focused on students' use of time and their academic, civic, and personal development. Over the course of one week, photo journalers took pictures of their worlds and also submitted pictures in response to 8 questions I provided. Representative questions included: "Where do you spend the most time?" and "Where do you not feel comfortable?"

#### *Version 1: Traditional Report of Setting*

Written in the style of traditional research reports, the first version of the setting includes type of institution, geographical location, and overall student demographics:

West University (pseudonym) is a research-intensive university located on the West Coast of the United States. At the time of data collection, there were approximately 21,000 students enrolled, of which 18,000 were undergraduate students. Approximately 54%

of West University students identified as female and 46% as male. The majority of students at West University identified as White (53%). Twenty percent of the student population identified as "Chicano/Latino," 17% as "Asian Pacific Islander," 3% as "Black," and 8% as "Other" or "Unknown."

This first version provides an overview of the study's setting from an institutional point of view. While it captures some elements of the study's context, important aspects of West University are missing. Most notably, students' perceptions of the setting are not presented. Diversity research, in particular, should consider the multiple views and experiences of participants. In a second version, I present the study's setting "from below" – that is, I report on students' perceptions of the space – particularly the perceptions of West University held by the students who participated in the study. I present this alternative version of the research setting in order to suggest that diversity researchers need to be mindful of *whose* setting is being presented. For students in my study, there were views of West University that were overlooked or ignored by institutional data and official informational materials produced by the school. In the following section, I provide an example of an alternative version of the setting.

#### *Version 2: Recasting the Setting*

Discussions with interviewees about West University's campus and the types of images captured by the photo journalers suggest that students encounter West University as a particular type of space. According to the students in this study, West University is primarily characterized by its location. When I asked them to describe what first comes to mind when they think of West University, the majority of the participants referred to its geographic location and the nature of the environment. Photo journalers, in particular, sought to capture and present this aspect of West University.

The beach was frequently mentioned. Joseph, a second generation Filipino male, submitted a photograph entitled: “View of Ocean” (see Figure 1) and explained: “West University has a great location, with campus surrounded by the ocean and nearby mountains. Further situating West University within the larger town, Victoria offered an image that she titled: “Lifestyle in [College Town]” (see Figure 2). It is a picture of a large, clear blue swimming pool lined by six palm trees. At the bottom of the picture’s frame are her feet, which suggests she took the picture

**Figure 1.** Joseph: “View of Ocean”



while reclined on a poolside lounge chair. West University’s idyllic location, accompanied by relaxed attitudes often attributed to beachside communities, seemed to be a reason students were drawn to this campus. In contrast to the larger towns or cities in which a number of its sister campuses are situated, West University was viewed as a smaller, isolated community, much in the same way that the city in which West University is located was portrayed. This

perception of West University may have led to students seeing and experiencing West University as a close-knit community.

Another frequent descriptor of West University was the party-going culture and the alcoholic drinks associated with the parties. The culture of drinking and partying was captured by the photo journalers, as they took numerous pictures of bottles of alcohol and of people with drinks in their hands. Interviewees shared mixed responses to the stereotypical image of West University as a “party school.” Several

interviewees said that even though they knew of the party and drinking reputation, they were surprised by the extent to which these activities took place. Lisa’s comments may provide a window into why this was the case for some students. Lisa explained how, before coming to West University, she had heard that the beaches are fantastic and that it is such a relaxing place. She also heard from one person that it is a “party school.” At that time, she did not take that person seriously. However, upon entering West University, she discovered that the school did live up to that reputation. This is how Lisa reacted:

*Ever since then, when I talk to people and people say, “oh, so which school do you go*

to?” *Right away when I tell them West University they think, “Oh, it’s a party school.” And I feel discredited because of it. I feel as if people just base my school off of that education. They don’t take me seriously...and [I feel] the need to break away from that reputation and try to prove to people that I don’t partake in the party scene or anything...*

In contrast to Lisa’s comments, other interviewees suggested that many West University

students have the unique ability to balance academics and “fun” (i.e., partying). They explained that students uphold a “work hard, play hard” mentality.

Finally, many participants commented on West University as a “white space.” Whether it was in classes or at parties, a number of

students noted their awareness of being a racial minority on campus and that the majority of the seats were filled with white students. At the time of data collection, approximately 53% of the undergraduate population identified as white. Interestingly, university system administration considered West University as one of the most racially diverse campuses among university system campuses.

Overall, when asked to describe West University, interviewees mostly spoke of the relaxed and laid back nature of the people on

campus as well as the beauty of the beaches and pleasant weather. Photo journalers also tended to portray the visually pleasing aspects of campus. In fact, the most frequently captured images were of West University’s campus. Students’ photographs presented a picture of the physical landscape of the campus. There were a number of photographs of the beach and campus buildings. There were seldom shots of ugly or unpleasant things such as trash or filth. One photo journaler did capture shots of graffiti on a

**Figure 2.** Victoria: “Lifestyle in [College Town]”



wall. Narumi’s photograph, together with her written explanation, highlighted the often complex and always nuanced outcomes of students encountering college spaces.

The vertical panels of the brownish gray, wood-imprinted concrete were the canvas for letters painted in bright green that spelled out: “XXXX.” The words were painted by hand and the color was starting to fade. A partially torn anti-war rally poster covered the bottom half of the letter “X.” Narumi titled this image: “‘XXXX’ Graffiti Near the Tower” (see Figure 3). She also provided this explanation:

*When I first came to this school, I was unaware of the image that West University had [a reputation] as a party school. After I heard that West University was a party school and witnessed some of the typical party behavior of the average student, I was slightly ashamed to be a West University student. However, as time passed and I adjusted to my*

Through this one image and the accompanying comments, Narumi offered insight into her complex relationship with this setting. First, she provided a window into her initial perceptions of West University, which included how she learned about the university's party school reputation. Second, through her expression of being embarrassed by West

University's

image, we gain insight into how she viewed herself. Third,

Narumi's comments on the "terribly juvenile event" that was unexpected of college students, expressed as though she was separate from these students, indicates how she positioned herself in relationship to other students. And finally, we gain insight into changes in the relationship

between Narumi

**Figure 3.** Narumi: "'XXXX' Graffiti Near the Tower"



*new environment, the campus and the people grew on me until I could truly say that [I] liked the school and couldn't imagine being anywhere else... However, this tagging event came as a surprise. It was a terribly juvenile event that I wouldn't have expected from college students. A similar event happened at my high school, and the graffiti was removed almost immediately. Yet, in contrast the school simply left it there. This probably demonstrates the laid-back atmosphere of the campus.*

and the space (i.e., embracing the campus and not able to imagine being elsewhere) and her updated understanding of the campus with a sense of acceptance (i.e., graffiti remaining indicative of West University's laid-back atmosphere).

### **Closing Thoughts and Implications for Future Research**

Had the setting of this study only been reported in a traditional research format by describing the broad landscape of the institution being studied, we would have a much less

nanced view of West University. Participants' views of the setting were an important piece to understanding their experiences as students of color at West University. Although details of the institution such as student demographics are valuable, students' perceptions of the setting should not be overlooked. The omission of participants' perspectives of a setting is problematic for research that seeks to examine students' experiences, especially students of color.

Future diversity research should consider including multiple versions of the setting when there are disconnects between an institutional perspective of a space and participants' perspectives of the space. Researchers also should consider the integration of methodologies that can capture multiple perspectives and complement more traditional methods of researching diversity on college campuses (e.g., campus climate surveys). As institutions of higher education work to foster diversity and inclusion on their campuses and researchers attempt to examine these phenomena, both campus administration and diversity scholars would benefit from viewing space as more than merely a neutral backdrop in which things happen.

A number of scholars have written *about* college students' experiences with diversity. University administration, faculty, and staff work to address diverse students' needs. While these remain valuable efforts, it is important that students' voices, particularly students of color, are not overlooked. It is imperative that research on diversity enables participants to "tell the story from our end." Rethinking how researchers view and report a setting is a worthwhile place to begin.

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*Dr. Michelle Samura is Assistant Professor and Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education in the College of Educational Studies at Chapman University. She also is the founding Co-Director of the Collaborate Initiative. Dr. Samura's*

*research focuses on the intersections of space, race, and education. She is particularly interested in how a spatial approach offers a unique lens to more effectively examine varying levels of power and a more accessible language to talk about the related dilemmas with which people wrestle.*

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