



DIVERSITY AT MASON

The Science of Diversity Project

Edited by Eden King & Liz Andrews

Series Preface

Founded in the spring of 2004, the Diversity Research Group (DRG) has changed with time. Its initial structure involved once-a-semester meetings of the many faculty, staff, and administrators across the university who shared an interest in the topic of diversity.

Recognizing that the university was both highly diverse and diverse in unusual ways, the DRG seemed a good location from which to consider the impact of diversity on higher education.

Over the years, members of the group collaborated on focus group sessions with students, analysis of institutional data, presentations at professional meetings, professional publications, undergraduate research projects, and the Diversity at Mason series, which included Student Reflections (2006), Valuing Written Accents (2007), The Fulbright Experience (2008), Student Research on Student Identity (2009), The Pursuit of Transformative Education (2011), and “A New Kind of International” (2015).

This seventh edition in the series explores students’ experiences in the Science of Diversity project. The SOD project is a collaborative endeavor emerging from the DRG, engaged over 25 undergraduates as active participants in all aspects of a social science research project focused on how diversity manifests itself and is experienced by undergraduates at GMU. The results of interviews, surveys, and a mapping project yielded important themes including: (1) a shared understanding of diversity as a “surface level” feature in our context, (2) a habit of self-segregation among peers, and (3) the generally supportive nature of encounters with faculty and staff.

Here students’ voices describe what diversity and student scholarship at Mason mean to them. The Diversity at Mason series continues to challenge the DRG and the university to build understanding of diversity in our community.

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Foreword: Engaging Undergraduate Researchers to Understand Diversity at GMU

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Student composition in higher education is increasingly racially/ethnically diverse. Since 1976, the number of students who identify as non-White has increased from 17% to 39% with demographers estimating a national population that is majority Latino within the next two decades (NCES, 2012). Higher education researchers have been building a consistent line of inquiry to examine and explain the impact of racially/ethnically diverse student populations concluding that diversity has a positive and relatively strong impact on student success. Having diverse student populations provide opportunities for cross-race interactions which have positive gains for student intellectual and social self-confidence, engagement, motivation, and more likelihood to retain and graduate (Clarke & Antonio, 2012; Gurin, Dey, & Hurtado, 2002). Diverse interactions have the potential to challenge existing views, stimulate perspective taking, and nudge students out of scripted cognitive modes (Gurin et al., 2002)

In line with this scholarship, the George Mason University community has emphasized the significance of diversity. In 2005, The Princeton Review named George Mason University as the most diverse university in the nation. The high number of students from different racial/ethnic groups as well as country of origin and positive results from a student-based survey led to this prestigious distinction.

Yet, providing access to students from a variety of backgrounds does not necessary result in successful completion of a college degree. In fact, students from non-Caucasian backgrounds are more likely to drop out of college. Completion is an area where Mason also thrives. EdTrust, a non-profit research group, released a report in 2010 that compared the six-year graduation rates of underrepresented minorities (URM) and non-underrepresented minorities (non-URM) . Mason has no gap in graduation rates between these two groups of students.

This finding is particularly important in context of national trends. Overall, 56% of students who enter a four-year university receive a bachelor's degree within six years (IPEDS). The overall rate is inflated by White and Asian/Pacific Islander students who have a 59% and 66% graduation rate respectively. African-American, Hispanic, and American Indian students graduate at rates at or below 47%. These numbers reflect graduation gaps of over 20%.

The Princeton Review distinction and the EdTrust findings imply that Mason is successfully serving students from a variety of backgrounds. But as a community, we needed to understand the specifics of how diversity at Mason interacts with the educational goals and how to successfully serve and support students from diverse backgrounds. To do so, a group of faculty engaged in an undergraduate research apprenticeship that sought to broadly examine diversity in the context of the GMU community.

In this Science of Diversity (SOD) Project, we engaged over 20 undergraduates in all aspects of a social science research project. These students acted in undergraduate research apprenticeships using participatory action research to examine diversity at GMU. The project was awarded a Scholarship Development Grant by the university's Office of Student Scholarship, Creative Activities, and Research (OSCAR).

The results of interviews, surveys, and a mapping project with over 500 GMU undergraduate student participants yielded important themes including a shared understanding of diversity as a "surface level" feature, a habit of self-segregation among peers, and the generally supportive nature of encounters with faculty and staff. The purpose of this volume of the Diversity at Mason series is to present the student researchers' perspectives of these themes and the project as a whole and, with them, to gain insight into the nature and meaning of diversity in our community.

The volume begins with Jorge Velasquez’s reflections on the degree to which students’ understandings of diversity align with the university’s espoused ideals. This description is complemented by Balca Bolunmez’s analysis of the physical campus spaces identified by students as “diverse.” Tierra Hollifield emphasizes the role that involvement in scholarly activities can play in enhancing student learning about diversity and Elizabeth Baires considers the impact of faculty diversity on student experiences. Finally, M. Liz Andrews, the graduate student director of the SOD project, synthesizes the voices of these student researchers and reflects on the broader themes about diversity at GMU that their work illuminated.

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What does Diversity Mean at GMU?

Jorge Velasquez

The Science of Diversity (SOD) is more than just a course offered at George Mason University (Mason); it was an opportunity to create knowledge and be a part of the research process from beginning to end. Not many undergraduates can say that they had this type of experience. What made SOD such an enjoyable experience was the unconventional method in which it was taught. It was not a typical class. The class was comprised of multiple faculty members, staff members, graduate students and undergraduates. There was never someone at the front teaching, we always sat in a circle and discussed. What we discussed mattered to all of us, diversity. At the core of this project, we all wanted to understand how diversity worked at Mason. Now I am in graduate school, and I can proudly say that my experience with the SOD project prepared me for the rigors of an advanced degree. I am currently a graduate student at a large public research institution in Tampa, Florida. Like Mason, my current institution has a very diverse ethnic and racial student body. My current institution prides itself on its diversity, just like Mason. I have come to learn that diversity is a buzzword in higher education across the nation. But what does diversity mean? Why is it important? These are some of the core questions the project attempted to answer, at least at Mason.

One of President Cabrera's pillars in the Mason I.D.E.A. is diversity. Diversity in the President's strategic plan is defined as "bringing together a multitude of people and ideas in everything that we do. Our culture of inclusion, our multidisciplinary approach, and our global perspective, make us more effective educators and scholars." However, what do students think about diversity in regards to intergroup and intragroup interactions at our university. Is it as elaborate and multifaceted as the President's definition?

Through preliminary findings it seemed that the President's definition of diversity is not congruent with student's perceptions and definitions of diversity. For the most part, students viewed diversity at a very surface level. What I mean by this is that students often defined diversity by mentioning or describing it as culture, ethnicity and/or race. For example, in short interviews a student said, "Diversity is what is happening in GMU right now. There are people from different countries, different states, different race(s) so that's what I call diversity ..." and another student stated, "I think I define diversity as people from different backgrounds coming together in the same place". This idea is reinforced by the overwhelming majority of students interviewed. Many students mentioned that diversity is composed of simply physical characteristics and culture.

Students' perceptions and definitions of diversity influence their interactions with their peers and the university. Diversity was seen by students as a positive presence that shaped the Mason environment and experience, for the most part. Many students who were interviewed saw that Mason's student population had a habit of self-segregation. This is seen in students' responses, one student stated, "I would say even though we're a diverse school there's really not -- each of our, I guess, different cliques. We just hang out with each other. There's really no intermingling of different cultures." The mention of cliques, small groups of people that spend time together and readily allow others to join, suggested that students intentionally choose to join groups and in doing so exclude themselves and others. This was reinforced when another student responded to the question "what is diversity?" by stating "Unfortunately some communities still stay to themselves even though they're (there are) like a couple people here and (they are) there that are accepted." Students are clearly aware that Mason's student body is racially and culturally rich, but there is a lack of intergroup interaction. The Mason idea of diversity states that we "bringing together a multitude of people and ideas in everything that we do..." and it is apparent by student's responses that we do in fact bring together a multitude of people, but lack in the realm of inclusion.

One student said, “Although I still believe that despite being the most diverse school we don't really interact with a lot of other groups of people meaning that our diversity is slightly ineffective,” perhaps suggesting that Mason does not provide an environment to foster intergroup interaction. This preliminary finding begs the question, why do students choose to self-segregate?

A common theme seen in students’ responses center around a sense of belonging and safety when they choose to form groups that are often perceived as cliques. This reinforces the idea of self-segregation. In an interview one student mentioned, “I don't really associate with like any other groups I guess because I just don't have any common like interests.” This quote simplifies why students decide to “self-segregate.” Students want to be with others who share similar interests and folk they can relate to. Perhaps, this inherently creates that perceptions of exclusion and inclusion that is seen throughout the data. Students do not self-segregate because they want to deliberately exclude others, they do so because they share commonalities with the communities they are apart of. In a long interview a student describes their ethnic community being a source support and safety.

“Obviously I think we – I'd always felt more comfortable with the Hispanic community. All my friends growing up have been Hispanic and I think that just – I was always more safe. I felt, I don't know what the right word is, but I felt more safe just being with a minority group and I was kind of overshadowed with the other types of people and nothing against them or anything – it's just I feel like we're common and so even if we're not related in some way I feel like we have the same interests or same culture, you know how our family interacts with us at home. Obviously, the language and just that's the best way I communicate with them.”

By self-segregating students are able to find a place where they feel supported and create a sense of community, but simultaneously this creates a sense of exclusion of others. So then is this a good or bad thing? In my opinion it depends. Students are not intentionally excluding others, there is a perception that the groups they form, sometimes based on racial, ethnic or cultural similarities, are not open to all students. Barriers of perceptions are what keep students isolated from one another and perhaps inhibit cross-cultural communication and interaction. Diversity and how it functions in particular contexts is difficult to explain, it is multidimensional and has many layers. It looks and functions differently everywhere you go.

Overall, it's seems that Mason is doing something right. Students seem to understand the diversity is important and it is a visible part of their college experience. However, there is much work to be done in order for Mason and its community to learn and benefit what it means to be one of the most diverse institutions of higher learning in the nation.

Where does Diversity Exist at GMU? Perceptions of Diversity from a Geospatial Perspective

Balca Bolunmez

As we live in the new digital age, many Internet media companies provide diversity rankings—among other rankings—to guide students through their college selection process. These companies also provide varying definitions of diversity. College Factual, for example, defines overall diversity as a combination of ethnic diversity, gender diversity, and geographic diversity. Niche states that overall diversity is a function of types of students, ethnicities, origins, and economic backgrounds. Forbes takes a more systematic approach and suggests that, “an ideally diverse school would have one-fifth of its population belong to each of five tracked [ethnic] categories (African American, Asian, Hispanic, White, American Indian).” A key question is what diversity means to students themselves. Science of Diversity Project (SOD) sought to answer this question by exploring students’ perceptions of diversity within George Mason University.

In SOD, we utilized a mixed method study design that involved qualitative analyses of short and long interviews, quantitative analysis of student surveys, and a geospatial analysis of student surveys that used campus maps. The details of qualitative and quantitative analyses are discussed in other essays in this volume. The focus of my essay is the last technique, geospatial analysis of student surveys that used geographical maps for data collection.

Our project took a geospatial approach to diversity because we argue that diversity is inherently a geographical concept, and thus understanding perceptions about diversity in a given place and the relationships among them can uncover new patterns of and explanations for behavior. In fact, the rationale for this argument was built during the early years of 20th century. Kurt Lewin’s field theory (1936) outlined the fundamentals of topological psychology and expressed the need to understand human behavior in relation to geographical spaces. Theories that were influenced by Lewin’s field theory (e.g., general systems theory, Von Bertalanffy, 1969; ecological systems theory, Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1995) commonly posit that people and their environments interact and understanding the nature of these interactions can help explain human behavior 10 (Hillier, 2007).

Research disciplines that rely on geospatial data (e.g., community psychology, environmental health) adopted the aforementioned theories and utilized geographical mapping techniques to explore human-space relationships. Extant research in these disciplines utilized one of the four mapping methods: keying survey-generated data into maps (e.g., Cardazone, Sy, Chik, & Corlew, 2014), visualizing census data (i.e., big data) through geographical information systems (e.g., Brusilovskiy & Salzer, 2012), having participants draw maps to tell their stories (Futch & Fine, 2014), and having participants mark areas on maps to answer various survey questions (e.g., Smith, Gidlow, Davey, & Foster, 2010). In SOD, we used this last approach, which I will call participant-defined mapping, to study George Mason students' perceptions of diversity.

To do this, we first invited undergraduate students to complete a paper and pencil task for small incentives (e.g., candy) and a potential larger incentive (i.e., enter drawing for one of ten \$25 gift cards). Students who agreed to participate (N=88) received a map of Fairfax campus and used different colored markers to circle locations on the map in response to four questions (each question is referred as a "category", hereafter). Each question was answered in a different predetermined color to reveal participants' diversity-related cognitions, as well as their emotions (i.e., affects) and behavior in reference to specific places. The questions, "Where do you see diversity?" (i.e., red category) and "Where do you see people from diverse/different groups interacting?" (i.e., yellow category) revealed participants' cognitions; "Where do you feel comfortable?" (i.e., blue category) revealed students' affect; "Where do you spend your time?" (i.e., green category) revealed their behavior. Upon completing the survey, participants were thanked and given the option to enter the drawing for one of the ten gift cards. Figure 1 displays an example of a map with a participant's responses.

After transferring the data from paper surveys to Excel worksheets, a dichotomous “place selected ” variable was computed for each building in each category (“1” if circled, “0” if not circled). Using this variable, a “total place score” (range = 0-88) was calculated based on the total number of participants who circled a specific place for each category. For example, a score of 20 for a building in the red category would indicate 20 individuals saw diversity in that building.

A descriptive analysis showed that the Johnson Center scored highest followed by The Hub and Student Union Building I (see Figure 2 for the top 10% in all four categories). Specifically, 89% of the participants indicated seeing diversity, 75% spending time, 74% feeling comfortable, 74% seeing diverse groups interacting in Johnson Center. In all other buildings and open areas of the campus, there were noticeable disparities between red category (i.e., seeing diverse/different groups interacting) and the other three categories. The disparities were observed even in those buildings that scored among the top 10% in the orange category (i.e., seeing people from diverse/different backgrounds interacting) (see Figure 3 as an example). This finding prompted us to compute correlational analyses among the “total place score” variables for each category.

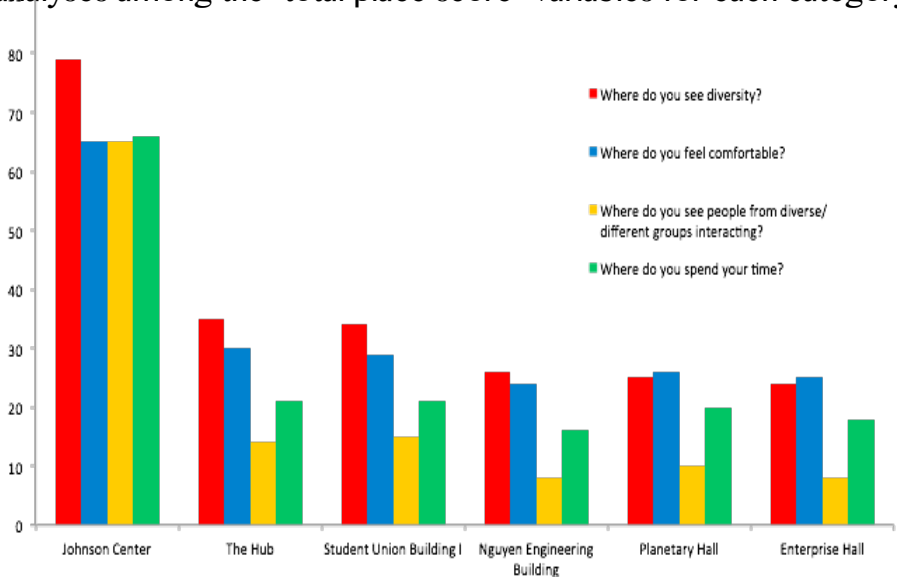


Figure 2. Fairfax campus buildings that scored within the top 10% in all four categories (“Where do you see diversity?”, “Where do you spend your time”, “Where do you feel comfortable?”, “Where do you see people from diverse/different groups interacting?”/different groups interacting?”

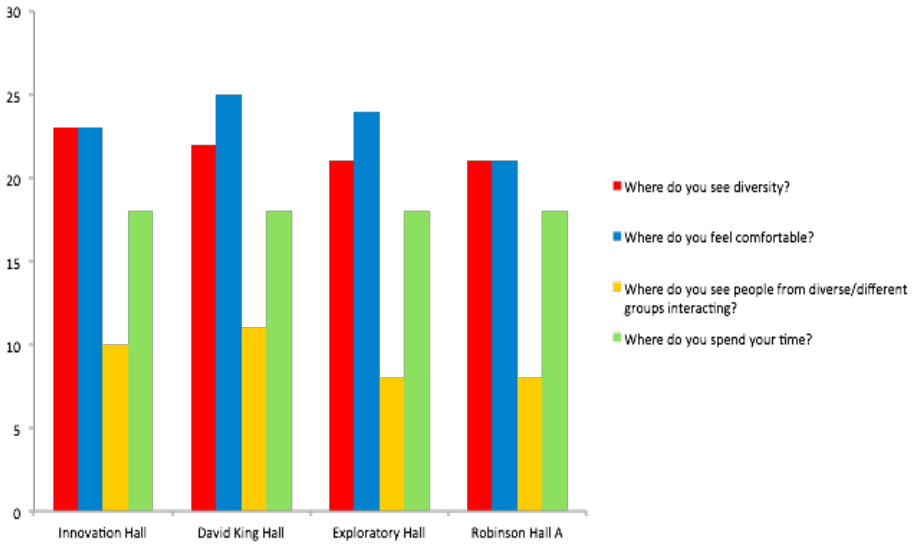


Figure 3. Fairfax campus buildings that scored within the top 10% in orange and green categories (“Where do you see diversity?”, “Where do you spend your time”, “Where do you feel comfortable?”, “Where do you see people from diverse/different groups interacting?”)

Correlational analyses revealed a number of significant relationships ($p = .05$, two-tailed). Overall, feeling comfortable in a place was correlated with seeing diversity ($r=.46$), seeing diverse groups interacting ($r=.46$) and spending time ($r=.21$) in that place. Seeing diversity in a place was correlated with seeing diverse people interacting ($r=.59$) and spending time ($r=.27$) in that place. However, seeing diverse groups interacting in a place and spending time in that place were not significantly correlated. In other words, where students chose to spend their time, they saw diversity. However, the existence of interactions among diverse/different groups did not necessarily relate to this choice and students chose to spend their time in a certain place even though the existing diverse groups did not interact with each other. Interestingly, qualitative analysis of data gathered from other segments of SOD revealed that students perceived their campus environment to be highly diverse (i.e., housing different ethnic groups), but they also indicated that people of different ethnic groups did not communicate as much with each other.

By highlighting the disparities among different data layers (i.e., cognitive, affective, behavioral), participant-defined mapping technique helped us understand how George Mason students perceived diversity and how these perceptions could relate to the students' emotions and behavior. The key conclusion from our geospatial analysis is that the lack of interaction among clusters (of students with different backgrounds) does neither seem to make the students uncomfortable in campus locations nor prevent them from spending their time in certain locations. However, this lack of interaction might also mean that diversity at George Mason is not fully utilized to increase our strength as an academic community. University Life has already implemented various activities and events to foster students' knowledge of different cultures. One example is the International Week that takes place every spring semester. Such activities, perhaps on smaller scales, could be spread throughout the year to give the students a chance to interact with peers from different backgrounds on a regular basis. Also, formal diversity training programs, where new and existing students can enroll in short lectures about different cultures, discuss aspects of diversity (e.g., diversity of thought) and interact with peers with different backgrounds could be helpful.

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How does Engaging in Diversity Scholarship influence GMU Students?

Tierra Hollifield

George Mason is an institution that prides itself for the diverse student population that it hosts. On the surface, this is quite apparent and advertised throughout multiple channels. However, how does the Mason community view "diversity" and what does it mean to our university? This question sparked the development of a project known as the Science of Diversity. Our research is a student-faculty collaboration created to explore into the minds of Mason students on the topic of diversity. Once we had recorded their thoughts, our goal was to hopefully understand student's perceptions of diversity in relation to the institution. This included various categories such as peer interactions, student-faculty comfort levels, involvement on campus, and various related topics.

We distributed surveys and conducted interviews with current students in order to determine their perspectives. There was one question-response category that stood out most to me. This section included questions regarding how comfortable they felt with the faculty at Mason and if there were similarities between the two groups. Remarkably, students voiced that while diversity is present within the student body, this is not necessarily reflected among the faculty and administrators employed by George Mason. Yet, their responses to questions such as, "Would you feel more support/comfort having faculty that were more similar to you?" were a resounding, "No I don't think it would make a difference." Personally, these were extremely interesting findings. As a former student, I can acknowledge that I did not have a variety of professors with different ethnic or cultural backgrounds nor additional faculty in leadership roles. With this being said, I do not regret those who have contributed to my educational accomplishments. However, it does raise the thought that I could have been severely limited to certain views, opinions, and shared experiences with the lack of diverse educators. If Mason is such a diverse school, then why is this not reflected in the educational system?

Before my involvement with the Science of Diversity, my perception of diversity seemed very narrow - people of different cultures and backgrounds coexisting, accepting, and respecting one another's differences. Reflecting on my feelings during the project, I did not openly participate as much as my peers and the faculty involved during group discussions. I felt uncomfortable because it was through this experience that I came to terms with one alarming detail. I had never discussed diversity at this level of intensity and intellect. I feared to offend anyone with my lack of knowledge, my unintentional ignorance towards this topic. I had never been exposed to such an opportunity, especially with people of color, people who experience issues of diversity on a daily basis, people who were so well versed in not only personal experience, but also educational knowledge on this topic as well. Since I was young, I understood how diversity was the interaction between different types of people. What I had not realized before this project is how I personally have been able to seamlessly move back and forth over the line of diversity whenever I wanted to. Many may not know, I am seen as "white," but I also have a Pacific Island background as well. My mother is from Chamorro heritage, but the pigment of our skin and certain associating features are not apparent with certain members of my family, myself included. Therefore, I can blend in with the whiter crowd, but I also have the privilege of embracing my ethnic side as well. The important idea to take from this is that I have not fully experienced issues of diversity because I have the privilege of choice. Including the choice to partake in certain majority "white" or diverse experiences, the choice to claim which side I want and when I want to claim it. However, it is obvious that not everyone has this luxury because it is a luxury. It is mind-blowing to possess the advantage of control over how people view you, to a certain extent.

Discussing the issues of diversity, discrimination, and other related problems, are so taboo in our society. To pretend that it is not happening simply because no one is talking about it does not mean that it does not exist. Clearly if there is such a lack of diversity in George Mason's employees, there is a questionable problem.

As for those with similar advantages such as I have, we should not take this privilege as something we are doing “wrong.” It is an awakening experience that we should use to educate other individuals with the same privilege so that we can understand our role in this issue and how to help to educate one another, empower one another, stand together with one another in order to better these flaws within our educational systems and beyond.

Considering my previous views, I can now see that diversity is not as one-dimensional as I had once thought. Looking at it more so as individuals with different backgrounds just being around each other and tolerating it. Presently, I feel that the project has opened my eyes to issues of diversity that I had either failed to see before or could not understand from where I was currently in my life. Diversity is more than just surrounding yourself with different types people – it is how diversity affects individuals as well. How people experience or do not experience it, embrace it or disregard it, confront the issues or stay silent. Diversity across students, educators, and administrators is what an institution should strive to provide for all who come into contact with it. If given the opportunity to be educated or mentored by an array of diverse individuals, I believe that I would not have had such unnerving feelings of discomfort throughout this project. If this were established at Mason, students would have more exposure to faculty and administrators who are more inclined to discuss diversity and the umbrella of ideals that it encompasses. Therefore, students could greatly benefit from this academic inclusion of diversity. It would provide an open a forum where students, teachers, administrators, and many others could interact, share, learn, and most importantly, educate themselves on the issues that may go unnoticed. It is vital to understand how often issues of diversity play into everyday situations that could eventually spiral into larger, more impactful issues.

The Hypocrisy behind GMU’s “Diversity”

By Elizabeth Baires

George Mason University (GMU) is extremely proud of its established reputation as one of the most diverse institutions in higher education in the nation, but how did the university gain this title? Diversity in itself has become this commodified notion that all Universities want to embody to attract donors, students, etc. GMU does not shy away from exhausting the title that they have attained. About a decade ago, Mason students—as well as students all over the nation—were given a survey that included one particular question about their school’s diversity. A large majority of our student population that participated in the survey answered that they believed themselves to be surrounded by a diverse group of students, and so began our reputation.

The Science of Diversity Project aimed to identify how Mason students defined and experienced diversity. In the process of conducting our research, students shared that they believe we have diversity at Mason, but how do they define it? We found that our student population has different definitions for what they thought the concept of diversity was. The definition presumed by most students is that diversity is a variation of people from different ethnicities and races. Simultaneously, there are a select few who believed it means a variation of students in different clubs, students of different classes, students with different majors, etc. Since the majority of the students feel attached to the idea of diversity being related to race and ethnicity, we then began to wonder: What do Mason students think about the lack of diversity in our faculty and staff? Do they believe they have missed opportunities as a result?

I am a student of color, I am a Latina female, and I am also a recent alumna of George Mason University. I find the lack of diversity in GMU's administration and faculty to be problematic for the students of color. I have experienced firsthand how this issue can be detrimental to not only student success, but also to the few faculty members that support them. Although I have experiences related to these matters myself, I cannot speak for the experiences of our entire student body. I found it surprising that when we asked students if they would feel more comfortable around professors who looked more like them in regards to race or ethnicity, most students answered "no or I don't think it makes a difference". This was a small section of our short survey, and I do not believe it was given sufficient attention by the students in comparison to some of the other questions. My personal experiences negate this finding.

Institutions of higher education need more professors, faculty, and administrators of color. It is not because people of color would do a better job than a white professor and boost the institutional quotas for faculty and staff of color. No. I have had fantastic white professors and many are responsible for my success as a Mason student. However, my most powerful role models and mentors were my professors of color. The folks who took a special interest in me, and cared for me the most were the staff and faculty of color. This is exactly where the problem lies.

First, the very few professors of color who are accessible to students have often found it necessary to take on the role of doing most of the diversity work at Mason. They have become the go-to people for everyone when a question of race or ethnicity comes up, and they are expected to take on the responsibility to be defenders of diversity and the intersectional issues that come with it. Not only does that affect their social setting at work, it also has the potential to limit the progression of their efforts. Realistically, educators already have difficult jobs and adding the responsibility of trying to break down hundreds of years of systematic inequality could burn anyone out.

Secondly, admission rates for students of color are increasing, thus creating a higher need for staff of color to serve as mentors. As a student at Mason, I had a mentor who I shared with at least 50+ students of Latino heritage, who was also responsible for advising all 10 of the registered Latino organizations on campus. I wish I were exaggerating. This woman was and remains responsible for supporting a large portion of the Latino community at our university. This is due to the lack of mentorship that we have for our Hispanic students. She has committed herself to us, and does a fantastic job at doing so, but that is not fair to her.

I would like to end by asking a question: How does George Mason not see the hypocrisy behind priding themselves in diversity, while failing to hire and support similar numbers of faculty and staff to support those that represent this diversity in the first place? If our students consider race and ethnicity to constitute diversity, and consider GMU a diverse university, shouldn't we take it upon ourselves to demand a higher ratio of staff, faculty, and administration of color?

Conclusion: Diversity of Perspectives

M. Liz Andrews

The President of George Mason University, Dr. Ángel Cabrera opened an event during the spring 2016 semester by addressing what he called the "elephant in the room" - the naming of the University law school after the late Supreme Court Justice, Antonin Scalia. Upon the announcement of the naming of the school, the Internet raged with angry commentary and jokes about the University honoring the conservative Justice, who wrote opinions in opposition to things like gay marriage and affirmative action. President Cabrera stated, "Our agreement to name the school has absolutely nothing to do with our commitment to diversity and inclusion, which are core values of who we are as a university." Cabrera's statement raises questions about what it means to center diversity as a value at Mason.

Four years earlier, in the fall of 2012, the Science of Diversity Project sought to understand what this strange term - diversity - meant for Mason students in their everyday lives. I served as the Graduate Assistant for the project and was continuously impressed by the students' ability to be both in favor of diversity and critical of merely accepting it as a fact of their environment.

I witnessed the development of complex analytical thinking skills in many students and attribute this to the student-centered structure of the Science of Diversity Project. During the first semester, the students developed our research themes, drawing from their experiences and insights as students. They translated these themes into research questions to investigate how mentorship, intergroup relations, leadership roles and classroom dynamics shape the undergraduate student experience of diversity at Mason. They also did reading and wrote briefs about relevant literature on the topic of diversity in higher education. In the spring of 2013, they developed several research protocols including short (~4 min.) and long (~28 min.) interviews, an online survey, and a unique campus-mapping method. In order to give voice to the Mason undergraduate experience on many levels, they were excited to use quantitative (survey), qualitative (interview) and experimental (mapping) research methods. It was a true learning experience for all of us in participating in multiple types of research as well as applying for and receiving IRB approval.

One of the most exciting parts of the project was the third semester, fall 2013, when the students recruited their peers in the Johnson Center for the project, conducting interviews and guiding participants on their mapping exercises. They successfully collected 458 surveys, 50 short video interviews, 32 longer audio-recorded interviews, and 88 maps. In the final semester of the course, spring 2014, the students got to see the results of several semesters of work, analyzing all the different types of data for results. At the end of every semester, all of the students contributed to a public oral presentation to the George Mason community, updating invested faculty and staff about the project.

The students who participated were very invested and even asked for a longer meeting time after the first semester. They brought not only personal experience but also knowledge from numerous different majors such as Criminology, Law and Society, International Affairs, Psychology, and Economics, among others. Students said again and again that they felt more empowered in this course than any other because the faculty centered their knowledge and opinions. The course was also made more accessible and useful to students in several ways: we provided them with textbooks, the students could choose to register for no credit for free or get up to 3 credits for the course, and they all received a research designation on their transcript for the course. This was made possible by the excellent and multifaceted support of OSCAR (Office of Scholarship, Creative Activities, and Student Research).

As a faculty-student team of researchers, we had many conversations about the obvious existence of many people from different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds among the student body, to name a few. What troubled many of the student researchers, as well as the students they interviewed, was the dividing lines that continue to exist between people of different identities. Many students expressed the belief that Mason's diversity exists on a surface level - the school is the academic home to many different people but there aren't school-wide structures in place to ensure that students engage one another across groups. It was inspiring to see the students see this phenomenon of "segregation" from many different angles. On the one hand, students felt frustration around the ways people tend to stay with those who are like them. On another, many recognized that it is essential to have spaces that celebrate and honor the particularities of one's ethnicity, culture, sexuality, etc. The ability to hold multiple viewpoints alongside one another was a real and positive outcome for the student researchers.

I am proud of the work we did with the Science of Diversity Project because it empowered many students to see that they could be researchers and investigate topics that are interesting and important to them. As a graduate student, I was learning many of these lessons alongside our students and have drawn on much of what I learned to develop my dissertation project. Perhaps most importantly, the Science of Diversity team initiated what I hope will be a series of continuing conversations about a thing we claim to value so highly but often goes unexamined at the university.

President Cabrera's remarks about diversity were followed by contrasting views expressed by the speaker he introduced - Prof. Tricia Rose, a scholar of U.S. culture who was visiting campus to give a keynote address. The first question she was asked after the talk was about the naming of the law school after Justice Scalia. Prof. Rose presented a different view of the subject: "I think it matters what we name our institutions. Scalia has stood large against the expansion of rights of many groups of people. I would be concerned because it sends a signal. I would be disappointed."

It is vital for students, faculty, and staff at the university to carry on dialogue about what it means to uphold diversity as a core value. It may be possible to grasp multiple views on the subject, but it is essential to have those conversations. The Science of Diversity Project sought to engage in just that type of work. It is important for the administrators of our academic community to listen to the students and continue offering them opportunities to create knowledge about the institution.