Author:
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Title:
Relations of Diversity in An All-Female Dorm

About the Author:
I am a 21 year old junior currently living in an all-female dormitory.

Abstract:
My study focused on the relations and interactions that occur between female residents of different racial groups in an all-girls residence hall. In this study I pinpointed what interactions take place in a residence hall, and with whom the interactions are or are not occurring. I found out that Caucasian girls do not interact as often with Latina and African American girls, as Latina and African American girls interact with each other, though Latina girls interact with Caucasian girls at greater length than African American girls do. I also realized what can be done to further the interactions between female residents of different racial groups, specifically what programs can be implemented and focused on to further the diversification not just in residence halls, but on campus in general. These programs are inclusive of making programs such as the Girls Series Talk mandatory for residents to attend. Also, implementing more multicultural activities for students to engage in.

Initial Exercises:
Q: How do you think about the University? How have you imagined it in the past and what do you think of it now?

My earliest feelings regarding the University of Illinois were fear and apprehension. I did not know much about the university, and I still was nervous about coming here. For one, it was not my first choice in schools because it was so close to home. Several people had even assured me that it would be like another four years of high school since there were quite a few people from my high school coming to the U of I. So, I also felt discouragement upon choosing the university. Once I was on campus, I felt completely overwhelmed. The most overwhelming part—oh my, the size! Thus, as a new student on campus, I felt hesitant about making new friends or any friends for that matter. My first year I lived in a living/learning community called Global Crossroads. When I initially found out I would live on a floor with other international girls I was kind of disappointed. This was neither my first nor second choice. I threw it in as a last choice because my sister convinced me to do so. But, I had not real interest in living with international students. I wanted my friends to be as American as possible. I wanted friends who looked, talked, and acted just like me. I even dreaded meeting and rooming with my roommate, Miho, a Japanese girl who I discovered spoke very little English.

My first few weeks living in the dorm I was very shy and introverted. There were lots of students from all over the globe living on my floor, and I had no particular interest to meet any of them. Yet, I remember one particular night when I finally started talking to the girls on my floor. There was this one particular girl who was from Ghana, and she had been living in the US for over five years. I remember the first thing she said to me after noticing that I was noticeably uncomfortable around the other girls. She told me that I should really try to get to know the other girls, and not try to look for only "other black girls" to hang out with. And, eventually after much hesitation...I did. And thus began the best year I have had in my college experience, so far. I made a lot of true friends and great acquaintances my first year, a few of those who remain my close friends to this day. Though my closest friends were still American, I had met people that I would not have met otherwise, had I not been in Global Crossroads. This gave me an extremely favorable view about the university. This was also one of the first things that struck me about the university—the level of diversity I had seen. It was amazing and very refreshing to see. Had I gone to another university, I may not have seen and met so many people from such diverse backgrounds.

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Date: September 22, 2008

Time: 6:00 p.m.

Participants: Martha (M) and Dana (D)- roommates
1. Obtain access. We consulted with each other first to determine which apartment location would be the closest, like in reference to the quad. We determined that Denise had the closest location to the main quad, and access to her apartment would be easiest for Diana and me. We then set up a day and time that would be convenient for each of us to observe her roommates making dinner. Denise emailed us with her apartment address and contact information, letting us know that her roommates would commence dinner promptly at 6 pm.

2. Record your assumptions. I had no real assumptions about what I would see. I just assumed that two of Denise’s roommates would make a traditional dinner, perhaps something like a pasta dish. I had no prior knowledge at all about Denise’s roommates, so I figured going in “blind-folded” would give me the best advantage in observing their movements and interactions. I did wonder how her roommates would react to being observed, and whether or not they would act naturally, or feel intimidated by our presence. I had hoped that they would be friendly, and that we would not make them feel too uncomfortable.

3. Take notes on the overall setting. The apartment seems fairly new, though the outside appears worn and it smells quite repugnant, probably due to the party atmosphere of the complex. The kitchen is a small, but a good size to maneuver around. It is an open area, joined with the living room space, but separated by the line where the tiles and carpet area meet. It includes a counter top that curves around in a C-shape, oak-colored cabinets, an off-white refrigerator, a black and white dishwasher, and white wall paint and white floor tiles. There is a black waffle maker on the counter top, and matching towels with colorful bottles on them are draped on the oven door handle. There is a gray-colored, aluminum steel, medium sized pot on the stove top. D wears a rosy pink top and sweatpants with valentine hearts, and brown flip flops. She is medium height and build, has a thin face, and dark brown hair. M is dressed in a white collar tee with a light yellow camisole underneath. She has on dark blue jeans, partly covering her red-colored toenails. She is a bit more heavy set than D, and has a fuller face and is shorter by a few inches. She also has dark brown hair.

4. Describe the activities and record the body language.

6:00 pm

M pours oil slowly in the large brass pot and moves pot around so the oil swirls around. She opens a container of seasoning and holds it up before pouring it into the pot.

D watches M and shakes her head at her. She holds on to the table with her left hand.

M takes pot off the stove, constantly stirring it.

D takes over stirring.

M switches back to stirring while D opens the small tomato paste can. M puts water into the pot.

D pours tomato paste into the pot, and takes a paper towel to wipe off her hands.

M pours more water into the pot.

D stirs.

M pours more seasoning into the pot.

D stirs, then steps back and folds her hands, standing with one foot on top of the other.

M puts in seasoning and tastes the soup.

6:33

M sits in a sofa chair, while D sits on the arm of sofa chair with her legs dangling on the sides.

D and M turn towards each other and talk.

M takes off her headband and then places it back on her head.
D briskly rubs her face.
M puts her arm around the back of the sofa and plays with her hair constantly.
D gets up to check the pot and turns toward M.
M gets up and grabs an oven mitt.
D stirs pot, M stands there with the oven mitt.
M sits back down in the sofa chair with the oven mitt still on.
D returns back to the arm of the sofa chair, sitting Indian-style now very relaxed, sitting with her legs tucked in.
M plays with the oven mitt and rubs her feet together. M plays with her hair with the oven mitt still on her hand.
D reaches forward to grab the oven mitt.

6:48 pm
M opens up the fridge to get a yogurt. M goes over to the drawer and grabs two spoons. M gives one spoon to D.
D takes a spoonful of yogurt and makes a face. D then gets another spoonful.
M gets a spoonful of yogurt and continues to eat the yogurt. M returns to the stool.
D plays with her spoon.
M finishes yogurt and tosses the container in the garbage.
M tastes the soup in the pot and pours more salt into it. M sits back on the stool. M then walks over to the counter and looks at the back of the salt container. M then goes out to the balcony and whistles. M returns and stirs the soup.
D plays with her hair, still seated on the sofa chair, and wiggles her feet.
M tastes the soup, puts it in a bowl and gives it to D.
D also tastes the soup.
M finishes the sample in the bowl and goes back to sit on the stool. M plays with the vase on the table next to the stool.

5. Talk with your partner. We immediately recognized that D and M had a wonderful working relationship in the kitchen as well as in general. This is evident when observing their close proximity throughout the meal preparation and thereafter on the sofa chair. Both girls remained quite stationary in front of the stove, often times turned towards each other. Also, when waiting for the soup to finish cooking, M sat on the cushion of the sofa chair while D sat on the arm of the sofa chair, instead of sitting on four available and empty stools. Both girls’ movements were almost in synch. Whenever M was next to the stove, D was always right to her left. As well, both girls would leave the kitchen at nearly the same time. Besides their alternation of checking the soup’s readiness, D and M moved in very similar directions at simultaneous times. Though M was clearly more aware of where utensils, seasonings, and other ingredients were in the kitchen, she and D occupied the same space quite frequently. However, it was apparent that D was receiving instructions and guidance from M, and that M was the more frequent cook as well. So, it was quite clear that M was more dominant and comfortable in the kitchen domain. Similarly, M was also more dominant in the conversations. She did not over power D so much in conversations, but we could definitely tell that M was a much more talkative person, while D enjoyed listening and laughing at M’s comments.

Discourse Analysis
After looking at the introductory paragraph for the Senate Committee on Equal Opportunity (EQ), one is led to believe that the committee’s goals are to promote equality among students, specifically in reference to minority students. However, after reading the second paragraph, the definition of equality for minority students seems to focus more on a comfortable environment and less on a diverse environment. At first, the committee’s questioning of whether or not they should allow first-year students to have a preference in regards to selecting their residence seems to be geared towards a positive discussion of diversity. They further show consideration to issues of diversity through their belief that taking away this opportunity from incoming freshmen will result in isolation for minority students. However, they ignore the reality that most freshmen students do not even get the dorm that they choose, and are often allocated elsewhere anyway. So, how minority students could avoid isolation when they often do not even get their choice seems quite implausible. Furthermore, it is very misleading to head this paragraph with the subtitle “Campus Diversity” when the committee seems to be neither emphasizing it nor promoting it, claiming that it is doing so at the expense of minority students’ comfort zones.

The next section is under the subtitle “Diversity in the Dorms” which as of now already seems like a distant ideal, second to making students feel comfortable in their environment rather than promoting them to integrate with students of diverse backgrounds. So, first the committee addresses restructuring the assignment process of dorms to reiterate diversity. But, once again it cautions against focusing on diversity without making sure that students are provided the atmosphere of comfort. It continues this emphasis toward individual preferences rather than diversification by using the example of pairing students with roommates. The committee believes that students should be paired with other students who have similar interests. Moreover, to reiterate once again the need for students to feel comfortable instead of challenged by unfamiliarity, the committee explicitly states that they “pair roommates by class, college, and curriculum”. What is interesting about this statement is that it does not necessarily create an environment of comfort. The assumption that someone will feel comfortable with a roommate who has these similarities just does not hold. Furthermore, to promote further the need for individual accommodation, the committee points out how upperclassmen no longer have to worry about being placed in dorms they do not want to be in, and how they have the opportunity to decide. In this sense you get the feeling that housing diversity weans after students are no longer freshmen because they are no longer “forced” to live among a diverse group of students.

However, the committee does focus attention on integrating cultural differences. The committee speaks about developing a new living and learning community, which is the current community Global Crossroads. They briefly describe the makeup to be 120 students that are equal in the ratios of race and gender. They also describe programs of diversity, one in particular, “Mix It Up”, in which students were “given a colored bead as they entered the dining hall and [were] encouraged to sit at the table with others with the same colored bead”. Programs like this are instrumental in mixing up the student body, but what happens when these programs and initiatives are done? Often times, students return back to their familiar space and comfort zone, and this occurrence seems to be okay with the committee. By this acceptance, the commitment which accords itself with endorsing diversity amongst students also recognizes that they should have a choice to engage in diversity. These ideals seem to contradict one another, even though it seems fairly obvious that you cannot force a student to engage in diversity. Yet, when the promotion of diversity is weak, it only reiterates the need for students to focus on their own interests and similarities. And, the committee endorses this right.

Even further, the committee seems to be pointing a finger at the students as if it is their fault that there is a lack of diversity on campus, and one gets the feeling that they are saying “we can’t force students to integrate”. This is evident towards the end of the “Diversity in Dorms” section in which the committee notes that “internal segregation occurs not just in housing but all across campus”. It seems to be a cry that, see it is not our fault that diversity does not exist in housing because it does not exist outside of housing either. However, the committee stresses that there “needs to be [an emphasis] placed on bringing people of different backgrounds together”, yet it does not truly pose an answer to this predicament. Though there is no correct answer or solution to this problem, the involvement of different groups in solving this issue of diversity seems to be limited. There are meetings held with different groups represented by minority organizations, cultural centers, residence halls, and the Greek system. And, though they do add that diversity has begun to increase, they neglect to clearly show how that has occurred. The committee even admits that “there continues to be segregation” and further points out that “the continued segregation sometimes occurs due to students migrating towards others with which they are most comfortable”. So, the committee recognizes this problem; however, they still endorse the need for students to feel comfortable in their environment, specifically minority students. I feel that until the committee recognizes that this is a problem in itself, and they endorse complete diversity which involves students feeling uncomfortable and out of their comfort zone, diversity will continue to progress at an extremely slow pace. The committee’s insistence on comfort for minority students not only isolates them, which is what they ironically wanted to prevent, but it also allows for them to feel okay about not diversifying their involvements. The committee needs to change their goals and revamp their purpose to actually “improve the status of minority groups in the University community” in relation to the goals of diversity.
Project on Student Life and Culture:

After looking through several yearbooks dating back from the 1950s, I was immediately struck by the lack of diversity shown in the student body. Particularly, I took great notice in the lack of diversity that existed in female dormitories. One dormitory in particular that grabbed my interest was of course, my own. Lincoln Avenue Residence Halls or LAR was a sadly underrepresented dorm by minority females. Most of the females were Caucasian, and there was usually a sprinkle or a small group of African American students in the various hall photographs, and even a few Asian students as well; however, there seemed to be little else diversity. This was so interesting to me because by observing my surroundings thus far, this being my first year at LAR, I have seen quite the opposite. I have seen a fair amount of African American girls, Asian girls, some Latina girls, and a few Middle Eastern girls as well. Even though as far as diversity, LAR could be even more diverse, I feel it has come a long way since the 1950s. This discovery reminds me of how I felt in the beginning of my college journey. I was so anxious about just finding “my group” to fit in with that I was unconcerned about meeting people from different cultures. What I really wanted was to live in an environment that resembled that of the photos in 1950 of LAR, a dorm where the majority of students looked like me, and perhaps there was a sprinkle or two of Caucasian or Latino students. Though I was not so completely naïve to believe this would actually occur, I did believe that my exclusive group of friends would fit that description. However, after living in Global Crossroads, my environment proved to resemble that of LAR, one of diversity, actually one that had much more diversity than I had supposed. So, though I had hoped on a 1950s environment of largely segregated space, I actually got a current up-dated version of diversity which I now greatly appreciate.

Keeping the focus on the differences within a dorm in comparing two different eras, I also looked at and discovered the differences in looking at a space from the 1950s versus that same space today. As far as the physical space differences between the 1950s and now, they were quite obvious and apparent. Looking at pictures and captions from the 1950s regarding the actual space of the building, one could immediately see the parallels and the contrasts. It was interesting to discover that a caption on the archives website underneath a picture of an LAR lounge described the lounge as an area “where the girls meet and talk, or just rest”. This is interesting because this description actually probably was more realistic back then than it is now. The lounge areas on the floors are pretty crummy now. The lounges are drafty, medium sized rooms that resemble a triple room in LAR. There are four desks located within the lounge, along with the most ancient looking lounge chairs that have horrendous green tint cushions. That is all. I was told that there was a TV in the lounge last year, but I guess no one used it enough to keep it in there. In fact, the lounge is visited so infrequently that most new comers don’t even know it exists. Though I was unable to access the picture online, I was able to view a picture of the main lounge or lobby from 1951. It resembled a lobby that could be located within a hotel. The small tables that we have in our lobby now were non-existent, and instead the lobby was filled with large couches and coffee tables, and even carpeting—now it is all wooden floor. Everything is arranged so meticulously down to the perfectly straight placed curtains and the floor lamps that are equally distanced apart on each wall. Yet, even though the layout of the lobby has changed, it has still maintained its “classy” appearance. The lobby still has couches, but smaller ones that usually seat a few, and sofa chairs dominate the space now. This could be indicative of the more individualistic approach that students have towards college life. Further, tables dominate the main space and are the focal point of the room—so it functions less as a waiting space or a place of relaxation and more an alternate spot to study—i.e. electrical outlets next to the tables to plug in laptops.

After further evaluation of the 1950s lobby, I just got the feeling that this room did not feel like a student space. It was too restricting, though there was plenty of open space. But, the look of the room seemed to display a feeling of coldness and restrictedness—as if one would violate the rules if they spoke at all. Even the items within the room gave off the sense that this was a room for serious study. Located on a table stand next to a large sofa there was a folded newspaper next to a pair of 1950s cat glasses, which was clearly reminiscent of the time back then. Also, I saw what appeared to be a glass ash tray on another coffee table, though the photo was a bit blurry. This room definitely did not seem like a space for students at all, considering the stiff and tidy appearance versus the usual function that a lobby serves for students today—a space of comfort and convenience in which to study and relax. Like the change in diversity, I found it refreshing in the amount of change that has occurred in the lobby. I believe it creates a more relaxed feeling for students and encourages students to actually use the lobby, instead of seeing it as a room for strict study and casual but quiet relaxation. This lobby also has reassured me of my expectation before I arrived here that I would be able to have a common space in which to socialize as well as study with friends. I have noticed this in the new arrangement of the lobby. The tables in the lobby hardly ever are empty, and are hardly ever occupied by a single study. Usually a group of friends are studying together. So, though the floor lobbies definitely need a tweaking, it is nice to know that there is an informal communal space for students to interact with one another.

University Narrative

The section, Transforming Illinois, within the Diversity and Inclusion portion of the Chancellor’s office work on diversity
initiatives had a definite connection to my Illinois narrative about equal opportunity for students. The section focuses on finding ways in which diversity and inclusion of the student body can be achieved, similar to the way in which the narrative on the Senate committee of equal opportunity laid out one of its goal to be that of creating campus diversity. Both articles have a strong focus on creating and furthering diversity through specific initiatives. In the Transforming Illinois section, the focus is on four specific initiatives or thrusts as they are called. These four thrusts include: improving the education and workplace environment, increasing representation, enhancing scholarship, and expanding community and public engagement. The Senate committee’s initiatives are implementation of equal opportunity and affirmative action programs and development of guidelines that would aid in ensuring that minority students continue to increase in numbers and status. Both initiatives point towards bettering the overall campus environment by increasing diversity, whether through enforcing affirmative action measures for minority students, or by focusing on specific goals that foster the inclusion of the entire student body. I believe that looking at this as an issue that involves the entire campus and turning towards an inclusive approach is much more beneficial because then it does not just focus starkly on one specific group of students. Achieving diversity is impossible without involving all students, and sometimes by favoring certain students over other students, it creates more problems in matters of having students become more likely to embrace diversity. That is why I feel the Transforming Illinois initiatives are sounder, especially considering they are worded better. They don’t focus on a specific group of students. Rather, the initiatives point out various segments of improvement that can be relayed to the entire student body, such as improving the education and workplace environment. They don’t just pose doing this for minority students, but for “all members of the campus community” in order for them to “thrive personally, professionally, and intellectually”. In this respect, the need for making students and campus members feel comfortable does not just center on making minority students feel comfortable, but achieving a level of comfort for all students. Also, by taking this all-inclusive approach, it takes away the stigmatization that comes with labeling minority students as victims, and rather than point the finger or single out specific groups for “protection”, it relies more on the basis of creating an environment that is safe and comfortable for all students and community members. However, one of the initiatives does point to increasing representation of underrepresented students, which still remains a central focus for implementing diversity. The initiative speaks about increasing the representation of students, faculty, and staff from underrepresented groups in regards to recruitment, resources, awards, etc. Another plus to this narrative versus the other narrative is that it includes working on diversity and inclusion within staff and faculty also, not just within the student body. It makes sense that for diversity to keep its momentum, students need to able to work with educators who also have the same goals of inclusion. So, while this narrative had a correlation to my narrative as far as furthering diversity, it also differed in its approach to reaching the goal of diversity—focusing on inclusion of the entire study body in the process rather than implementing policies that would foster growth for minority students.

Question:

Q: What are students' experiences of diversity in a woman's residence hall?

Plan:

How does programming in housing effect student diversity? How will an increase in positive interactions between students benefit the overall university environment?

How do African American, Caucasian, and Latina females interact with one another in various settings?

Other Q's that will be pertinent in the course of my study:

How do they interact in the communal bathrooms? What about in the hallways? What is the racial composition of those who leave their doors open? What is the racial makeup at a single dining table? Whom is cordial with whom?

Assumptions:

I believe that through the interviews I conduct, I will see that both Caucasian and African American students see the need for more diversity and want to be involved in advancing diversity on campus. However, I believe that African American students will stress the need for diversity more than Caucasian students, and also will have a more negative view towards the lack of diversity. If also believe that Caucasian students will identify more diversity on campus in comparison to African Americans who probably will say that there is a greater need of diversity initiatives on campus.

Data:

Well, after finishing just one interview, I already feel that this interview will be especially vital in providing examples of how students do or do not engage in activities and relationships of diversity. What I found that verified my assumptions were the fact
that my interviewee did not have a diverse group of friends. When asked to describe her friends physically, she exuberantly described them as being “blond with blue eyes”, and hesitated upon my asking her to describe them racially. She responded as I assumed she would, by describing all five of her closest friends as Caucasian. Furthermore, I found it interesting that she talked about having no quarrels or qualms with any girls on the floor, though upon observation, she tends to hang around the other Caucasian females on the floor. She said she got along well with everyone, and had no clashes whatsoever with anyone on the floor. This could be attributed to her easy-going and friendly personality, or the fact that she engages with specific individuals on the floor, and therefore it would seem likely that she would get along with “everyone on the floor” based on her view of who she identifies with as friends, whereas someone else may view them as people who engage in casual conversation. I also believed that when asked about diversity on her floor, the interviewee would mention just about every ethnic, or racial group to emphasize that there was diversity on the floor. This assumption proved true when the interviewee named just about every ethnic, or racial group represented on her side of the floor—she mentioned Mexican, though there are only two Hispanic females on her wing of the floor, both of which are her roommates. She also mentioned Indian, which is representative of one female on her wing, as well as Taiwanese, which also includes just one female, and Chinese, which includes a couple of girls on her wing, as well as European, which includes a fair amount of girls on her wing.

What was surprising about the interview was that when I asked the interviewee if she felt that the school’s makeup itself was diverse she said she assumed that it would be more diverse, considering it was a state school, which I found was an interesting contrast to the answer she gave previously about diversity on her floor. I believe that she sees more diversity within the dorm versus the overall school because the makeup at her dorm is actually more diverse, and also because it is much easier to identify diversity in your immediate surroundings, than to judge diversity on what you can’t see altogether. But, the most surprising response to me was when I asked her if she ever experienced culture shock as a Caucasian student. I asked this question kind of half-heartedly expecting her to respond shyly or embarrassingly no. However, I was shocked when she responded that she had experienced culture shock immediately upon arriving here. An out-of-state resident, she arrived here later than most students, and as a result registered just a few days before move-in with international students. She said because she was in the minority amongst the international students, she immediately felt a sense of culture shock and out-of-place. She said she found it “nice” and quite funny to be in the minority for once, though she said it with nervous laughter. So, this information that I have collected so far will greatly help me in developing how students see diversity and how they either approach and embrace or shy away from diversity—and I also help to know and find out why and what are their reasons for either embracing or shying away from diversity.

Thus, I end this analysis with one final response that I found both very refreshing as well as interesting. When asked if she believed there was true diversity on this campus, she replied that no, because there are not persons here that are represented from each country. I found this refreshing that she would take this approach. It was possible that perhaps she mistook the question of total diversity to mean that of complete representation of every single country, which is a definite and possible interpretation. Yet, I feel that this reflects how she at least identifies that there is a greater need for diversity, which is what she implemented in her answers, and she seemed to show that she wanted to have a hand and posed an interest in achieving such diversity.

**Discuss:**

How does one define diversity? Is it the physical appearance of a community’s members? Or is it something much deeper and more defined than that? In particular, how does one determine the magnitude of diversity emphasized within a residence hall? In My Freshman Year, Rebekah Nathan develops her definition of what she believes qualifies as true diversity within a college campus. She attributes a successful diversity to be one that is not only dependent on the university population being reflexive of the general population, but one that relies on “students becoming more involved in the lives and issues of that diverse population”. Furthermore, she adds that the ideal of a successful form of diversity lies in the “hope that all students will develop friends and have important conversations with those of backgrounds and ethnicities different from their own” (Nathan 58). This definition of a successful diversity is also what I feel defines true diversity within the campus environment—students of different racial backgrounds being able to interact with each other, and not just learn about each other on a surface level, but truly learn and interact with each other on a much deeper level. Thus, I have devoted my ethnographic research to studying these interactions and identifying their existence or the lack thereof, as well as pinpointing why these interactions do not occur as often as they should. I have decided to limit my focus specifically on an all female-residence hall, which I will call GirlX Hall, comprising my observations of females to focus specifically on three racial groups: African Americans, Caucasians, and Latinas, but referencing other racial groups as well.

Before moving to GirlX Hall my junior year, I lived in a coed dorm, an experience that I rather enjoyed. However, because the coed dorm did not offer single rooms, I decided to apply for a dorm that did. Upon my friend’s discovery of one of the few and last available single rooms left, I decided to apply to live in GirlX Hall, a hall I heard described as a quiet place to study, with a heavy population of African American students. I had some feel for GirlX, having eaten a few meals in the dining hall, and I especially liked the hall’s lobby area because it resembled that of a hotel lobby. So, I decided to give GirlX a shot. Upon arriving at GirlX, I
had some apprehension, as do most students in an unfamiliar environment, about making new friends. Also, after cruising my floor
annex, I observed that all but two of the girls on the floor were freshman, so I immediately felt a bit of regret and fear of having to
interact with and relate to these “youngsters”. So, at first I was standoffish, eating dinner and interacting with friends from previous
years who lived at other dorms or apartments. I cannot even recall the moment where I truly started to interact with the other girls on
my floor, but once I started to strike up casual conversations with them and let down my guard, I begin to engage with them on a
more personal level. Soon, I had girls confiding in me like a big sister, as I engaged with the girls in activities like impromptu “play
fights”, and conversations about crazy, dysfunctional family members, and eventually dinners at 6pm everyday like clock work.
Even though I felt like I had developed great relationships with a good majority of the residents on my floor, I still felt apprehension
when it came to approaching or speaking to certain individuals who did not come across as very inviting or friendly. But, I had to
evaluate my own approaches to speaking to them as well. Did I come across as unapproachable to them? Why did I have a harder
time interacting with certain individuals as opposed to others, specifically why did I interact more easily with my Latina neighbors
than with any of my other neighbors? This sparked my interest in what exactly the interactions or lack thereof between girls of
different races in GirlsX Hall showed as far as the reach of diversity on campus. I had recognized that there were moments of
tension on campus between different race relations, but I wanted to know how these same race relations transferred in the home
domain of campus, specifically with female students.

I focused my attention on specific areas within GirlsX Hall to further study race relations between female residents. The interactions
I observed were in communal areas like hallways, the lobby area, the bathroom, and the dining hall. Hallway areas were particularly
interesting because they differed depending on the location of the building. Looking at the hall on my floor, I observed various
interactions between girls of different racial backgrounds. But first, let me describe the racial makeup of my hallway. On the left
side of the hallway there was an Asian girl and her middle-eastern roommate, three sets of roommates who were Caucasian, me
(African American), and two Latina girls and their Caucasian roommate. On the right side of the hallway, there were two sets of
Asian girls who were roommates, two sets of a Caucasian and Asian girls rooming together, and two Caucasian girls who were
roomies. So, at physical glance, the floor did seem like a pretty diverse mix of ethnicities. Yet, most of the interactions were limited
in their scope of diversity. For one, interactions between Caucasian and Asian girls heavily dominated most of the interracial
communications. I myself became aware and privy to the ease with which both “Americanized” and a few international Asian students
interacted with Caucasian students. I did not see this same ease occur between Latina and Asian students, or Latina and white
students, and the same with African American students. In fact, there were relations of tensions between Latinas and Caucasian
students on my wing. Natalie, a Latina resident on my wing, referenced various times when she would hear derogatory statements
made against other racial groups by her Caucasian neighbor. She would hear her neighbor speaking to other girls on the floor
making racially derogatory comments like, “Why do Hispanics always smell like laundry detergent?” or hear her referring to her
skin tone after getting a tan as “looking like an Indian”. I myself often felt coldness from some of the Caucasian and Asian girls on
the floor, though the Caucasian girls in general were particularly friendly. The RA on our floor, Carmen, a Latina sophomore, even
admitted that Asian girls tend to stick to people who look like them, and two African American girls I interviewed also complained
about the stares and non-responsiveness of Asian girls they received. However, both Caucasian girls expressed I interviewed
expressed no such occurrence whatsoever. Samantha, a Caucasian freshman on the floor, believed that everyone on the hall got
along pretty well, and there was no clashing. As well, Jenny, another Caucasian freshman on the floor, said there was never any
fights, and that “I get along okay”, and everyone’s really nice to each other, no one wants to cause drama. She also referred to the
atmosphere as one where everyone is on the same boat and “we can all relate to each other on the same things”. So why is there
conflict between particular racial groups as opposed to others? I surely believe that had I interviewed and included Asian girls in my
study they too might have expressed feeling hostility from African American, Latina, and even Caucasian girls. So just in
speculating, perhaps this non-communication between Asian girls and Latinas and African Americans can be attributed to a lack of
awareness about one another or even fear of branching out to get to know someone. Or, perhaps it focuses on these girls
overcoming a fear of the unfamiliar. However, I found this reasoning immediately shut down by the RA Carmen who seemed quite
adamant about placing the blame on the “non-interactive” Asian students who she readily identified were “the international ones”, all
with the exception of one Asian international student on our floor who was particularly talkative and outgoing. She said that it was
just a cultural matter—Asians are taught to be more private and not so open. This generalization made me wonder if she were in fact
implying anything about the rest of us—as if we all were raised in culturally different ways. Did in fact all African American, Caucasian, and Latina families raise their children to be more talkative and open? Is this perhaps why I often felt ignored and
invisible to some of my Asian neighbors and found solace and acceptance with my Latina neighbors? Were they more attune to my
openness about life? I had neglected to think that it could be culturally motivated in this way, and yet I could not live with this
reasoning. I believed that it was more so a person’s character and personality that either attracted you to them or drove you away, not some cultural bias. Not every Asian person I had interacted with, international or not, had been standoffish. In fact, I had some
excellent interactions and experiences with fellow Asian students. Yet, in general the interactions that took place amongst students
did reiterate a segregated and stereotypical pattern of interactions. These interactions had “less to do with personality than with
shared circumstances and shared demographics” (Nathan 57). As Amanda, one of my African American interviewees had pointed
out to me, you stick to who and what you know, regardless of whether or not you could meet someone of another race in which
you might have more or just as much in common with.
This method of segregation, this time more racial than cultural, carried over into another locale of GirlsX, the lobby area. The lobby, a room full of small tables, sofa chairs and couches, which doubled as both a study and lounge area, featured spaces of segregation amongst those who were studying or doing homework, those who were lounging around waiting for their guy friends or dates, or those who were just talking with friends. It was an open area so usually it drew in various residents, but the number of residents varied depending on the time. Earlier, you would normally find single residents studying, doing homework, relaxing, or snoozing before or after their class. But, usually around the time of dinner, between 5 and 7 pm, groups of students would pour in to “study”.

At this time, you could see the segregated study groups—African Americans, Caucasians, and Latina girls who most often studied with their friends. Occasionally you might see girls from different races studying together, but it was more out of necessity—if you wanted to do well on the exam, don’t study with a friend. Otherwise, the lobby was more of a social space for same race friends to casually study and talk about the course of the day, gossip about other friends or roommates, or meet with same race male friends or companions.

The communal bathrooms on the residence floors also served as social spaces, though less segregated. Besides places of necessity to “potty” and shower, the bathroom provides a space in which girls of different races can and do engage in conversation. Usually, the locale of conversation is the countertops space with several rows of sinks. Girls gather here to wash their faces, brush their teeth, and talk to residents who enter in through either side door that connects the two adjacent hallways. Most talk between residents of different races is casual. Talk centers on difficult classes, annoying professors, or is even relegated to simpler communication—a quick hello or a friendly glance. Girls who are of the same race tend to have more elongated conversations. These conversations include what party that went to over the weekend, and whether or not the party was “lame or whack”, or “really jumping”. Also, amongst African American girls I noticed that the conversations center on issues of hair care. I myself tend to engage in conversation quite a bit with other African American girls in regards to how they keep up their hair. This area of talk about hair amongst African American girls tends to be a taboo area of conversation with Caucasian girls. Too often I heard African American girls mention that Caucasian girls just do not understand when it comes to explaining to them issues about their hair. Either they view African American girls’ hair as completely foreign to that of their own, or they show genuine interest in learning about the differences and similarity in their hair versus their own. However, it becomes a topic of disinterest for African American girls to talk about with Caucasian girls because it is often frustrating to explain. Amanda, an African American sophomore, commented that when one of her black friends was drying her hair in the bathroom, a Caucasian girl in the bathroom turned to her and said, “We didn’t know you guys did that”, and she became very frustrated by this girls inquisition in regards to her hair care. This exotizing of black hair is something I too have experienced when speaking with my other race friends, even in explaining my hair care to my Latina friends who I inaccurately believed would have a better understanding of my hair. In one incidence, I referred to my hair as being natural and discovered my friends could not understand what they meant, and furthermore became disgusted with me when I told them I would go weeks without washing my hair. It was at times like these that I felt I could only discuss issues about my hair with my black friends. Moreover, it is instances or circumstances like this when it just becomes easier to talk with people of your same race, people who you know will understand you. Though you do find girls who show genuine interest in unique issues about you in regards to your racial background as the RA Carmen told me when one of the residents on her floor asked her what it meant to be Mexican, it does at times become frustrating to explain what one often identifies as arbitrary characteristics of their life.

The clearest form of racial segregation was in the dining hall. Girls of the same ethnicity who were spread out on their floors were instantly brought together within the dining hall space. It was as if the dining hall were a place to identify one’s racial match and sit and commune only with them. Of course this unspoken rule was broken at various times, but in general the tables in the dining halls were very segregated. So, who segregated in the dining hall? African Americans were a very segregated group in particular. Both of my African American interviewees admitted to interacting with girls of other races on their floors, but when it came to interacting within the dining hall, I observed that both girls only ate with other African Americans. In particular, Amanda even acknowledged that she did not interact with other African American girls on her floor because they [African American girls] “tend to be catty”. She said rather she interacted quite a bit with her Asian neighbor who she described as very cool, and her Caucasian neighbor who she referred to as tough, but funny. However, once brought into contact with her African American friends, she could not leave her realm of comfort. This was the same problem with Christina, a freshman African American. Christina, who came from a predominantly white area, said she had no problems interacting with students from diverse racial backgrounds because in high school she had been the minority and remembers going to and hosting slumber parties in grade school with girls from different racial groups. However, she said upon coming to the university she experienced a unique type of culture shock. This shock was related to her being around “her own people”, an occurrence in which she responded with shock and awe. She expressed that she had never experienced having friends who lived in the inner-city and she was very pleased by gaining the experience of finally being around a lot of African Americans. Thus, Christina would not pass up the change to be around other African American students who looked just like her, something she was not use to but found extremely fascinating and comforting. Whereas African Americans felt comfort being around their own, Latina girls often blended with other African American, Caucasian, or Pacific Islander girls in the dining halls. According to Carmen, there just weren’t enough Latina girls for them to form their own social groups. Also, Carmen felt that the African American population of girls in GirlsX Hall was quite large and their community was so
strong and interactive. She did not feel the same for the Latina population stating that, “I don’t feel Latinas are that united”. As far as Caucasian girls, they also tended to be segregated, but their groups were commonly integrated with Asian or Indian students.

Apart from segregation in various locations within GirlsX, I also wanted to take a look at other instances of interactions between the girls. As far as student involvement in general within the hall to further diverse interactions between the girls, there were various programs and activities set up by the RAs. One such event that I attended on a Thursday night around 8 pm was an event entitled, “Race: Let’s Talk About It!” This event took place in a comfortable, rec room in the basement area of the hall. As I entered the room with my Latina friend, Antonia, I immediately saw a large amount of chairs arranged in a circle in the center of the room. As well, there was the large array and spread of “goodies” to entice residents to attend the meeting. However, after looking around the room for a few minutes, I saw very few residents pouring in. In fact, the only residents present were myself, Antonia, and two African American females, one of whom grabbed a sandwich and then engaged in conversation at a distant table with an African American male who appeared to be her boyfriend. As the time crept past 8 pm, the RAs decided to search the halls and recruit residents to come out to the talk. After hearing insistent yelling and prodding, more residents began to slowly pour in. However, the trend of residents pouring in struck me with great disappointment. The large majority of these residents were African American. So, as to come out to the talk. After hearing insistent yelling and prodding, more residents began to slowly pour in. However, the trend of residents pouring in struck me with great disappointment. The large majority of these residents were African American. So, as everyone began to settle in their seat, I decided to take a tally of the residents in attendance. The tally goes as follows: Black: 14, White: 2, Latina: 2, and Other: 1 (A middle-eastern female). After taking my tally I nudged my friend Antonia to show her the tally. Everyone began to settle in their seat, I decided to take a tally of the residents in attendance. The tally goes as follows: Black: 14, White: 2, Latina: 2, and Other: 1 (A middle-eastern female). After taking my tally I nudged my friend Antonia to show her the tally. She responded with a slight smile and a sympathetic giggle, but turned to me and quietly said, “Where are my Latino people?” I answered her quickly with a sarcastic and accusatory “I don’t know” in which I knew she would not take offense, but I clearly was irritated by the lack of diversity in the turnout. Before we began the talk, an African American RA, immediately expressed her disappointment in the turnout but said that we would commence the talk nonetheless. As residents first arrived in the room, the RAs told each resident to write a question and place it in the discussion box. So, upon commencing the talk, the only Caucasian resident in attendance who happened to be an RA, began to ask the questions. Because the residents in attendance were overwhelmingly African American, they dominated the discussion questions regarding race. Most of the discussion centered on how African Americans felt they were treated on campus, with most students describing their interactions as hostile and others providing explanations to these interactions or more benign examples of their interactions with other students, students in particular who were Caucasian. The only Caucasian resident in attendance in turn expressed her feelings of guilt in the response to the African American residents’ experiences while the only other Latina resident in attendance, Carmen, tried to include her similar experiences as a Latina student on campus. Later on during the talk a Caucasian girl came in, looked around, and obviously began to observe and scribble down notes in her notebook. After 20 minutes, she left. After the talk was over I wondered what could have been done to draw students of diverse backgrounds to the talk besides African Americans. Perhaps they were frightened by an event that was entitled a talk about race, or felt they would be going down a guilt trip like the RA who attended. Or, it is a possibility that they could have missed the flyers that were put up in the halls, or they were once again frightened by the flyer display which featured the word “race” in large, bright colors. Upon interviewing Carmen, I decided to ask her why she felt the turnout was so low and what could be done to increase the diversity of turnout in the future. Carmen felt that students, who she identified as non-minority students, were probably frightened and scared away by the talk. She also said that perhaps they needed to put on the next flyer that this event is open not just to minorities. As I laughed at her suggestion, she responded she was quite serious about this because it was ridiculous that they, in which she referred to “they” as Caucasian residents, did not show up. When I asked Carmen what could be done to form a community of diversity, in which girls of different racial groups could interact with each other on a constant basis, she expressed that it depended on the girls. She continually pointed out that as an RA, she and fellow RAs could only do so much. She expressed her disappointment in planning programs with fellow RAs and finding out that these programs only attract certain racial groups, like the race talk. She discussed possibly conducting a survey in which she asks students why they are so afraid to talk about race. Rebekah Nathan, author of The Freshman Year, addressed this question in her ethnographic study—how race “Is typically ignored as a topic of conversation in mainstream college culture, treated as an invisible issue and with silence” (Nathan 60). Further, Nathan mentions how students “were willing to tell intimate details of their sex lives than discuss race relations on campus” (Nathan 60). This was evident when I discussed different programs hosted in GirlsX with the African American resident Amanda who attended the race talk and said the turnout for the talk about sex and interracial dating was more racially diverse than the race talk.

As I looked at Carmen throughout the interview it was hard for me to acknowledge her as a Latina student. Upon meeting Carmen initially at the start of the semester, I found myself playing the guessing game as to what her ethnicity was. Furthermore, after hearing her speak, my own biases and stereotypes set in, and it became even more complicated for me to pinpoint “what she was”. So, I placed her in the category of Greek or Mediterranean. All this changed when Carmen put up a display board in the hallway that featured the country from which her family originated from. The display board showed various pictures of Venezuelan inhabitants, inclusive of a picture of her nephew eating a Venezuelan dish. My perspective of Carmen changed immediately. No longer did she feel distant to me or unapproachable as she had before. This unapproachable vibe that I felt Carmen had given out had nothing to do with her personality, she was extremely kind, outgoing, and down-to-earth. But, initially my misappropriation of her as of Greek or Mediterranean nationality made her a stranger to me, considering my own ignorance and lack of contact or communication with peoples from that background. My ability to see her as Latina made here more accessible to talk to and made
me feel more comfortable around her because I had Latina friends. This bias of mine, and my insistence on feeling comfortable around specific groups of people made me readily accepting to the possibility that Caucasian students felt they could not talk to, much less discuss issues of race with minority students such as African Americans and Latina students, with whom they did not feel comfortable being around. This need for comfort level was also evident when I talked to Carmen. Carmen said that when minorities walk into a room, what is the first thing they do—“we look for people who look like us”. She also stated that minorities do this instinctively, even without thinking about it. If it were the other way around for Caucasian residents, would they too engage in the same behavior instinctively? If they believed that the turnout at a race talk would be overwhelmingly full of minorities, would they want to attend? It’s obvious in this regard that students are in fact intimidated by one another, and more specifically intimidated by who and what about each other they do not know. This intimidation is what stops them from interacting with each other—fear of what they can come to find out about each other. Or, it could possibly be fear of finding out what one is missing by failing to interact with another, or learning the truth or reality about an individual apart from what one thinks they know about someone from looking at their racial background.

However, a commonality I found interesting in conducting these interviews is that every single interviewee claimed that they want to learn or interact with someone from a different racial group, but the means to getting there always came across as problematic. This was especially the case with Amanda, the African American sophomore who attended the talk and spoke quite forcefully and boldly about the conditions on campus that affect African American students. What was physically interesting about Amanda was that at first glance I guessed Amanda to be a very fair-skinned African American with perhaps a very “high-yellow” parent or relative. But, after asking Amanda if she experienced any culture shock upon attending this university, she responded, “Not really, I don’t think so. My grandpa is Italian, and my mom always dated outside her race. Oh, and I have two white uncles.” This relevant, but not entirely surprising information was of interest to me because many people shun and keep their distance from people of other races when in fact their own families or lineages are actually diverse. It is interesting how people can so readily dismiss or ignore that their own differences within their families have no correlation to how they view other people of other races. But then again a familiar face is not approached in the same way that a stranger is. Amanda made this readily understandable to me when she insisted that it was not entirely her fault that people of other races did not engage in conversation with her. She talked about instances of walking into the main lobby of her building and getting direct and stark stares from white and Asian girls. “Why do they stare?” she declared to me strongly and defensively. “Do they feel threatened, live off stereotypes, think I will yell at them?” she continued. She did say that she had more positive experiences in interacting with other girls than negative experiences. “Once I talk to other people they’ll say you’re cool, won’t jump down your throat”, she assured me. She also expressed great delight and happiness in a Halloween pajama party that she and her organization had sponsored. When I asked her about the turnout as far as racial numbers were concerned she readily exclaimed, “Turnout was great!” She also spoke about other events that were planned by the RAs, one such event was a talk about interracial dating in which she said the turnout was surprisingly diverse. However, she believed that the race talk showing was not diverse because she felt that people are usually uncomfortable and get on the defense when discussing certain issues. She said that these issues are especially “touchy subjects for whites”.

I found that one of the reasons that people also attributed their lack of interactions with girls of other races was because of their history or background with either previously engaging with others of another race at a young age, or being completed ignorant of or not engaging with other children of another race at all. In Amanda’s case, she moved around to three or four neighborhoods in which African Americans always were the dominant group. Though she interacted regularly with her mom’s boyfriends of different races, she hardly ever interacted with other children her age who were from different racial backgrounds. She provided an example of such an interaction. One of her mom’s boyfriends, whose ethnicity was Mexican, took her and her brother to a park in a predominately white, Irish neighborhood. She said this was her first time being around white children, and it left a lasting impression on her. She said that none of the children would play with her or her brother, but she immediately stated thereafter that this “didn’t hurt my character”. As well, it is common that students who enter the university with fellow students from their high school tend to stick with those students throughout their college years. As Rebekah Nation points out, “many of the networks that endured through college were based on experiences before college” (Nathan 57). This was the case with Amanda who came to the university with her best friend who was her roommate freshmen year, and three other students from her high school who she named as three of her five closest friends on campus. Freshman year you just stick to whoever you meet first, Amanda stated. “We are all like teenage girls who want to do our own thing”. This was Amanda’s response as to why her group of friends was neither diverse nor different from the type of people she was used to being around. There was a similar, yet also quite different occurrence in another interview I conducted with Latina sophomore, Natalie. Natalie also attended the university with a good friend from high school who she decided to room with her freshman year. She also remained close friends and a current roommate with another Latina girl she met her freshman year. However, Natalie’s group of friends was much more diverse than Amanda’s whose friends were all African American. Natalie’s group of friends included her Latina roommate, a Filipina student, an African American student, and a Caucasian roommate Samantha. Samantha was a particularly interesting choice of Natalie’s because it was a hesitant one. However, Natalie proved to have a genuine affection and like for Samantha. At first Natalie admitted she felt quite threatened by Samantha. Samantha, a freshman from a wealthy and predominantly white area of Columbus, Ohio, signified the general stereotype of a rich, snobby white girl. Yet, Samantha did not reiterate this stereotype for Natalie. She gave no inclination of
being wealthy and her easy going manner did not come across as being arrogant. Thus, she did not feel threatened when Samantha asked “carefully” about her accent and where she was from because they had reached a level of trust and comfort when talking to one another. This ease at which they interacted with one another was at once made readily apparent to me upon interviewing Samantha. She laughingly joked how she would try to pick out words her roommates would say over the phone to her relatives in Spanish, and said she enjoyed learning about different aspects of their culture. However, the interesting component about this interaction was how much it meant for each girl. For Natalie interacting with her Caucasian roommate, it seemed as if it was a given or normative behavior. Thus, it was nothing for her that her fellow roommate would be considered a friend, even if she were named last. But for Samantha, Natalie was viewed more as a person of interest, or someone she could learn from but not really take to the friendship level. This was an interesting element in learning about interactions between girls of different races. Caucasian girls seemed less keen on seeing Latina girls as friends, while Latina girls seemed more open to embracing Caucasian girls as their friends. This was pointed to in the multiculturalism article that talked about the percentage of people who have at least one friend of another race in which the percentage was nearly 70%. However, my findings did not mirror this percentage. Most of my interviewees expressed having friends from their own race, while Caucasian girls expressed having friends who were Asian or Indian, and Latina girls expressed having friends who were either White or other.

On the surface the racial makeup of the halls appeared to be extremely diverse, and in fact it was, but the actual relations and interactions that took place between girls of different racial groups was pretty scarce. In addition, it’s actually quite common for “freshmen dorms [to] generally [be] well integrated, but not several of the early programs and events that help introduce and acclimate new students” (Nathan 60). This was particularly the case, especially when I spoke to the Carmen who said that it was difficult to get new students to come out to events in the dorms, and even more difficult for those events to be attended by diverse group of students. She expressed her disappointment in getting girls to come to floor dinners, in which she hoped that the girls would not just sit next to people they already knew but meet new people. She believed that the one floor dinner that she hosted, in which she described the turnout as being moderate, achieved some level of interaction between girls of different racial backgrounds. She informed the girls that she wanted them to introduce themselves to someone they had never met before and to sit next to someone who was not their neighbor. Though she identified the success of the floor dinner as brief, she felt that if more girls had turned out for the dinner, it would have been a greater success. However, Carmen wasn’t sure what more she could do. “We talk about this [diversity] so much”, she continued, “but there is never an easy answer”. She expressed further that her boss is always asking them what they can do to instill diversity, and it is something that the RAs struggle with a great deal. Carmen felt that the best answer to solving the problem of getting girls to diversify their relations was to continue to get people to talk to each other, and “change the way we reach out and talk to each other about things”. She felt the Girl Talk Series, started by a group of RAs, was helping to bridge the gap between the girls. She continued to stress that the turnout needed to be worked on, that is was up to the residents to simply “show up”.

I agree with Carmen’s message. I believe that students must be more open to “showing up”. There is a great need for students to open their eyes and be willing to except the truth—the bad with the good, and vice versa. The truth—we are not open to understanding and relating to each other. Students, especially girls, need to come off the defense and let down their guard, to the point where they allow others from diverse backgrounds and races to enter in without fear of presumptions, stereotypes, or prejudices. The change that needs to take place must start within the students and the residents first. However, campus organizations like the university housing division also need to encourage and foster the need of more interaction between residents. Implementing more than the one necessary or sufficient multicultural program required by RAs is what should be done, as well as enacting programs that encourage the spread of diversity all year round, inclusive of numerous programs per month. Also, the housing staff should make it a requirement for female residents to attend at least two of the programs featured in the Girls Series Talk. But, most importantly, students need to understand that a successful diversity relies on them making the effort to interact and involve themselves with students of diverse backgrounds. The university can only supply the push, students have to initiate the acceleration.