Diversity at Home: The Question of Racialized Lived Spaces on the University of Illinois Campus.

What is an ideal University? A place where there is diversity, a place where students can feel at home, and a place where students face reality and discover new ideas. Incoming freshman students enter a big university like the University of Illinois with expectations of new experiences. As in being able to finally be independent and survive in world where everyone has to make it for themselves. As first year students there is a big transition from how life used to be to how life is now since we are no longer being sheltered at home. Our first year on campus is our developmental stage of becoming independent and being exposed to new cultures in a diverse environment. This paper provides understanding to where diversity should start on campus. This paper seeks to look at on-campus housing and multicultural specialty houses. In regards to specialty houses I will argue how the labeling of these houses can be problematic when it comes to the promotion of diversity all around campus. I will argue that diversity needs not to just be in existence in the classroom, and that it needs to be present within all dorms where students spend most of their time. In order for the students to have a comfortable transition from home to on-campus housing one must be able to adapt to a new environment if they are ever exposed to one on campus.

Diversity is something that should be seen on campus, but it should also be felt by all individuals that attend this university. Diversity starts at home meaning the dorms; this is the place where students need to see as well as feel diversity in order to be comfortable when they branch away from home. While holding a group discussion as my friends and I were eating dinner one
day I asked whether they consider their lived space as “home”? One friend replied “No because I feel out of place because I’m not apart of the predominant ethnicity within my building and that makes me feel very secluded.” There is a problem when students don’t feels comfortable once they leave away from home. The university provides us with a safe environment; however a safe environment is not enough to make students feel at home. The university must get rid of the non-existence of diversity within the dorms because this can be detrimental to the students academic achievement and it can also hurt the person emotionally because the concern and worries about being around one predominant ethnicity. They (U of I faculty) must understand that each and every student comes from a different environment and that U of I must do anything and everything possible to make all students feel at home and safe.

Before getting into where diversity should start there needs to be clarification on the term diversity because many people come to think differently about this term, and that people should understand this term in broader perspective than just from a personal perspective. In the article “Students Perception of Diversity on a College Campus” Brigitta Brunner writes that white students define diversity in terms of culture. Blacks or African Americans define it as equality, inclusion in educational matters and societal acceptance. While Latinos see it as an opportunity for social interaction. Brunner illustrates the ways that students define diversity on an interpersonal level, rather than on broader terms. Her study demonstrates the ways students are thinking about diversity solely in racialized terms. But what this paper seeks to do is expand the very definition of diversity itself, to not simply understand it as an ethnic or cultural difference, but as believing that each individual is unique, and recognizing the individual differences of others as well as ourselves. It is the exploration of differences in a safe positive and nurturing environment. It is about
understanding each other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual.

Brunner’s article also had a good persuasive point when she says that the university can only do so much when it comes to the expansion of diversity (313). This is true, however the students are only limited to what they have. If students are not provided diverse environments in the dorms how do students suppose to help expand the meaning of diversity within it? Regarding housing there is really nothing we can do to solve the issue of segregation unless majority of the university (students) petition about the problem and show that the dorms are not equally diverse like it should actually be.

What are the connection between diversity and university housing? I asked myself if I saw diversity in respect to my definition of it, and the answer is ‘No.” What I saw was students spending most of their time in segregated spaces, particularly in terms of university housing. After living here for two semesters I have begun to notice how racially divided the dorms are. Florida Avenue Residence Halls (FAR), Pennsylvania Avenue residence Hall (PAR) and Illinois Street Residence Hall (ISR) are the three dorms that this research will consider. The two buildings are the farthest away from the main quad is FAR and PAR. Students who reside in FAR and PAR are known as the” melting pot” because these buildings mainly consist of minority students. ISR the closest dorm to the main and engineering quad mainly consist of engineering majors and the majority of the students who reside there are Asian American.

Based on conducting interviews with students that live in these residence halls, one question that I asked my interviewee was “When do they see or feel that they are in a diverse environment?” One student had the reply of “When I’m walking to class on the quad, because that
is when I actually see an array of different ethnicities and cultures. Marinda O’Bryant a student who lives on campus agrees with the statement above and states that…

**Marinda:** I think we only have a little diversity on…… campus but not enough.

**Q:** Why do you say that?

**M:** Because…..the only time the school is diverse is when we are walking across the quad going to class. Any other time it’s not diverse at all.

**Q:** Where diversity should start, campus or with dorm life?

**M:** Where they lived.”

**Q:** Do you feel that your dorm is racially diversified?

**M:** No.

Other as well as I cannot call our lived spaces home. The statement above reinforces my claim of their being an absence of diversity in student living spaces. What are students to do when their lived spaces are no longer comfort zones, this issue of the non-existence of diversity should not even be a problem if the university intervene and start promoting diversity.

How and where can we achieve diversity here on campus, should perhaps it start with our lived experiences, meaning our dorm life. I would argue that if students are only exposed to one predominate ethnicity in their dormitory then there is really no chance for us to know about each other. But if the dorms become more diverse, students will not only learn on an academic level, but it will open and deepen our interpersonal understandings so that we have a broader vision of difference that is more like the definition that is being proposed at the beginning of this paper. A freshman here at UIUC states how she would feel if she could see as well feel diversity.

**Quianna:** How would you respond if you were able to feel as well as see a diverse campus?

**Elida Martinez:** Well for one thing I would feel more comfortable as in being exposed to an equal amount of other people who differ from me as opposed to just one ethnicity. If my dorm were to
be diverse I would have more knowledge about other cultures since I’m exposed to them. I would also be able to understand how they live and have true knowledge on those who are characteristically and physically different from me.

**Quianna:** Would students respond differently if they were in a more diverse environment?

**Elida Martinez:** I do think students would respond differently if put in a different environment. People would either segregate themselves if they were the minority or try to fit in. The problem is, it is hard to try to fit in an environment in which there is so much of one race, and not enough of your own, and you're not sure how the other race is might respond upon interaction.

**Q:** Are the dorms diverse and who's fault is that the students or the university?

**E.M:** I do not think that the dorms are diversified enough. I think that it is the university's fault because if they really wanted the student body to interact with different races other than that of their own, they'd place students from all kinds of backgrounds and races together in dormitories. I find myself to be a minority in my living space; there are not more than 3 or 4 people of Spanish-speaking descent that I have seen this past year and that is injust. It is injust because people should be exposed to more than one race, I would have loved to be in a dormitory with more than just one race.

Being in an equally diversified environment students will be able to succeed on a more academic and intrapersonal level (Light 129). If the university desegregates the students, students will begin to acknowledge and appreciate the campus, their lived space, as an environment that sees difference not just as black or white, but as an environment that sees difference from the inside out.

Novak, Wade’s, “Informal Segregation in Campus Housing” is a paper where the student claimed that there is a possibility that students are segregating themselves because students have the preference of where they live (Novak,7). Students may have the preference to live where they want, however the university can always step in and intervene to make university housing a more diverse environment. As incoming freshman not all students visit the campus before they attend and what other way to find out about campus housing than from the pamphlets they send all
students. In the “Admit one I Belong“ book it showed all the on-campus living possibilities and the specialty of each dorm. This book included what each dorm provides as in new furnished furniture, whether it’s air conditioned or not and who lives in each building as only referring to gender. However, this pamphlet never included how diverse each building was or the location and distance from the main quad. Based on the pamphlets sent to all students one may begin to notice that there were some elements that were stated in the pamphlets that actually doesn’t exist on campus. As far as our lived spaces there is an absence of diversity where we live, we hear that it’s very diverse through pamphlets and our advisors, but one must be able to see it for themselves and based on interviews from a variety of freshman’s, diversity is not seen nor felt.

How does the university promote diversity? The university can go about promoting diversity in many ways. One way is by diversifying dorms, and by having non-ethnic based cultural houses (specialty houses). There way of promoting diversity is by having a diverse multi-cultural street that benefits to all students. This street known as “Minority Row “ which consist of cultural organizations that extends out to all ethnicities even though they are racially and ethnically geared towards one ethnic group. You have African American Cultural Program, Asian American Cultural Center, Japan House, La Casa Cultural Latina and the Native American House. Ethnic based cultural houses can be problematic when it comes to the promotion of diversity. I asked Marinda whether cultural housing was diverse. Her reply was that “These houses give a vibe of separation. I feel that everyone should have access to everything here on campus. There shouldn’t be cultural houses only for those who are of that ethnicity.” These houses provide resources to all, but students may not have a chance to access the resources given because the inquiry of whether you have to be a certain ethnicity in order to have these resources accessible to them.
Rebecca Parker, the author of “Why Special Housing for Ethnic Students makes Sense,” states that special housing is a way for students to connect with one self. It allows students to share interest with those who have similar characteristics like themselves. I asked students “What’s wrong with multi-cultural housing?” Sheniece Presley, a first-year student at UIUC, replied “Well I feel that cultural housing shouldn’t be labeled because it doesn’t include other ethnicities even though they say anyone is welcome.” Each cultural house provides a mission statement about the purpose of each cultural house and what each house tends to provides students who attend UIUC. On the African American Cultural Center webpage, their mission says they tend “To provide opportunities for all students to engage in the vital cultural and social experience of meeting, interacting with, and learning from students of diverse backgrounds.” If this house really wants to reach out to all students, there should be no point in calling the house the African American Cultural Center. I argue this because with the ethnic labeling of this house, it makes it seem as though the focus of providing help is only for African American students. “Minority Row” does not make this university more diverse because it focuses on just a few of many ethnic groups on campus. With non-ethnic based cultural houses, there will be an expansion of diversity not only just within the dorms, but also on campus because no one will feel secluded because these cultural houses will reach out to all students. These houses will acknowledge all ethnic groups which will provide a safe and comfortable environment for all students because these houses will focus on helping all students.

I as well as other students who attend UIUC believe diversity should start where we students live. I would argue that if students are only exposed to one predominate ethnicity in their dormitory, then there is really no chance for us to know about each other. Within our living spaces, students will grow in the knowledge and understanding of how other people live if they are only
exposed to it. If the dorms become more diverse, students will not only learn on an academic level, but it will open and deepen our interpersonal understandings so that we have a broader vision of difference that is more like the definition that I proposed at the beginning of this paper. A campus, a lived space, an environment that sees difference not simply in black or white, but inside and out.

Appendix 1


Quianna: How you doing?
Marinda: Do I have to answer that? Laughing and almost choking on a cereal bar.
Quianna: No, feel free to answer or avoid any question that you feel uncomfortable with. Laughing
Quianna: How do you feel about diversity here on campus?
Marinda: I think we only have a little diversity on……. campus but not enough.
Q: Why do you say that?
M: Because…..the only time the school is diverse is when we are walking across the quad going to class. Any other time it’s not diverse at all. Holding her hand on her head.
Q: Do you think it’s the universities fault about the school not being diverse or do you think the students have something to do with it?
M: Yes as far as the university goes because they have control over everything. Dealing with the issues of where we live and where things are placed we the students have no control over what is already established here on campus. All we can do is go by what they give us.
Q: Ok. Where do you live?
M: Busey Evans.
Q: Why did you choose to live here?
M: Because it’s close to campus… and the fact that it has air conditioning. Chuckling
Q: Why didn’t you choose any other dormitory?
M: Cause I heard things about other dorms such as PAR and FAR. Basically I was told that if you live there it’s like living in the projects or where there’s a lot of activity going on. As far as my location on this campus those two choices were scratched off my list.
Q: Did you get your first priority choice for where you wanted to live?
M: Yes! Why did you ask that?
Q: I was just wondering because I’m trying to see whether the Housing Department has something to do with the segregation of students in the dormitories.
M: Well on that note I do think they have something to do with the segregation of students. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that majority of the blacks/minorities live in PAR or FAR. It’s not a coincidence that all the Asians live in ISR where they are closer to both the main quad and the engineering quad. Speaking angrily.
Q: Well what do you think should be done about this?
M: Really…. We can’t do much about it. We are not the ones who make the choices about where students live.
Q: Don’t you think that if enough students get together and bring this to the housing Departments attention that something will be done about the issues of diversity?
M: Smacking her lips and sarcastically giving me a look in the eye. Girl….this whole campus gone have to protest about these issues and I don’t think that’s going to happen because some may be fine with how things are and others may just not care. This is a deep issue that we must look into before we can start pointing fingers and try to make changes about it. But hey anything is possible.
Q: Ok. I see…moving on. So, do you feel that financial aid should be considered when it comes to living arrangements?
M: Ummm. No. Because we should have the preference of living where we want instead of being forced somewhere. I was somewhat pressured into living in Busey Evans because my mom filed taxes late so that mean my financial aid report form school arrive late so I didn’t really receive much for school. This school thinks they are slick. Coming to find out that Busey is the most expensive dorm on campus. Before coming here I talked with someone from the housing department which made Busey sound like the best all girls dorm here. Kind of sucks to me. Really I don’t see what my $8,000 something went into.
Q: Laughing in the inside. So you didn’t have enough money from financial aid so you had to take out loans for the rest of your tuition and room and board?
M: Yep!
Q: How do you feel about cultural housing here on campus?
M: Hmm...It’s ok. I mean that it’s a good thing to have.
Q: Do you find it diverse?
M: Yea, but no as well
Q: Why?
M: Because … these houses give a vibe of separation. I feel that everyone should have access to everything here on campus. There shouldn’t be cultural houses only for those who are of that ethnicity. The school is making this campus separated because they placed these houses together. They may not think it’s a problem and to certain students they might no think of it as a problem as well, but now that you brought this to my attention it is kind of disturbing.
Q: Well I appreciate your help for my research paper and I wish you luck on your exam next week. Bye.
M: Thanks and you have a good day.

Appendix 2

Presley, Sheniece. Personal Interview. 15 April 2008

Quianna: How do you feel about cultural houses?

Sheniece P: Well I feel that cultural housing shouldn’t be labeled because it doesn’t include other ethnicities even though they say anyone is welcome.

Q: Do you feel that your dorm includes an equal variety of all ethnic groups.

S: No. That’s the sad part about it. I expected to be around more than one just ethnicity, but unfortunately my building only consist of mainly whites and Asians.
Q: Thank you.

Appendix 3

Elida Martinez. Telephone Interview. 20 April 2008

Quianna: How would you respond if you were able to feel as well as see a diverse campus?

Elida Martinez: Well for one thing I would feel more comfortable as in being exposed to an equal amount of other people who differ from me as opposed to just one ethnicity. If my dorm were to be diverse I would have more knowledge about other cultures since I’m exposed to them. I would also be able to understand how they live and have true knowledge on those who are characteristically and physically different from me.

Quianna: Would students respond differently if they were in a more diverse environment?
Elida Martinez: I do think students would respond differently if put in a different environment. People would either segregate themselves if they were the minority or try to fit in. The problem is, it is hard to try to fit in an environment in which there is so much of one race, and not enough of your own, and you're not sure how the other race is might respond upon interaction.

Q: Are the dorms diverse and who's fault is that the students or the university?

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Appendix 4

I surveyed ten students who live on campus there name remained anonymous because there were no consent form that said I can publicize there name in my research paper.

Questions

1. ) Where should diversity start, in the dorms or just on campus? (Pick One)

2.) Do you think your dorm is racially segregated?

3.) Where do you actually see a diverse environment or do you ever see one?

4.) Is the labeling of specialty housing offensive?
5.) Do students segregate themselves from other ethnicities or is it the university?

**Bibliography**


Presley, Sheniece. Personal Interview. 15 April 2008.