



Best Practices for  
**Inclusive and Diverse  
Photography**  
in Higher Education

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The Visual History of Higher Education

# Best Practices for Inclusive and Diverse Photography in Higher Education

## Introduction

The visual representation of inclusion and diversity on college campuses is an essential part of telling the story of a university. Prospective students, parents and supporters, current students, faculty and staff look at university websites, social media, both digital and printed marketing and other publications to learn about a university beyond the statistics.

Images viewed as inauthentic, images that lack diversity, or images used out of context can broadcast that underrepresented populations are not valued by an institution. Such a perception is not acceptable when colleges are competing for accomplished students and higher enrollment.

The purpose of this paper is to state best practices for using photography to accurately include those underrepresented on campus. The authors are members of the University Photographers' Association of America and are the ones who capture and create these images. The UPAA is an international organization of

over three hundred photographers dedicated to the application and practice of photography in higher education. The organization is com-

mitted to photographic excellence through continuing education and networking with their professional colleagues.



PHOTO BY CLAY STALTER | UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-SPRINGFIELD

## Authenticity is paramount when representing inclusion and diversity in photography

Truthful representations of the campus community, events and activities build trust for the accuracy and believability of university messaging and communication. Images that are received as genuine, depicting situations that would truly occur on campus, will positively affect perceptions of current and prospective students and staff. Trust in this authenticity leads to a willingness to work with photographers and participate in photo shoots to market and communicate the message and intentions of an institution. Working with administration, staff and faculty to capture existing campus events and classroom situations is the ideal. Capturing racially diverse students already taking an economics class is preferable to casting students for their diverse appearance and then trying to recreate the look of an economics class.

*“Ideally, we should stop trying to put ‘diversity’ in a static image that only captures visual aspects of diversity. While a picture says 1,000 words, it doesn’t ever tell the*

*whole story. Therefore, we believe ideal imagery showcasing diversity in college should focus on the myriad of activities and places students congregate rather than their racial or gender identities. It should not be ‘ask select brown students to gather for a photo’ and then this photo is used to represent diversity everywhere. Pictures are too often engineered with representation of different races and genders in a setting that isn’t natural. Sadly, by focusing on ‘engineering’ the right image, we fail to capture students of color as themselves, in the places where they are rather than where we put them to take a picture.”* ~ Katherine Kennedy, Director of The Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground, Boston University.”

Institutions with minimal diversity in their student bodies should not create a false narrative through visual marketing. Imagery that falsely reflects the reality on campus risks marginalizing students who believed otherwise and can diminish the authenticity and reputation of the institution. A Black student who chose her college partially based on the

diverse images she saw in the viewbook may feel duped and isolated instead of included and valued. A better alternative would be to visually highlight campus initiatives aimed to broaden diversity such as race relations speakers, cultural fairs, inner city mentor partnering programs, service-learning projects and campus involvement in diverse and inclusive organizations.

Post-process image manipulation can also create a false narrative of institutional diversity. It’s considered an unethical practice by photojournalists and most photographers in higher education marketing departments. The negative effects of treating people of color as a prop, digitally dropped into campus scenes or altering skin color to give the appearance of racial balance, can be severe and long lasting. More than 25 years later, Time magazine’s cover of O.J. Simpson’s digitally manipulated mugshot from June of 1994 remains one of the most recognizable examples of racially insensitive alteration of an image. Trying to achieve a false representation of diversity through software editing is not worth the hit to an institution’s credibility.

### Represent Diversity Beyond Skin Color

Showing all aspects of diversity through photography can be challenging. Sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, mental health and some physical disabilities cannot necessarily be “seen” but can be illustrated using subtle visual cues. Signage or symbols on campus that show inclusion or access for all individuals can be

utilized. Students wearing a cross, using a rosary, praying or meditating can visually reflect religious inclusion. Clothing with representative messaging such as the rainbow flag can convey diversity that is not otherwise recognizable. Pins, patches and stickers on backpacks, water bottles and laptops can also denote support and recognition.

*“I think that LGBTQIA+ visibility, especially when incorporated in the university’s broader marketing makes a statement about who we value and want to highlight on campus. It can help make clear that inclusion and equity is everyone’s work.”* ~ Jen Hsu-Bishop, Director of the Milton E. Ford LGBT Resource Center, Grand Valley State University

*“Ideal imagery would include more than people of varying races in photos regarding diversity. Imagery would depict varying abilities, learning styles, languages, food, and students and employees in various settings around campuses.”* ~ Charmaine Sevier, Manager, Diversity and Employment, Moraine Valley Community College



PHOTO BY CLAY STALTER | UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-SPRINGFIELD

### Avoid Stereotyping and Misidentification

Images that portray stereotypes can further strengthen false perceptions and beliefs about underrepresented groups. Photos of Black athletes or studious Asians are examples that emphasize the false notion that Black people can only excel on the sports field and Asians are only intellectual. Use photos of underrepresent-

ed students in areas that they are not immediately and disproportionately associated with. Showing those who are underrepresented in broader roles demonstrates that the full potential of all students is recognized.

*“I saw an image of a Black male student and he had on football clothing or something athletic. I paused to think why couldn’t he have been in a lecture hall? Why not allow him to be photographed outside the football uniform. Could he be in a suit? Reading a book in the library? Deconstruct the notion that Black equals athlete, white equals scholarship/academics. Instead of a Black woman (wearing braids and tattoos) being captured in a sorority shot, allow her image to be more complex (we are multidimensional folks), like in a science laboratory with a lab coat on for example. That speaks greater volumes than an Indian woman in a science class, which is captured far more often, and suggests another unreliable message.”* ~ Sharalle Arnold, Associate Director, Center for Women & Gender Equity, Grand Valley State University

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PHOTO BY GLENN CARPENTER | MORaine VALLEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

*“Students often experience their inclusion in photographs negatively because the photographs that institutions use are so profoundly segregated and noninclusive. That is, the photos (most often) of brown people are meant to be photos of brown people instead of photos of people. And they are used in ‘brown’ spaces instead of in all spaces. And, they are often of the same people.”* ~ Crystal Williams, Associate Provost for Diversity & Inclusion, Boston University

Marketing and communication departments often rely on keywords within the metadata of an image file to help find and choose photos for various publications and projects. The accuracy of the keyword descriptors is central to correctly reflecting diversity and showing knowledge and sensitivity to ethnic and racial differences. When choosing keywords for a photograph of a group of brown students of uncertain ethnicity for example, it is best to use the umbrella terms “diverse” or “diversity” as descriptors rather than misidentifying a Honduran student as Mexican.



PHOTO BY AMANDA PITTS | GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

### Broaden Diverse Representations Beyond Students

Often, prospective students look to staff and faculty as models of their future. Finding and highlighting diverse faculty and staff who are achieving in their field illustrates the opportunities available to students as well as showing inclusion and diversity are valued beyond the classroom.

*“I also see missed opportunities for diversity when all the diversity efforts and/or initiatives are only focused on students. Yes, we are here for the students, but the employees contribute to diversity and inclusion across the vast campuses.”* ~ Charmaine Sevier, Manager Diversity and Employment, Moraine Valley Community College

### Services and Spaces Can Demonstrate Inclusion

Using photographs to highlight inclusion is another important challenge. Photographs can include symbols and signage around campus that demonstrate a dedication to

inclusivity. Signs for gender neutral bathrooms and dedicated breast-feeding rooms, Braille on building entrances, classroom doors and elevators, closed captioning on digital monitors and sign language interpreters can all visually signify inclusion.

*“If we aspire to exalt our institutions as being inclusive and diverse, then showing services and/or spaces where inclusion is enacted is important and doing so as a norm, not an exception, is important. So, for instance, when there is a photograph of a leader making a speech and the ASL interpreter is either photoshopped out, or, more likely, the photograph that omits the ASL interpreter is preferred, we’re making a decision not based on the quality of the photograph, but on the content of the photograph. Or, if you prefer, we’re not normalizing inclusive actions. And, those omissions, in the aggregate, have impact.”* ~Crystal Williams, Associate Provost for Diversity & Inclusion, Boston University



PHOTO BY SUSAN MCSPADDEN | JOHNSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

**Photography that is representative without over-selling is a key component in inclusion and diversity**

Some of the most important marketing materials photographers shoot for are targeted to prospective students. For students to see themselves at an institution, the marketing materials must contain images of students like them. Showing diversity and inclusivity at a university through photography not only shows those represented in photos that they are welcome, but it is a selling point for those seeking a university with an appreciation for diversity.

Over-representation or including the same individuals repeatedly can be problematic when institutions push for a level of diversity that does not exist. Photographs used in conjunction with anecdotes and data can tell an accurate and cohesive story of what diversity is like on campus. An institution that significantly overuses underrepresented students, staff or faculty in imagery can lose credibility within the campus community and with prospective students who visit campus to further research the institution.

*“I think it’s important to show the diversity of our campus, but not so much that it’s unrealistic or exceptionalizing. Some people have shared that they often feel that communications/photos over-represent diversity and students are surprised when they arrive on campus that the community is not actually as diverse. It’s important to critically investigate and question what messages we are sending intentionally or unintentionally through photography. So often, photos reify the power dynamics that exist in our society with individuals with dominant identities portrayed in positions of power and authority such as faculty members, administrators, presenters, etc. while individuals with marginalized or oppressed identities are photographed as students, clients, audience members, etc.”* ~ Jen Hsu-Bishop, Director of the Milton E. Ford LGBT Resource Center, Grand Valley State University

*“The most common mistake I’ve seen when photographs are used for diversity is specifically for student recruitment brochures or landing pages of websites. The primary photo on the brochure shows individuals of various races, genders, etc. However, if you continue through the brochure or pages on the website there are no more photos depicting diversity at all.”* ~ Charmaine Sevier, Manager Diversity and Employment, Moraine Valley Community College

Researchers at Augsburg College in Minnesota conducted a study in 2013 of viewbooks from 165 four-year universities to assess the accuracy of photographic portrayal of diversity in recruitment materials. Researchers counted racially identifiable students in the photographs and compared them to the actual makeup of the student body.

Their findings were that most institutions used images of diversity that were significantly different than the actual makeup of campus. Diversity was typically symbolized by portraying Black students at higher rates than was true of the enrollment figures.

The study stated, “It is clear that racial diversity is being used as a commodity in the marketing of higher education and presenting an image of diversity is more important than accurately portraying the student body.” (“We’ve Got Minorities, Yes We Do: Visual Representations of Racial and Ethnic Diversity in College Recruitment Materials.” Pippert, Essenburg & Matchett)

The study also states that universities are trying to present an image based on the type of institution they would like to be rather than the one that they are.



PHOTO BY DEB GROVE | FRANKLIN & MARSHALL COLLEGE

**Images used in context and in a timely manner signal ongoing attention to inclusion and diversity**

Just as using the same student to promote diversity across numerous marketing promotions can be a signal that diversity is lacking or not important to the university, using the same diversity themed photo for a prolonged period of time can also be perceived as an indicator of those problems. As with all content of university photography, photos of diverse students should be continually refreshed and updated. Images featured on social media are widely seen and have a very short life online, but if used repetitively, they will be noticed. Many communications departments only allow access to the most recent 3-5 years of campus imagery. This time frame ensures that clothing, hairstyle trends, technology, and structural and remodeling changes are up to date as well as adding “fresh faces” to the image catalog.

Using photos of diverse students out of context can be even more troubling. When the subject or setting of an event or captured interaction is used to represent something else, it creates a false narrative. For example, do not use a photo from an engineering mixer to represent the department of Middle Eastern studies simply because the subjects shown are wearing hijabs. Out-of-context usage can be an indicator of a university that has not truly

invested in learning and embracing the details of inclusion and diversity.

*“We have noticed that stock photos of one or two students of color will be used for all diversity and inclusion purposes. In other words, it’s not a diverse selection of diverse students. And often, those stock photos are extremely old and are still used long after those students have graduated. We recommend that photographers work with student organizations and clubs, and departments to identify students for photos for two key reasons: 1.) to ensure up-to-date photos of current students and life on campus, and 2.) to showcase a wider range of the student population.”* ~ Katherine Kennedy, Director of The Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground, Boston University

**Conclusion**

Highlighting inclusion and diversity in institutions of higher education is vital and has financial, cultural and societal value. Attention to diversity doesn’t just benefit underrepresented populations, it also elevates the larger university community. Image usage is one way that current and prospective students, staff and faculty evaluate whether diversity and inclusion are valued. Therefore, the job of the university photographer is an important one.

Working in partnership with marketing

managers, writers, website teams, social media coordinators and especially designers, photographers can create image assets that tell the story of an institution with accuracy and integrity.

As the person who has the most contact with a wide section of the university community, photographers must advocate for a schedule that affords them the time to get to know subjects in order to understand their perspective and to create strong and accurately representative photos. Also, comfort with the presence of a photographer results in more natural looking images. Taking time to get to know a subject and being able to spend more time at activities and events can lead to meeting more people on campus who the photographer may not have met otherwise. This leads to more photo opportunities. Managers and supervisors who understand and support the time involved in the craft will be rewarded with a solid image catalog.

Every university is different and has unique challenges in regard to race, ethnicity and inclusion, but photographers play a vital role in representing these topics honestly and authentically on college campuses. Photography alone cannot solve issues or problems of inclusion and diversity, but it can help in making positive change to the culture surrounding these important issues.

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