

INTRODUCTION

This project investigates how university retention and recruitment efforts for students of color (SOC) may be affected by university website content. Data was collected from 4-year UW websites with a focus on visible diversity shown through the website images and how “deep” information on the website was located. Critical Race Theory and much research on recruitment and retention shows that “representation” can have powerful effects, whether present or absent. Quantitative analysis using linear regression shows moderate to strong relationships between the level of images of SOC “one click” deep on university websites and enrollment increases by SOC from 2009-2019. Qualitative analysis shows that few institutions mentioned Equity, Diversity, or Inclusivity (EDI) prominently, a “white savior” tone can be seen at times, particularly in study abroad and service-learning pages, and non-photographic content likely has a powerful relationship to SOC enrollment. Given the rising number of SOC in the UW System and Wisconsin overall, especially those who say they are of two or more ethnicities, implications for future recruitment efforts are discussed.

THEORY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The college choice literature mainly explains college selection by SOC as being determined by factors that affect educational aspirations, including parental cultural capital (Bergeron, 2009), though there is some research looking at institutional factors such as selectivity of college (e.g. Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee, 1997). These factors are not useful to this project, given that we are comparing mainly institutions of similar prestige and looking at SOC who have already enrolled. However, such research does show that SOC tend to gain less information from family and high school counsellors about college, worry more about costs, and choose schools closer to home geographically than white students; they also tend to get more information about potential schools from their social networks (Bergeron, 2009)(Desmond & Turley, 2009).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides us a way to understand how potential students of color might approach college choices. CRT points out that experiences of racial inequality lead to “racial consciousness”, which serves to both highlight racism in the world and protect against the negative effects of alienation and dehumanization produced by racial power differences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). These power differences contribute to a lack of sense of control in one’s life and mistrust in the dominant group (Mabry & Kiecolt, 2005)(Smith, 2010). These factors result in alienation experienced by people of color. Alienation then persists as discrimination and “consciousness of difference” embody the experience of people of color, as one becomes aware of the socially constructed differences placed in western society and the impacts these factors will hold in their everyday life (Kuo, 1978).

Another central concept in CRT is that racism is “normal” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This means that it is to be expected, and that the lack of racism is the thing that should surprise. This concept is embedded in the stance of “hypervigilance” or “healthy paranoia” where people of color tend to cast a suspicious eye on events and people around them at least until such time as they see or hear evidence of an anti-racist stance (Brown, 2003)(Simpson, 2007). Mistrust then continues and the alienation can be experienced through all forms of communication, including digital forms which continue to expand and become more significant.

All of this leads us to predict that schools that have a higher representation of SOC on their websites will have shown a greater increase in SOC enrollment over time.

METHODS

We gathered data on nine 4-year UW-system universities websites. The collected data focused on amount of discussion of diversity, content of images with students of color, resources available to students of color, and mentions of plans to increase the success of current and future students of color. The websites were coded as flow charts where P1 was the main page of the universities and P2 (page 2, or one click deep) was potential or new student pages. Coding the universities in this format allowed us to see if there was a relationship with any of the independent variables and the depth of information.

The independent variables that required us to analyze a student’s race and ethnicity relied on indicators (explicit labels, narrative content, photos, names, etc.) that helped make sure each student was coded correctly. Some pages of a university’s webpage were excluded due to the page unsuccessfully loading, or if that page was used by the university to advertise to the general audience on available space for public events.

For enrollment data, we chose to use percent increase over time by institution. Using absolute numbers of students would be a bias increase towards larger institutions. While using percent increase does make it more likely that small institutions with small enrollments will have a higher gain given a small starting number, it makes the most sense to look at institutional enrollment changes given that schools with smaller SOC populations (and further from large metropolitan areas) will face greater challenges in recruiting SOC.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

TABLE 1: Data by Institution for SOC Enrollment Changes 2009-2019.

Institution	Percent Increase All SOC 2009-2019 (rank)	Percent Increase SOC Who Declare One Racial Identity 2009-2019 (rank)	Percent Increase SOC Who Declare Two or More Racial Identities 2009-2019 (rank)	African American Percent change / change in number of students 2009-2019	Native American Percent change / change in number of students 2009-2019	South East Asian Percent change / change in number of students 2009-2019	Other Asian Percent change / change in number of students 2009-2019	Hawaiian / Pacific Islander Percent change / change in number of students 2009-2019	Hispanic/LatinX Percent change / change in number of students 2009-2019	Two or more Ethnicities Percent change / change in number of students 2009-2019
Green Bay	198 (1)	166 (1)	470 (3)	262%/136	6%/6	71%/91	133%/85	0%/0	391%/483	470%/268
Eau Claire	92 (2)	55 (3)	543 (1)	126%/78	-56%/-34	0%/0	31%/38	-67%/-6	185%/259	543%/266
Whitewater	84 (3)	57 (2)	529 (2)	-2%/-11	-50%/-21	-9%/-8	9%/11	-18%/-2	219%/636	529%/349
River Falls	63 (4)	41 (5)	229 (6)	-11%/-10	-70%/-14	44%/35	9%/5	-40%/-2	146%/124	229%/103
Stout	58 (5)	47 (4)	105 (9)	91%/68	-30%/-14	25%/40	35%/24	-48%/-10	102%/132	105%/119
La Crosse	58 (5)	20 (9)	355 (4)	3%/3	-54%/-22	-24%/-40	-11%/-14	-40%/-2	106%/197	355%/277
Superior	46 (7)	21 (8)	212 (8)	27%/10	-41%/-28	-27%/-3	0%/0	Infinitive/3	177%/53	212%/53
Madison	42 (8)	25 (7)	253 (5)	-21%/-239	-51%/-106	-4%/-23	46%/723	46%/11	253%/1039	253%/2301
Milwaukee	39 (9)	27 (6)	229 (6)	-19%/-329	-49%/-84	17%/108	34%/222	-17%/-6	111%/1490	229%/707

Enrollment data: <https://www.wisconsin.edu/accountability/access/>

Overall, 2009-2019 saw an increase in SOC for every institution. We do note that Native American enrollment is down at almost every institution in the study, with only Green Bay showing an increase.

TABLE 2: Regression Models: the Effect of Website Content on Changes in SOC Enrollment 2009-2019

model	Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients (standard error)	t	Sig	R Squared
Model 1	constant	46.140 (27.971)	1.650	.143	
IV= Images of SOC 1 click deep DV = percent enrollment increases SOC 2009-2019	Images of SOC 1 click deep	5.633 (4.417)	1.275	.243	.189
Model 2	constant	174.645 (70.440)	2.479	.042	
IV= Images of SOC 1 click deep DV = percent enrollment increases Two or More Racial Identities 2009-2019	Images of SOC 1 click deep	28.791 (11.122)	2.589	.036**	.489
Model 3	constant	27.003 (26.410)	1.022	.341	
IV= Images of SOC 1 click deep DV = percent enrollment increases SOC Who Declare One Racial Identity 2009-2019	Images of SOC 1 click deep	4.595 (4.170)	1.102	.307	.148
Model 4 (Green Bay Excluded)	constant	23.188 (6.894)	3.363	.015	
IV= Images of SOC 1 click deep DV = percent enrollment increases Two or More Racial Identities 2009-2019	Images of SOC 1 click deep	2.687 (1.104)	2.434	.051*	.497
Model 5 (Green Bay Excluded)	constant	171.295 (72.210)	2.372	.055	
IV= Images of SOC 1 click deep DV = percent enrollment increases SOC Who Declare One Racial Identity 2009-2019	Images of SOC 1 click deep	27.116 (11.563)	2.345	.057*	.478

Significance levels: * = <.10, ** = <.05, two tailed test. Given no theoretical or empirical reason to expect that fewer images of SOC lead to more enrollment, a one tailed test would be appropriate, but has not been reported.

We began analysis by looking at correlations between enrollment changes and images of SOC and found that the number of SOC images showed higher correlations than the ratio of SOC/all students images on websites. We use SOC images in the analysis as represent.

Model 1 shows no significant effect for SOC images and enrollment changes. We then looked at whether there was an effect by specific ethnic groups and images of members of those groups (models not shown), but again found no significant results. However, Model 2 shows the analysis of those who declared 2 or more ethnicities, and we did find that there is a significant relationship between the number of all SOC images on a website and enrollment increases for this group, and that website images explain 48.9% of the variance in enrollment changes over time. When comparing all SOC with 1 declared ethnicity to all SOC images (Model 3), there is no significant relationship.

Given that Green Bay is an outlier (by 2-3 times the next highest school in percent SOC and percent SOC who declare one ethnicity) we then analyzed the data with Green Bay excluded (Models 4 and 5). Both of these models show significant effects of website images on enrollment over time, and both approach 50% of the variance in enrollment changes explained by website images.

While we cannot say from our method if increased images on websites cause an increase in enrollment, it seems that the relationship between increased SOC enrollment over time and a higher number of SOC images on websites is solid, supporting our main hypothesis that representation matters.

Qualitative Analysis

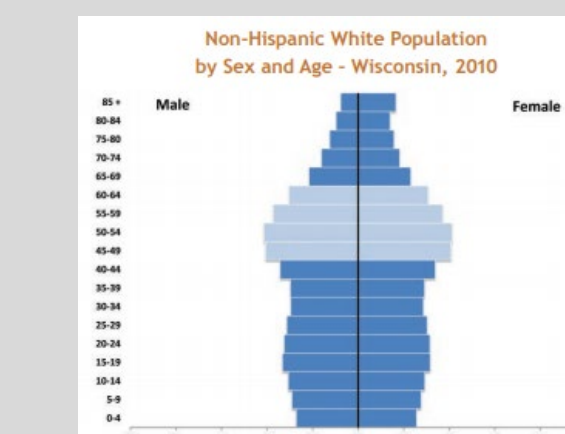
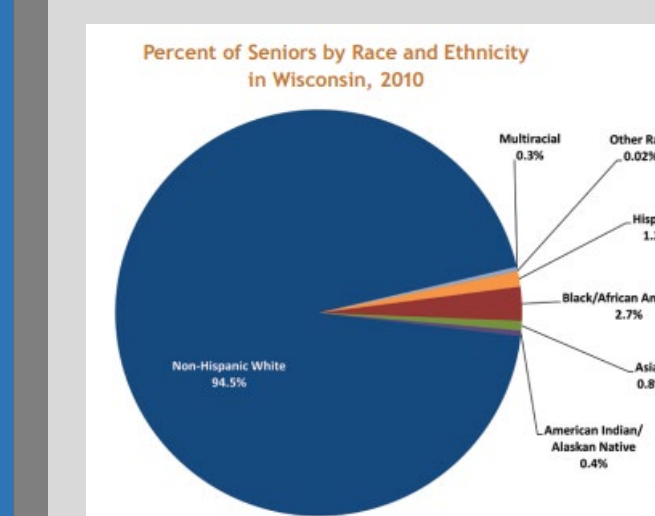
Green Bay has done quite well by the numbers; however, their website is best described as being more minimal in content, particularly overall use of images of all types. Given this, we believe Green Bay’s recruitment advances with SOC are likely strongly related to other institutional activities.

Given a push to more Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity, there is a relative lack of information on these topics on websites (Equity and Diversity are rarely even mentioned). We find such issues to be mentioned or linked to, but not addressed in depth on the websites.

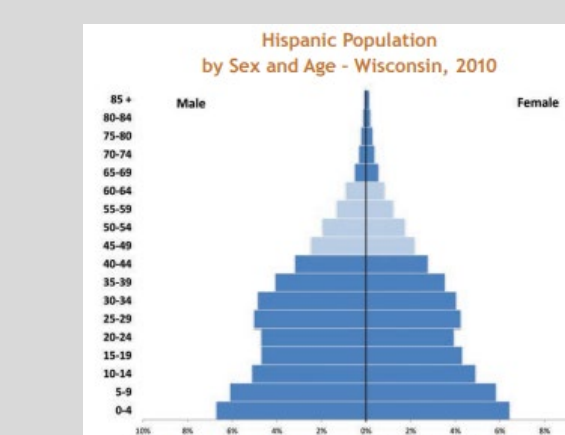
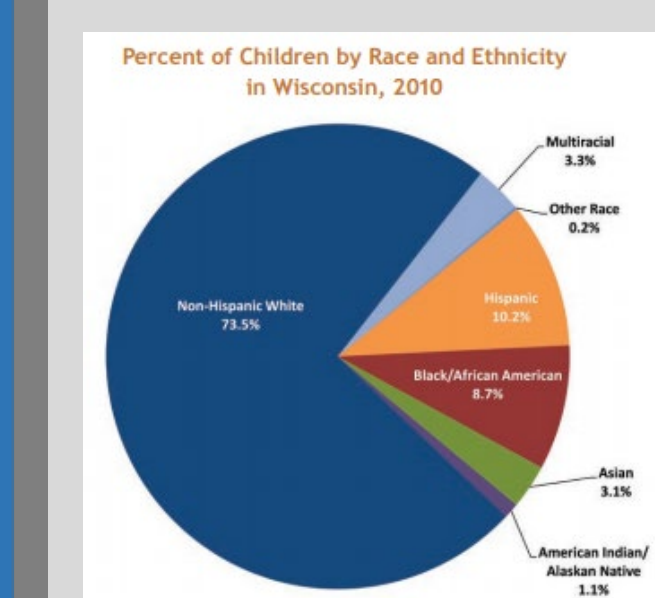
Also, a “white savior” tone can be seen at times, particularly in study abroad and service-learning pages. This can be particularly problematic for recruitment efforts with SOC, as their “hypervigilance” might cause them to discount all other information about a campus after “their real attitudes were revealed.”

DISCUSSION

Recruiting students is challenging, given changing demographics of the population. Our analysis shows a very large increase in SOC who declare 2 or more ethnic identities. Interethnic marriages has been growing nationally, with 17% of all newly married couples being interethnic in 2015. Wisconsin is following this trend.



From 2010 census data, 0.3% of the elderly in Wisconsin were interethnic, but 3.3% of children were multiethnic.



2010 Census Chartbook: Demographic Trends in Wisconsin. https://cdm.apl.wisc.edu/publications/2010_census_chartbook_wi.pdf

DISCUSSION

Given support for our main hypothesis, we suggest that representation in visual forms on college websites may be related to recruitment outcomes. We caution that the presence of certain language may undercut diversity efforts, such as when a student sees what they consider “white savior” language. Further, we suggest a case study of Green Bay’s efforts to recruit SOC is warranted. Schools are not currently focused on multiethnic students and given demographic trends this is a missed opportunity for recruiting. Further, we find the lack of content about Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity to be potentially problematic. Institutions put a great deal of effort into these areas but fail to promote such efforts on their recruitment related web content and do not do a very good job of explaining what those concepts are in detail. By expanding on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity somewhere on their websites that potential students are likely to encounter, that will signal to potential SOC that school initiatives are taken seriously and will educate all potential students about the important core institutional values before they ever step on campus. While the nature of our data limits what we can say about this process, future research is planned to interview SOC about their experiences in choosing a college, and their experiences at college.

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