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Joy as Data, Resistance as Assessment: Black Student Photovoice at a Hispanic-Serving Institution

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Abstract: This paper explores how Photovoice methodology was used as an assessment tool to understand the lived experiences of Black students at West Coast University (WCU), a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Guided by Black Critical Race Theory and Black Placemaking, the assessment examined how Black students experienced anti-Blackness, joy, and belonging at WCU. Traditional assessments can overlook or flatten the complexity of Black student life, especially at institutions focused primarily on Latine-servingness. By centering student-created images and narratives, this assessment highlighted the power of art-based assessment to reveal nuanced insights and foster institutional accountability. Findings challenge assumptions about equity at HSIs and call for race-conscious, participatory, and justice-oriented approaches to assessment that affirm Black student resistance, joy, and community building as essential to campus transformation.

Keywords: *anti-blackness, Photovoice, assessment, Hispanic-Servicing Institutions*

Introduction

My hopes and goals for HSIs are to become spaces that advance racial equity, social justice, and collective liberation and that commit to enacting a liberatory, humanizing, and emancipatory approach to education.

-Gina Garcia

I started a new faculty position at West Coast University (WCU), which has been a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI)—a college or university where at least 25% of undergraduate students identify as Latine—for over a decade. Within the first year, as a Black faculty member, I was immediately confronted with the ways anti-Blackness (prejudice and systemic marginalization specifically targeting Black individuals) manifested in my classroom and between Latine and Black students. The low number of Black students in the program was not lost on me either. Campuses often view Garcia’s (2023) work on HSI servingness as applicable only to Latine students, but HSIs should look and feel different from Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), which are higher education institutions where the student

body is mostly white. As stated by Garcia (2023) in the above epigraph, HSIs can seek to provide a more “liberatory, humanizing, and emancipatory approach to education” (p. 9), thus supporting all marginalized students differently. The transforming potential of HSI is the freedom dream we should all reach for.

Historian Robin D. G. Kelley (2022) introduced the concept of freedom dreaming in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, a vision that has been further embraced by educational scholars such as Bettina Love, who expanded on the radical possibilities of education for Black students (Love, 2019). And yet, HSIs have not traditionally been places for Black freedom dreaming. In many ways, they have mirrored the whiteness, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness found at PWIs (Pirtle et al., 2024). In some cases, they have caused even greater harm, as anti-Black experiences stem not from white peers or faculty, but from the hands, mouths, and actions of other People of Color.

WCU, like many other institutions, has struggled to fully serve its Black student population. Black students constitute only 2.6% of the student body and have reported ongoing challenges with anti-Blackness, hate incidents, underrepresentation, limited Black faculty (about 3%), and a lack of dedicated Black spaces on campus. These concerns extend beyond WCU. Many institutions still struggle to recruit, retain, and adequately support Black students (Chambers, 2022; Chambers & Sharpe, 2012; Cupid & Tomlin, 2023). In response, some campuses have used traditional assessments and campus climate studies, often employing outside firms, researchers, faculty, or administrators, who rely on surveys and focus groups to examine Black student experiences (Gaff, 2022; Harper & Patrón, 2025; Hurtado et al., 2008). WCU also followed this approach. The university has slowly enacted recommendations, and it has made some progress through new hires, the creation of new positions, and a more intentional focus on Black student retention.

As a new member of this academic community, I wondered whether words alone could fully capture aspects of Black student life—experiences that we must see and feel. Do traditional methods of assessment truly reflect the needs of Black students at an HSI and allow us to “assure a culture of careful accountability” (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025, p.2) to highlight their experiences? Can art-based assessments invite students to share stories of struggle and thriving in ways that empower them and help faculty and administrators connect more deeply with them? Could a co-created visual micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level campus assessment, focused on anti-Blackness, joy, and belonging, offer an alternative to or supplement for standard assessment methods?

I took these questions back to the classroom where my wonder first began. Using Photovoice methodology—a participatory research approach in which participants use photographs to capture and reflect on their lived experiences—I created an assignment for a masters-level research course to use this assessment tool. With Black Placemaking (Tichavakunda, 2024), and Black Critical Race Theory (BlackCrit; Dumas & Ross, 2016), which centers anti-Blackness and the unique experiences of Black people, as our lens, we explored what it looked like to put the ACCELERATE assessment principles into practice on a micro (individual), mezzo (selected campus partners and administrators) and macro (campuswide) level. We have highlighted these moments throughout the paper with the principles in *italics*. The following assessment questions guided our work: a) How do Black students at WCU

experience antiblackness on campus? b) How do Black students at WCU define and experience joy on campus? c) How do Black students at WCU experience support and belonging on campus? This paper provides an overview of how we used the ACCELERATED principles, our team's positionality, literature, theoretical frameworks that underlie our thinking, methodology, and assessment findings, including images, implications for practice, and a conclusion.

ACCELERATED Principles

Freire's (2018) concept of praxis, defined as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 51), is at the heart of this project and of how we, as a team, envision operationalizing ACCELERATE's principles. Assessment for us is more than a process of collecting data; it is a process of understanding the human experience, listening, learning, and ultimately creating meaningful and equitable changes in environments and experiences for those who are most marginalized. Approaching assessment this way reflects the *Learning-Centered and Continuously Cultivating* principle because it is an on-going process and learning does not stop once the data is collected and the findings are reported (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025). As Braught (2026) addresses in his multi-case study of three institutions, the influence of assessment is not always linear or captured in a final report; it can develop through relationships, conversations, reflection, and continued engagement.

Our Photovoice assessment, focused on Black students at an HSI, is rooted in inclusion, fairness, accessibility, accountability, and meaningful change, all of which align with the ACCELERATE principles of *Equity and Empowerment, Collaborative and Co-Creative, and Action Driven* (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025). Evidence of these principles is present throughout the project. Participants are included in the data collection, analysis, and dissemination processes, reflecting a Collaborative and Co-Creative approach. Our assessment questions are grounded in the pursuit of equity while ensuring no harm is done to Black students, demonstrating our commitment to *Equity and Empowerment*. Being more inclusive and intentional in our assessment work is not quick work. In Gaff's (2022) efforts to implement the ACCELERATE principles at the University of Northern Iowa he states, "Meaningful assessment requires slowing down to engage stakeholders, revise tools, and contemplate results" (p.1). Our process also required us to think differently about time when inviting the campus community and alumni to pause and more deeply look at the experiences of Black students through the perspective of images.

The ways we disseminate our findings through the community meeting, the library exhibit, and the report submitted to the university administration further embody an *Action-Driven* approach. These efforts go beyond simply collecting stories; they allow participants' stories to inform how people think, engage, and create environments that are conducive to Black student success. Assessment without action is a waste of time (Suskie, 2009). Action is necessary to build *Trustworthiness* because, without it, students, faculty, and staff lose faith in the process and in the potential for meaningful institutional change.

Assessment Team's Positionality

We conducted this assessment in an *Introduction to Educational Research* course, offered in the first year of a two-year master's program, and during a season when the campus had conducted traditional

assessments (surveys and focus groups) with Black students. Our project intentionally *Aligned Purposefully* with what the institution claimed to value, prioritize, and need at the time. Although the course was required, 11 students chose to continue the project beyond the course to deepen their understanding of the intricacies of conducting research and assessment in higher education. This group became the assessment team.

Our assessment team's positionality played a key role in shaping participants' comfort and trust in us, our interpretation of the assessment findings, and the steps we took after data collection. We also prioritized a *Collaborative and Co-Creative* approach to this campus-wide assessment. Our team included one tenured associate professor and 11 second-year master's students in student affairs: one man, eight women, one transgender person, and three individuals who identify as queer. We represented a racially diverse group of three Black, six Latine, one Asian, and two White scholars. Two of us identify as having a disability.

As an example of *Energized by Expertise*, the students participated in four summer professional development workshops, including writing annotated bibliographies, Photovoice qualitative analysis, and data distribution approaches. For example, our campus library archivist led a workshop teaching us to share our findings visually through a campus-wide exhibit, emphasizing mindful use of color, data size, and a mix of three-dimensional and two-dimensional information. In addition, the students wrote self-reflective journals on anti-Blackness in their lives and how they had been socialized about and with Black people throughout the data collection process. This additional training directly strengthened our team's ability to apply theoretical frameworks with confidence, analyze data, and articulate the findings of this assessment through a professional presentation, a campus exhibit, and this paper. Our collective identities and lived experiences reflected the diversity of the participants and the campus community we engaged during this assessment project.

Literature Review

This literature review summarizes what we know about Black college students and identifies a gap in understanding of Black students' experiences at HSIs. We build on this foundation to examine how anti-Blackness and Black joy shape higher education, and we discuss why equity in assessment is crucial for capturing Black students' complex experiences.

Hispanic-Serving Institutions and Black Students

The federal government designates an HSI as a nonprofit institution with at least a 25 percent full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment of Latine-identifying undergraduate students (U.S. Department of Education). As of 2023, the U.S. counted 600 HSIs, with 172 in California (Excelencia in Education, 2024). Lawmakers intended HSIs to serve as innovative educational sites for Latine students and other Students of Color who now enroll in these universities at growing rates (Garcia, 2023). Although Latine interest and activist groups advocated for the federal HSI designation, "the original legislation that established HSIs as a legitimate and distinct institutional type, [had] no mention of racial equity, social justice, collective liberation, or community healing" (Garcia, 2023, p. 2). If HSIs want to serve all their students holistically, they must establish values and practices rooted in justice and liberation (Garcia, 2023). To properly serve Latine students at an HSI, institutions must first understand the racial and

ethnic diversity of their student populations. When institutions assume Latine students are a homogeneous group, they erase Afro-Latine students and perpetuate anti-Blackness (Diaz, 2024).

Pirtle et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative study to examine how HSIs serve Black students. The study found that monoracial Black students often felt socially isolated, as their HSI failed to support the Black student body. For example, Black students experienced their HSI as a PWI, since white administrators, staff, faculty, and students constituted the majority. Black students saw the lack of representation as evidence that institutions do not commit to supporting Black students and Students of Color (Pirtle et al., 2024). They also did not receive institutional-level support in the form of material resources, such as Black-specific events, groups, and spaces that would boost their academic success. In addition, these students felt excluded from organizational culture, which ignored their social and emotional needs, leaving them without a sense of inclusion and support (Pirtle et al., 2024).

Lu and Newton (2019) led a study seeking to understand the myriad race-informed experiences of Black college students at an emerging HSI and an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (ANAAPISI). Lu and Newton (2019) found that Black students experienced a “cultural mismatch” between their Asian and Latine peers, Black female students’ race and gender-specific campus issues brought up to administrators were morphed into “women of color issues”, and participants in the study shared their social interactions with their Asian and Latine peers often made them simultaneously feel seen and unseen (Lu & Newton, 2019). Though HSIs are minority-serving institutions at heart, they are not perfect or without criticism. By listening to the experiences of minority student populations within these institutions, such as Black students, it can illuminate how socially ingrained anti-Blackness manifests within non-Black communities of color.

Anti-Blackness in Higher Education and Black Joy

Many Black students who enter HSIs are under the impression that, because these institutions are minority- and Hispanic-serving, they will be accepted and that these colleges will provide abundant academic resources (Bonner et al., 2015). Most often, however, Black students experience the opposite, as they indicate feelings of exclusion and a sense that their varying needs are not met (Pirtle et al., 2024). As explained in existing literature, anti-Blackness manifests itself within HSIs through stereotyped perceptions of Black students, shaped by legacies of White Supremacy. In Brooms and Druery’s (2023) study, 16 Black male participants who attended an HSI in the U.S. Southwest reported experiences of stereotyping from their peers, including feelings of nonbeing and nothingness (e.g., “They used to look right past me” p. 690), pervasive racialized-gendered stereotypes (e.g., “Black males are lazy” p. 691), and projections that they lack intelligence (e.g., “I don’t think they view me as someone as intellectual as I am” p. 692). Additionally, Black students have reported that they are underrepresented in the student population at HSIs and that these campuses lack Black faculty (Serrano, 2022). They felt the lack of representation meant that the commitment to supporting students of color, especially Black students, was minimal (Pirtle et al., 2024). Gaines (2024) found that these experiences can have academic, social, and psychological consequences for how Black students experience the institution, perform academically, engage on campus, and think about themselves. Any of these factors, individually, can have a detrimental effect on educational outcomes. Collectively, these experiences reveal a lack of institutional commitment to educating and protecting Black students

and creating an environment where they can thrive (Gaines, 2024).

Sense of Belonging of Black Students

Most of the literature reaffirms that Black students in a community with other Black students can build agency and strength in their Black identity (Tichavakunda, 2020). Black students are finding communities and spaces where they can challenge the norms and traditions that hinder their ability to thrive (Tichavakunda, 2020). Through these efforts, Black students are creating a community with other students who share their racial and ethnic identity, and with those who share a similar passion for effecting change for the betterment of Black students. This is reinforced by research on the campus climate among Black students in racial climates. Although Black students face challenges that other marginalized students do not, they use these challenges to motivate and support their Black peers (Chrystal et al., 2018). As they work through their struggles, they push forward to create a pipeline that motivates other Black students to follow that path, hoping to support and welcome more Black students. The relationships created are the driving force of Black students feeling welcomed on their campus.

With such a small representation, it can become difficult for Black students to find community amongst same-race peers. This is important because Students of Color tend to find peace, empowerment, and support when surrounded by other Peers of Color within their informally created networks at HSIs (Comeaux et al., 2021). Creating dedicated spaces for Black students is crucial in fostering a sense of belonging and cultural affirmation. Gaines (2023) highlights that Black students expressed a desire to engage in discussions about their interests within spaces shared with other Black students, suggesting a wish to be in environments where they can openly celebrate their culture and affirm the cultural wealth rooted in their communities and lived experiences. He also highlights that establishing Black-centered spaces and events beyond the classroom enables Black students to build connections with their peers and strengthen their sense of community at an HSI (Gaines, 2023).

Within Black student belonging, we glimpse Black joy. As Tichavakunda (2022) describes in her study, participants show that despite their racially determined problem status, they also experience joy because of their race. Her findings show that Black joy rests upon tenuous ground, and joy sometimes emerges from the tragic. Black joy, like Black life, persists and is, thus, sustained by the Black community despite immeasurable odds (Tichavakunda, 2022). Examining how participants understand Black joy deepens understanding of how race is felt and experienced (Tichavakunda, 2022).

This literature review provided the foundation for our assessment while highlighting the need to broaden assessment efforts at HSIs to include other marginalized student groups. As Gaines (2024) points out, even with well-intended educational practices, educators may still face challenges in ensuring equity for all students, particularly for Black students at HSIs. They stress the importance of regularly reflecting on pedagogy and adapting to students' changing needs through assessment and supporting literature. This reinforces why it is so important to keep assessment efforts current, ensuring that institutional practices effectively support specific marginalized student populations.

Frameworks

Black Critical Race Theory and Black Placemaking, our theoretical frameworks, provided context for the complex meanings and experiences of Black students, informed the development of our interview questions, and enabled us to explore Black students as individuals and as students within a specific space. This section will give a brief overview of the theoretical frameworks.

Black Critical Race Theory

Our study analyzes the unique experiences of Black students at an HSI through the Black Critical Race Theory (BlackCrit) and Black Placemaking lenses, which are critical race-based theoretical frameworks that center Blackness. BlackCrit is a branch of Critical Race Theory (CRT; Dumas & Ross, 2016) that differs from CRT in its focus on the specific lived experiences of Black people. CRT acknowledges and challenges racism through its five tenets (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017); however, it is not a theory of Blackness. BlackCrit acknowledges intersectionality and cautions against viewing Blackness as monolithic. It defines anti-Blackness as a social construct rooted in hatred that specifically despises Black people, and it posits that anti-Blackness is common and embedded in society (Dumas & Ross, 2016). BlackCrit focuses on the ways that history, policy, and practices have created and perpetuated the dehumanization of Black individuals in society. It also provides a framework for analyzing how educational practices and policies continue to marginalize, oppress, and disdain Black students, staff, and faculty, even in spaces designed to serve People of Color (Dumas & Ross, 2016). This theory allowed us to center and honor diverse Black student experiences within our assessments and directly address anti-Blackness and the unique ways systemic racism impacts their college experience.

Black Placemaking

Our assessment also used Black Placemaking, which emphasizes how Black people in urban settings transform oppressive spaces into places of resistance, belonging, and community (Tichavakunda, 2024). These spaces can be characterized by joy and celebrate the collective agency of Black people (Hunter et al., 2016). Specifically, we examined the framing of Black Placemaking in higher education, which acknowledges the permanence of racism on college campuses while highlighting the diversity and humanity of Black life (Tichavakunda, 2024). In addition, Black Placemaking emphasizes the labor of campus stakeholders who contribute to the creation and sustenance of Black places on campus (Tichavakunda, 2024). Thus, utilizing a Black Placemaking framework was essential to understanding the Black student experience at an HSI, as it broadened the analysis of Black life on college campuses beyond resistance and experiences of racism and anti-Blackness to include how Black students experience joy and co-create communities to foster a sense of belonging (Bell, 1992).

Methodology & Methods

Photovoice, coined in 1994 by Caroline C. Wang and Mary Ann Burris, is a qualitative research methodology where participants answer questions by taking pictures (Latz, 2017). After the initial photo-taking process, participants come together in focus groups or interviews to discuss the meaning of their photographs and explain how they relate to the posed questions. PhotoVoice intentionally uses photographs to give a voice to those "that ordinarily would not be heard, and broadcast[s] them into the halls of decision-making power" (Wang & Burris, 1994, p. 182). The PhotoVoice methodology

also stresses free will and is a community-based effort that positions the participants as co-researchers (Latz, 2017). If interested, participants can take on a wide range of responsibilities beyond what is initially asked of them, such as analyzing research-generated data. Ultimately, participants should be seen as the authors of their own lives, and the end goal is transformative change (Latz, 2017).

To assess Black student experiences at WCU, we selected PhotoVoice as our methodology. Often known as a participatory-action research methodology, it gives participants control over their stories (Latz, 2017). Our interest in this assessment was to determine how the WCU community could better support Black students and to better understand what experiences at WCU made Black students feel welcome. To genuinely understand this community's experiences and ensure our assessment does not contribute to their exploitation, it is only appropriate for participants to share and interpret their own experiences. With this focus on free will, we hoped to present an assessment that authentically captured community members' joy and hopes for improvement. This, in essence, is the spirit of *Collaborative and Co-Creative* assessment, where both the participant and interviewer are empowered and learning from each other. The participant is given autonomy and understands the goals associated with the work. Bourke (2023) said, "Assessment tools in higher education that provide more equitable options for students will first involve novel approaches" (p.189), so this methodology, new to assessment, embodied all three ACCELERATE principles of *Equity and Empowerment-Motivated, Collaborative and Co-Creative, Action-Driven*, and was appropriate for our campus-wide assessment approach.

We used PhotoVoice to assess the Black student experience in three stages: micro, mezzo, and macro. The micro stage was individual interviews with current and former Black WCU students; the mezzo stage was a photo exhibit where campus community members were invited to discuss the micro findings; and the macro level was an open library exhibit for the campus community to engage with the assessment findings and offer further insight.

Micro Stage- Individual Images and Interviews

After receiving IRB approval, Black participants were recruited through a snowball sample (Noy, 2008). As we met students, we would ask them to recommend or share the project with a friend. In addition, we advertised through social media posts, worked with campus partners (i.e., student housing, cultural centers, and academic departments), hung out at the Black Cultural Center and chatting with students, and emailed current Black undergraduate/graduate students and Black alumni. A total of 13 Black participants were involved: seven current undergraduate and graduate students and six alumni (undergraduate and graduate). The group consisted of five males and eight females. Additional demographic information shared included three individuals identifying as LGBTQ+, one Christian, one individual with a disability, one first-generation college student, one adult re-entry student, and two older adult students.

Potential participants were emailed a consent form and instructions for participating in the micro stage of the assessment. This included participants taking at least five to ten photos without faces and writing a 50–100-word explanation of how their image answered one of the assessment prompts: a) How do Black students at WCU experience antiblackness on campus? b) How do Black students at WCU

define and experience joy on campus? c) How do Black students at WCU experience support and belonging on campus? Each participant uploaded their image and explanation to a Google Slides and their password-protected electronic folder. Interviews were scheduled with all the participants and conducted via Zoom for an hour. A team of three student researchers interviewed one participant, taking on one of three roles: interviewer, timekeeper, and technology coordinator. All participants were asked a warm-up question and the same initial questions to start the dialogue:

1. Describe your picture.
2. What is happening in your picture?
3. Why did you take a picture of this?
4. What does this tell us about your experience at WCU as a Black student?
5. How can this picture provide opportunities for us to improve campus life for Black students at WCU?

Mezzo Stage- Community Dialogue

In partnership with student housing and aligned with PhotoVoice's efforts to create change and accountability (Latz, 2017), our team organized a community dialogue, entitled *Life as a Black Student: A Photographic Journey*, for the campus community to witness and discuss the micro findings. Team members used various outreach methods to encourage attendance at the community dialogue event. Campus administrators, including the Provost, the Dean of the College of Education, the Vice President for Student Affairs, Black Faculty and Staff Association members, and other administrators, were invited directly by the faculty lead.

Assessment team members who worked as administrators at WCU posted event flyers in their offices, sent emails to administrators across campus, personally invited Black student club leaders, and used social media to spread the word to all students. As attendees entered our event space, they heard background music and saw 39 framed images with photo descriptions hanging around the room. They were given three sticky notes in different colors to record their reactions to the photos they saw in response to the assessment questions. Guests used yellow sticky notes to respond to photos of joy, pink for belonging, and green for anti-Blackness, reflecting on participants' campus experiences. To promote inclusivity, the community dialogue included a virtual component via Zoom. PowerPoint slides with images and descriptions ran in a loop, enabling participation from individuals unable to attend in person. Assessment team members engaged with people through chat throughout the event.

After allowing time for reflection, we facilitated a community dialogue with about 100 people, sharing the comments left on the sticky notes, revealing themes of joy and oppression. The dialogue created an opportunity for individuals to share how the comments and visuals made them feel, as well as what the project personally meant to them. The event used a powerful combination of visuals, stories, and open conversation among students, staff, administrators, faculty, and alumni to highlight ongoing Black student-centered issues and the need for policy change. The assessment at the mezzo level was accessible to the broader campus community and helped affirm and expand our understanding of campus climate for Black students.

Macro Stage- Library and Campus Exhibit

To assess the campus community (macro) regarding anti-Blackness, joy, and belonging, following the community dialogue, the assessment team worked with the campus library archivist to install a PhotoVoice Library Community exhibit (Figure) on the second floor of the library in a high-traffic area. The trifold exhibit was on display for three months during the Fall 2024 semester. It incorporated photos from the “Life as a Black Student: A Photographic Journey” community dialogue (mezzo assessment), three photos and their corresponding reflections (micro assessment), and a description of what PhotoVoice is and why we conducted this study. To collect campus-wide assessment data, a section of the trifold had four reflection questions. For example, are there any programs, initiatives, or workshops that you feel are especially critical to the creation of a sense of belonging at WCU? What changes or improvements would you recommend enhancing racial inclusivity and equity on campus? Participants were invited to write their thoughts on index cards and place them into a locked voting box.

Figure 1

Library Exhibit Interactive boards



Note. Research team image

At the end of each week, we emptied the box and incorporated the cards into the exhibit by posting them on our display board, each with the corresponding question. The questions were designed to understand how attendees interpreted and reflected on their experiences through the lens of the photos and reflection questions. In addition to these questions, we offered a passive form of participation. Attendees could place a colored sticker (representing one of our three areas of assessment) on a board to answer the question: *What theme do you feel has been the most salient in your experience at WCU?* This passive activity was informative and provided insight into how many people visited and interacted with the exhibit, even if they did not respond to the reflection questions.

Lastly, we curated a list of 50 books available for checkout and displayed them on a bookshelf next to the exhibit, so attendees could further engage with the concepts we presented.

Assessment Analysis

The diversity in data collection directly impacted how the data was analyzed. In the micro stage, after member checks were conducted (Latz, 2017), we used PhotoVoice Analysis, which involved “a photograph analysis based on the researcher’s interpretations, a photograph analysis based on the participants’ interpretations, a cross-comparison, and theorization” (Tsang, 2020, p. 149). We co-created a data guide using Google Excel to help us organize, categorize, and analyze the data. The data guide included our categories, how we defined each category, what should and should not be included within a category, and participant quotes that supported our analysis. The data codebook ensured consistent labeling of our themes. For example, Anti-Blackness included attitudes, behaviors, practices, or views that could prevent Black people from experiencing full dignity and participation within the institution. Belonging focused on moments when participants described feeling comfortable, safe, welcomed, or supported in campus spaces, while Joy captured moments when participants described happiness, pleasure, or euphoria. Other categories, such as Perseverance and Participants’ Suggestions for Improvement of Black Student Life, captured how participants navigated their experiences.

We divided participants and assigned each their own tab. Team members started by providing their own interpretations of the photos. Reflecting and writing out what meaning they made from the images, then read the participants’ image reflections and interview transcripts, and then conducted a cross-comparison with what they understood in relation to participants’ interpretations. This process allowed other themes beyond anti-Blackness, joy, and belonging to emerge. Direct quotes were pulled from the transcripts and added to the Google Excel. We used this process to make sense of the photographs and narratives together, refine our categories, and identify themes across participants’ experiences.

The Community Dialogue (mezzo stage) data were collected through the post-its participants posted next to images during their gallery walk of the exhibit, and notes taken during the dialogue. All the post-its were laid out, and common emotions, ideas, and reactions were categorized in relation to the dialogue notes. For the Library Community Exhibit (macro stage), we reviewed each reflection index card for common themes and collected quantitative data from a passive activity in which community members placed dots on themes that felt salient to their campus experiences. Our team reviewed all feedback from the micro, mezzo, and macro to identify connections, similarities, and insights across the data, and shared them with decision-makers and shareholders at WCU.

Micro, Mezzo, & Macro Assessment Results

In analyzing the data from our assessment, we identified patterns and common experiences among Black students at WCU related to anti-Blackness, joy, and a sense of belonging. The next section is broken down to share the findings from the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of the PhotoVoice assessments. We have included images and image descriptions from our PhotoVoice project, but not all due to copyright and privacy concerns. To protect participants’ privacy, pseudonyms were used.

Micro Assessment Level- Interviews

During the micro-level stage, participants answered questions in one-on-one interviews and unpacked the meanings behind their images. We had the opportunity to understand Black students' experiences with anti-Blackness, joy, and a sense of belonging, which brought a clearer perspective on their lived experiences and their commonality with one another at WCU.

Anti-Blackness

For this assessment, anti-Blackness is defined as attitudes, behaviors, practices, or views that can prohibit any Black person from having full dignity and participation in an institution (Dumas & Ross, 2016). Almost every participant spoke of an experience they had at WCU. Within these areas, two themes arose that exposed the ways Black students predominantly experienced anti-Blackness: a) Lack of spaces for Black students and b) Low retention of Black faculty, students, and staff, which affected representation.

Lack of spaces. The lack of space for Black students was evident in how they felt they did not have a place in the WCU community, as if they were outsiders within a school that was supposed to be safe for all students to learn and grow. Many times, this feeling appeared to arise after events that negatively impacted the Black student community in a way that brought feelings of insecurity and fear. Becca explained, "I think that was the biggest thing, was that I felt like as a Black student [...] where is my safe space? Do I even have a safe space?" These feelings for Becca were in response to a fraternity on campus doing Blackface. For the participant, the event demonstrated disrespect toward her community. No consequences were given for the incident that occurred, giving the feeling that her community is not essential to protect and defend, bringing to the perspective that Black students are outsiders. The photo she found represented her experience of a lack of space and showed a Black student community and others coming together for a Black Lives Matter protest (Figure 2). For the participant, this lack of space prompts her to advocate for her community so they can speak out and create a campus space that provides them with a fair opportunity.

Jacob had a similar feeling after constantly worrying about their safety following the 2016 election. They recalled feeling, "At [WCU, I'm] like physically uncomfortable, not just like feeling mentally minoritized but like physically I don't belong in this space." The participant connected it to a photo of a campus building previously named after a donor, whose views are not aligned with DEI (Figure 3). This building houses a college considered one of the most significant at the university. The building is a physical representation of how People of Color do not have a place of their own and are forced to be in areas not representative of who they are. Even now, the building serves as a reminder to Jacob of their experience during the election, through both its physical and non-physical representations.

Figure 2

Black Lives Matter protest with sign in Dallas, emphasizing social justice.



Note. Donated by Lan Johnson- Public Domain taken June 6, 2020

Figure 3

Campus Building



Note. Participant's personal image

Lack of Representation. The issue of underrepresentation emerged as a prominent theme among participants, particularly regarding the limited representation of Black faculty, students, and staff. Many participants shared experiences of being the sole Black person in their programs or classrooms.

For example, Ivy noted, "I was struggling so bad with visibility in the program because I just didn't see anyone who looked like me in the class. I was constantly like, " Do I belong here, like, why? Like, where we at?" Similarly, Edgar highlighted the challenges associated with having only one Black professor, emphasizing the additional burden placed on this faculty member: "She's also the only Black person in the whole English department... and she is taking on so much, and so that's why I look to her for so much information."

Joy

This assessment defined joy as any instance in which participants expressed explicit feelings of happiness, pleasure, or euphoria. Photos submitted showed specific examples of what brought participants joy or instances that represented joy. In reviewing transcripts and photo texts, two themes arose: a) Affirming spaces and b) Shared experiences and identities allowed for the formation of connections with others.

Affirming spaces. These are places where participants have a space that brings them comfort and offers an opportunity to be with other students with similar identities. The African American Resource Center (AARC) is one space consistently mentioned for providing participants with this chance. Michelle explained how "[...] Black students need space on campus to chit chat." The AARC provided this space for the participant, who explained that they enjoyed speaking with other students in a small corner in the center, as shown in their photo of the corner and the black sofa where students can sit. They went on to say, "[...] it's really important that I feel connected to other Black students on campus, because we're just such a small population, we make up 2.2% of the student population here." Michelle's experience shows that affirming spaces are essential, as they enable people to meet others and form connections. On such a large campus with limited space for Black students, knowing that the AARC exists offers a chance to connect with the already limited number of students who would otherwise be difficult to reach. The back corner at the AARC provided this opportunity (Figure 4). It is a comfort space that allows students to come to sit and speak with one another, surrounded by prominent people and moments in Black History.

Skylar shared similar sentiments to Michelle, as shown in their photo of a record player in the AARC that holds several vinyls (Figure 5). They explained how "This place is a safe environment for all Black students." The AARC was not only a safe environment for students but also a place where they could learn more about their culture. He explained how "[...] music was one of the many subjects that connected me to the Black people, and then African Americans, here on campus." The record player provided an opportunity to bring people together through their shared enjoyment of music, as Skylar stated, "[...] one of the biggest symbols of Black culture is music." When this photo was taken, music was being played.

Figure 4

AARC- Black Cultural Center



Note. Participant's personal image

Figure 5

AARC- Record player



Note. Participant's personal image

The safety of an affirming space allowed them to actively learn more about their culture without fear of judgment or misunderstanding. Both participants' experiences in the AARC highlight the importance of affirming spaces that provide students with opportunities to explore their culture and foster community, thereby bringing joy to their university experience. Although this space felt like home to many, the challenge is that it is the only space on campus and usually closes at 5pm. This doesn't account for graduate students with night classes or students with classes in different parts of campus.

Shared Experiences and Identities. Building connections with students resulted from having similar identities and sharing experiences. This represents Justine's experience as a graduate student at the university. The photo she chose for the project was a beauty ad featuring 16 Black women of various skin tones, shapes, and sizes, sitting and standing, clustered together, wearing black crop tops and jeans. This illustrates her reliance on other Black women at the university for support as she navigated her graduate experience. They stated, "We still had similar experiences, and a lot of where some of us were coming from was like we're rooting for everybody Black." Within the Black student population, individuals have diverse experiences that set them apart, but at the core, there is a shared understanding that binds the population. This similarity helped participants lean on others for support, which in turn helped them experience joy at the university. Her photo embodies this idea. Even though the photo held several women, each with their own individuality, they were together.

Jones also describes this in their experience with their graduate program cohort, as represented in a group photo of 22 racially and gender-diverse students, all smiling, seated at a long table with plates and glasses at a restaurant after class. They stated, "And this is what joy looks like: being surrounded by people who know you, who care for you, and who see you for who you are, and they want you to be the best that you can be." Joy was experienced through the shared experience that allowed the participant to be valued for who they were as they journeyed through their academic program. They were together in the program and had formed deep bonds through their shared experience. Both participants' journeys in higher education highlighted the importance of connecting with others with similar backgrounds and experiences, which aided their progress. These people with whom they had formed connections helped them feel safe and supported in a system that offered few opportunities.

Sense of Belonging

This assessment conceptualizes a sense of belonging as the experience of feeling completely comfortable and safe within a given campus environment, ensuring that the individual feels welcomed, accepted, and supported (Tichavakunda, 2020). Participants submitted photographs highlighting specific locations or spaces where they experienced a sense of belonging. Analyzing the transcripts and accompanying photo captions revealed two themes that shed light on how a sense of belonging was cultivated at WCU. These themes include affirming personal identities through interactions with others who share similar identities and creating communities or networks that facilitate meaningful connections among individuals.

Affirming Identities. The affirmation of personal identities through interactions with others who share similar identities emerged as a prominent theme in the participants' responses. For example, Tanya noted, "To me, having the opportunity to connect with others, you know, Black students, having that

ability to connect with other Black faculty and staff on campus, that little thing that can motivate them to share their similar experiences,” highlighting the importance of identifying and connecting with individuals who share one's racial or cultural identity. Tanya illustrated this with a photo of a Black student and a faculty member sitting in chairs, engaged in conversation. Tanya’s photo depicts a Black faculty member wearing a purple long-sleeved shirt, seated on the left, and a Black male student wearing a white long-sleeved shirt with red sleeves, sitting side by side on the right, at a table with papers, a binder, and a pencil in front of them in a classroom. The faculty member rests her left hand on the student’s shoulder as she speaks. Similarly, Edgar expressed, “To see people who look like me or have backgrounds similar to mine come in and then recognize that we have a lot in common, and they can feel safe in a space like that,” underscoring the significance of seeing oneself reflected in others in fostering a sense of belonging. Jerad also shared this sentiment, describing how he found both representation and community through a specific campus space: “At first, I had no plans on going, but after being reassured by my peers that I belong there, and it would not be the same without me, I went. And I am glad I did!”

A prominent theme that emerged from participants’ experiences in the study was the formation of campus communities. For instance, Tasha reflected, “I am learning how to use the support of my cohort and my friends, and making connections to be able to, if you will, tread the waters of, you know, of higher education.” Tasha also describes this in their experience, with a graduation photo of cohort members and family. This highlights the significance of peer support in navigating the challenges of higher education. Furthermore, participants emphasized the importance of cultivating and maintaining these connections. As Eric noted, “My chosen community of people motivated me and kept me grounded in my purpose and goals. I was intentional about building connections and relationships, and they have flourished into lifelong connections” (Figure 6). This underscores the role of intentional relationship-building in fostering both personal and academic success, with many participants expressing that these connections contributed to long-term support and motivation.

Figure 6

Student Services Office Entrance



Note. Participant’s personal image

Building on this theme of community, participants frequently pointed to the African American Resource Center (AARC) as a central and symbolic space where those connections were nurtured and sustained.” James described the space (Figure 7), stating, “Well, I mean, first, when you just walk in. It's just it's so vibrant, and it's just so Black, I mean. And when I say that, I mean, it just feels like you walk into a Black person's home.” Similarly, Denise shared, “If you are looking for Black people, go to the library, go to AARC. This is where most people are, I mean, most of the Black people.” These reflections emphasize how the physical environment, such as the AARC, is critical in reinforcing a sense of belonging, particularly among individuals who identify with specific cultural or racial communities.

Figure 7

AARC- Black Cultural Center



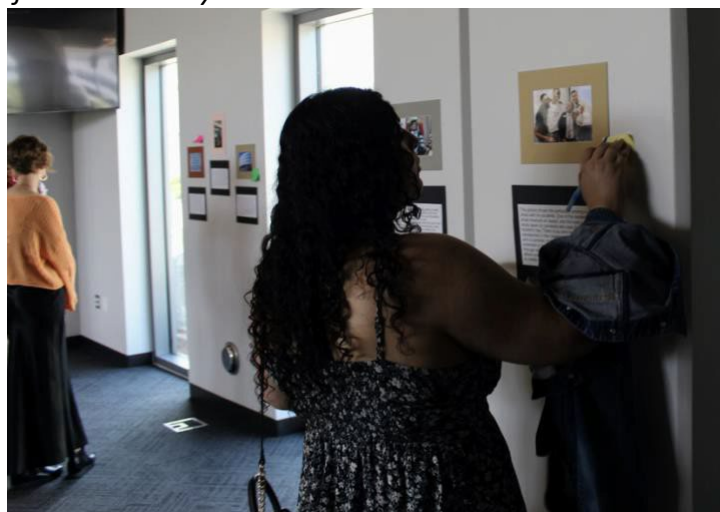
Note. Participant's personal image

Mezzo Assessment Level- The Community Dialogue

The Life as a Black Student: A Photographic Journey community dialogue event was well attended. The event attendees consisted of higher education graduate students, members from the Black Faculty and Staff Association, two classes of undergraduate education students, a few PhotoVoice participants, about twenty current and alumni Black students, the Executive Director of Human Resources and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, the Interim Vice President of University Advancement, the Interim Vice President for Student Affairs, various staff members from different Student Affairs offices, faculty from the College of Education, and a representative from the Provost office. Given the nature of WCU's campus designation as an HSI with low Black student enrollment, most of the event attendees were non-Black people, which is of important note considering that Black faculty, students, and staff cannot alone cure the deep-seated anti-Blackness within the structure of the institution at large. Our colored sticky note assessment at the beginning of our event served as a temperature check to gauge where attendees' thoughts and feelings stood after reviewing our PhotoVoice gallery (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Campus Community Post-it Reflection Activity



Note. Research team image

Sense of Belonging

The attendees' responses to images of belonging emphasized Black students' right to be part of the campus community and the integral role of affinity centers in supporting them. Some direct responses were "Belonging because the center offers a safe space for Black students", "Representing, including, and accepting", "Community", "Support from the community = safety and belonging", and "We belong." While holding an open space for students, staff, faculty, and administrators to share their reactions and responses to our project verbally, one Black student shared that he had never seen so many "People [who were not] Black at an event on campus that spoke to the Black student experience." He shared the joy he felt at seeing more people outside the Black community doing their part to continue fostering their own critical consciousness.

At the conclusion of this event, some findings were not what people said, but what they did afterward. The Provost Office committed to financially supporting the installment of the PhotoVoice Library Exhibit to support our campus-wide assessment and campus awareness, the Interim Vice President for Student Affairs set up meetings with our team to better understand what actions should be taken, and a report of our findings was sent to the Black Academic Success Director, so our PhotoVoice assessment findings could be added to the Black student focus groups and survey assessments that had already been done.

Macro Assessment Level- Black PhotoVoice Library Exhibit

Figure 9

Library Exhibit Display



Note. Research team image

The data we collected from the Black PhotoVoice Library Exhibit engagement consisted of qualitative responses to four questions we posed and quantitative data from our sticker board (Figure 8). Overall, we received 13 short responses to our four questions and 39 stickers in total on our board. The breakdown of sticker responses by theme is: 16 for Sense of Belonging, 12 for Anti-Blackness, and 11 for Black Joy. Since we were unable to monitor attendees' responses, these numbers could be skewed if individuals participated more than once or responded multiple times. As the prompt was to place a sticker on the theme that has felt most salient during their time at WCU, based on this data, we can make better assumptions about how attendees connected with our themes and whether they were able to identify them at all after engaging with our exhibit.

The short responses varied in whether and how they answered our questions. Responses encompassed issues specific to WCU, a desire to challenge issues affecting Black students, staff, and faculty, and an acknowledgment of the importance of Black Joy and this type of research. Furthermore, not all comments were positive, some posed questions to the research team. For example, some attendee responses included comments such as, "I think it is important to recognize the challenges and discrimination that arise for students/faculty of color. Ignoring issues like SGMH [campus building name] being named after a well-known racist makes People of Color feel undervalued and disrespected..." and "Black joy is an important part of our society! I think it is important to acknowledge culture and excellence!"

Discussion

Drawing on Black Critical Race Theory (BlackCrit) and Black Placemaking, our assessment revealed that Black students at WCU, a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), experienced their campus as both a site of ongoing anti-Blackness and as a space where they actively cultivate joy, community, and belonging. BlackCrit enabled us to critically examine how WCU's institutional culture and policies, despite its designation as an HSI, fail to address the specific needs of Black students (Dumas & Ross, 2016). As the literature confirms and consistent with BlackCrit, HSI designation alone does not guarantee racial equity or cultural responsiveness (Garcia, 2023; Pirtle et al., 2024). Instead, many participants described feeling like outsiders in classrooms, programs, and physical spaces that rarely reflected or welcomed Blackness. The absence of Black faculty, the lack of consequences for racist campus events, and feelings of invisibility echo the literature on anti-Blackness in higher education, where systemic exclusion is often embedded within practices designed to support “diversity” (Brooms, 2023; Dumas & Ross, 2016). HSI must intentionally disrupt anti-Blackness at an institutional level, and simply relying on a designation is performative at best and neglect of the realities and needs of Black students at worst.

However, by applying a Black Placemaking lens, we also saw how Black students co-created pockets of resistance and care, especially in spaces like the African American Resource Center, where Black joy, cultural affirmation, and peer connection were not just possible but thriving. This mirrors Tichavakunda's (2020) framing of Black placemaking as a radical act of transformation, in which students reimagine oppressive environments into ones of collective belonging and healing. Ultimately, the findings reinforce that anti-Blackness is not eradicated simply because an institution is designated as minority-serving. Real equity requires acknowledging the specific impacts of racism on Black students, investing in Black-affirming spaces and personnel, and viewing Black student joy and resistance as essential data points—not exceptions. Our study underscores the need to use critical, race-conscious frameworks in assessment to reveal both the harm and the hope that shape the Black student experience at HSIs.

Limitations

There were a few limitations in our use of PhotoVoice as an assessment tool that others should consider. First, PhotoVoice is not a quick process. We completed all three stages of the assessment process in 10 months. We could have spent more time in stage one and on planning stage two. This process is new to most people, so more time was needed to recruit participants and explain how to participate in this type of assessment. Second, when using PhotoVoice with racially marginalized communities, Latz (2017) said participants often want to include pictures of family and friends. We encountered a similar challenge, so some pictures could not be displayed or included in this publication. There is a balance between protecting people's privacy and empowering participants to express their creativity through images. Having more time to offer an example and to explain guidelines for appropriate images would help with this. Again, this goes back to Gaff's (2026) emphasis on slowing down the assessment process. Lastly, we conducted this assessment as a faculty-student team. We needed more time to share what we were doing with the campus community, so more students, staff, faculty, and classes could participate in the community dialogue and/or take trips to view the library exhibit.

Implications for Student Affairs Practitioners

Our assessment that actively implements ACCELERATE principles such as *Equity and Empowerment-motivated*, *Collaborative* and *Co-Creative* and *Action-Driven*, reveals critical implications for student affairs professionals working at HSIs, particularly when serving Black students within these spaces. First and foremost, student affairs practitioners must recognize that HSIs are not inherently equitable for all Students of Color, and that anti-Blackness persists even within institutions that carry minority-serving designations. Intentional strategies must be implemented to address the specific needs of Black students, whose experiences are often rendered invisible within broader diversity efforts. This includes resisting homogenizing approaches to student support, especially those that lump all Students of Color together without recognizing the unique manifestations of anti-Blackness.

Second, student affairs professionals should leverage art-based and participatory methods, such as PhotoVoice, to gather authentic, nuanced data on student experiences. We are living in a time when traditional ways of doing things no longer work or yield the same results. From the lasting impacts of COVID-19 and the racial uprisings to the rapid rise of AI and the instability of our current political climate, both students and educators have changed. How we engage with and serve students must evolve to reflect the realities of today's world. Assessment must be ongoing, adaptive, and rooted in social justice. This approach puts BlackCrit into practice by honoring and believing the experiential knowledge of Black students. Practitioners should create regular opportunities for dialogue between students, staff, and leadership to respond to assessment findings with concrete action. Directly aligned with the goals of ACCELERATE's principles, PhotoVoice actively contributes to centering the voices of marginalized students, disrupting traditional power dynamics in assessment to reduce harm, building in "careful accountability," and fostering community engagement that surveys alone cannot capture (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025).

Third, assessment practices in student affairs must be race-conscious and theory-informed, even at HSIs, where we might assume this would naturally occur given the large number of Latine Students of Color. Using frameworks such as ACCELERATE, Black Critical Race Theory, and Black Placemaking enables practitioners to surface nuanced, intersectional, and systemic dynamics that traditional assessment tools often miss. Institutions must implement and align assessments with the principles of ACCELERATE, prioritize ongoing critical reflection, including qualitative methods like PhotoVoice, to elevate the lived experiences of marginalized students, and translate those insights into action. Ultimately, fostering Black joy, resisting anti-Blackness, and building spaces of care and resistance are not supplementary goals—they are central to equity-minded student affairs practice.

Fourth, to meaningfully support Black students, practitioners must intentionally design, fund, and sustain Black-affirming spaces, programs, and personnel, such as the African American Resource Center, which the participants consistently identified as sites of joy, healing, and belonging. These spaces are not auxiliary; they are essential. As higher education faces increasing political attacks on DEI efforts and cultural diversity, we must come together to protect and affirm the value of student services. In this climate, PhotoVoice is more than an assessment tool—it is a powerful act of resistance and a form of freedom dreaming that can help us build toward a more just and inclusive future. Lastly, joy must be treated as serious data. Black joy, as the participants demonstrated, is not incidental; it is a

form of resistance, resilience, and belonging. Centering joy allows student affairs professionals to reimagine the campus not just as a place of survival for Black students, but as a place where they can truly thrive.

Conclusion

This assessment illuminated the nuanced experiences of Black students at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), revealing that while the HSI designation aims to serve marginalized communities, it often fails to fully support Black students. Using Black Critical Race Theory (BlackCrit) and Black Placemaking, we centered Black student voices and highlighted how systemic anti-Blackness continues to shape their experiences. Participants shared feelings of isolation, underrepresentation, and exclusion—issues compounded by a lack of Black faculty, minimal Black-specific resources, and institutional inaction when harm occurred. Yet within these realities, Black students also cultivated spaces of belonging, joy, and resistance, particularly through community, peer support, and affirming cultural spaces such as the African American Resource Center.

Using PhotoVoice allowed us to move beyond traditional survey-based assessment to authentically capture and share the stories of Black students. This method elevated participants as co-researchers and authors of their own experience, making visible both their challenges and their visions for transformation. Our findings call on HSIs to reassess their commitment to equity, moving beyond pan-ethnic approaches and intentionally addressing the specific needs of Black students with care and resources. As we think about future research, we would like to see if PhotoVoice assessment works for other marginalized student groups on campus, including faculty and staff from these communities. We would recommend expanding the time spent collecting data at the mezzo and macro levels by hosting multiple community townhalls across campus and creating a community display that could rotate around campus. For example, moving the exhibit from the library to the Student Union or other academic buildings to capture a wider and more diverse flow of traffic from campus community members. Lastly, consider other institutional types, as they might yield a different response or greater openness to this assessment approach, such as minority-serving institutions and community colleges.

Ultimately, we affirm that Black students deserve more than just a seat at the table—they deserve environments where they are seen, valued, and supported to thrive. Institutions must commit to sustained, equity-focused assessment and action that center Black life, challenge anti-Blackness, and embrace Black joy as both a right and a roadmap for institutional transformation.

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