Bursting the Business Bubble – Expanding the Diversity of Harvard Undergraduate Women in Business

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the diversity, as pertains to both race represented by the membership and industries represented by the programming, of Harvard Undergraduate Women in Business (WIB). Upon laying out the blueprint for action, the paper provides introductory context about the organization and about my role as Co-President of the organization. Next, there are sections dedicated to literature review, description of the methods used, and analysis of the data collected through a survey and in-depth interviews. The piece concludes with a discussion of the findings and suggestions for further exploration and research.

I affirm my awareness of the Harvard College Honor Code. Charlotte Kim

Executive Summary / Blueprint for Action

Upon investigating the present diversity of race among the organization's membership and of industries represented in the programming that the organization provides, I recommend that Harvard Undergraduate Women in Business implement a Campus Diversity Ambassador Program, fill a void in tech recruiting awareness through revamped tech-centered programming, and rebrand the organization's fundamental mission and vision to broaden our reach and accessibility.

Through conducting this research, I have worked with other members of the organization to conceive of the Campus Diversity Ambassador Program, which is now set to be implemented. The program will aim to organically increase the racial and ethnic diversity of our membership through two primary channels. The first is through Campus Diversity Directors, whom we plan to recruit this semester. These would be current members of Women in Business of minority status who are also involved in cultural groups on campus. In return for being granted committee member status and gaining access to the accompanying perks (invitations to social events, eligibility to go on career exploratory trips, and more), these individuals would be asked to host informal information sessions for female-identifying members of their cultural groups – or other individuals who identify with their same racial identity – to educate them about the resources offered by Women in Business and ultimately encourage them to join the organization. The Campus Diversity Directors would also lead affinity groups of existing WIB members who identify with a given identity marker. The second channel would be through Freshman Campus Diversity Ambassadors. We will send out applications for this position over the summer to incoming freshmen. In this role, they would have a unique opportunity to have a leadership position within their first semester at Harvard, in which they would work with the Campus Diversity Directors to spread awareness about WIB among minority communities. In addition, they would be tasked with fostering tight-knit affinity communities within the "comping" class, such as by organizing social get-togethers with WIB funding. The hope is that these efforts will increase retention in the comping class of people of minority status who might have otherwise dropped out upon failing to identify a compelling sense of community and support in the organization.

The second suggestion is to increase programming for the tech industry. With the rise of e-commerce, AI, and technological advancements, it is critical to increase the offerings specific

to this sector, so as to remain relevant and forward-thinking as an organization. Harvard presently lacks a robust support system for tech recruiting. There is little accessible information about tech recruiting timelines, as evidenced by the fact that the OCS calendars are overwhelmingly finance- and consulting-specific. To address this void, WIB could introduce committee positions that are specifically dedicated to working with tech companies, such as members who exclusively solicit sponsorships from them or who exclusively coordinate with them for networking events. We could also highlight tech companies through glorified networking events, such as day trips to local companies. Finally, we could integrate more tech company visits into existing programming, such as on our domestic and international career exploratory trips.

Third, we should utilize our marketing channels (both internally and externally) to emphasize that WIB is comprised of and welcomes people of a diverse range of concentrations (not just all Economics), career aspirations (not just all banking), racial and ethnic backgrounds (not just all White and Asian), extracurricular interests, personalities, and more.

Introduction

I am the Co-President of Harvard Undergraduate Women in Business (WIB), which was founded 20 years ago and is currently the largest undergraduate business organization at Harvard College. Having assumed our role in November 2018, my Co-President (Erin McCarthy) and I are placing a heavy emphasis on addressing issues of diversity within the organization – in regard to the racial make-up of our membership and the range of industries that we spotlight. The research question that I am seeking to answer is, "What are the most effective and sensitive ways to address the present lack of racial and industry-related career diversity of WIB's racial composition with that of Harvard's undergraduate population?" Concerning industries, I hope to address, "What are WIB's members' preferences in regard to the overall amount and specific kinds of industries that they learn about through WIB programming?" The audience for my actionable knowledge will first and foremost be WIB Executive Board, so that we can collectively implement tangible changes. I also plan to share the findings with the entire membership, for the sake of transparency and to solicit additional feedback. Finally, I hope that

my research will prove helpful for any pre-professional organizations at Harvard and beyond that are facing similar issues and questions.

WIB comprises approximately 600 members, including 13 board members (2 Co-Presidents and 10 Chairs of 9 committees). These committees are Alumnae Relations, Career Development, Community Outreach, Diversity, Expeditions, Intercollegiate Business Convention, Marketing, Membership Development, and Sponsorships. The work that they do includes planning the world's largest undergraduate business conference, securing financial partnerships to source our \$150,000+ budget, coordinating our partnership with HBS, and planning domestic and international career exploratory trips for our members.

This year, my Co-President and I introduced Diversity as a new committee, in response to a survey conducted last year that indicated our membership's disproportionately White and Asian racial make-up, which does not reflect that of Harvard's undergraduate body. Through the Diversity committee, we hope to identify some sources of and to consequently address this dearth of racial diversity. This committee will spearhead partnerships with cultural groups on campus, organize Diversity Discussion Dinners, and introduce affinity groups within WIB, with the objective of making each member feel that she has a safe and intimate community within the large organization. To guide recommendations for action to ameliorate the lack of racial diversity, I am hoping to get at the root of why WIB's membership does not reflect the general student body's diversity by finding some correlations between racial identity and career interests, as well as gaining insights into why students of color may not think to or may be reluctant to join WIB.

The second form of diversity that this research will explore is that of the range of industries that WIB members are exposed to. By the nature of our sponsorship structure, we naturally attract larger financial contributions from finance and consulting companies, as they recruit most heavily at Harvard. In addition to considerations of money, we also strive to align our career-based resources with the industries that have the highest demand among our members, which also disproportionately tend to be finance and consulting. However, it is difficult to determine whether these industries are the most popular among Harvard students due more to their inherent interest, or to the companies' proactive outreach. We are therefore hoping to educate our members about a broader range of industries, so that their career pursuits can be more informed and deliberate, even if they continue to disproportionately select into the same

industries. So as to begin addressing this concern, my Co-President and I have been working closely with the Career Development, Expeditions, and Sponsorships committees. In shaping recommendations for action regarding industry exposure, I am aiming to gauge the career interests of WIB members, so as to best support their aspirations.

Literature Review

There exists some literature that is linked to my research topics. First in regard to racial diversity, there have been studies on the effects of diversity on student group performance and satisfaction. Schoenecker, Martell, and Michlitsch's questionnaire-based study found that diversity negatively affected group satisfaction, particularly among undergraduate groups. They explain that there is a trade-off of in highly diverse groups between diminished performance arising from communication difficulties, on the one hand, and increased creativity due to multiple viewpoints, on the other.² However, they explain that much of the dissatisfaction with intergroup diversity results from the arbitrary assignment of students to groups, merely for the sake of increased diversity.³ They also predict that students' communication and cohesion should improve with practice.⁴ As there is a 10-week "comp" process to join WIB, I believe that the steps to become a member reflect a more deliberate, rather than arbitrary, decision-making process. As a result, I hypothesize that the positives of intergroup diversity would outweigh the potential drawbacks that these authors outline.

These authors also note the broader significance of heterogeneity in student groups, as it more accurately reflects the reality of the modern workforce, thus equipping students with the skills and knowledge to interact with people of diverse backgrounds.⁵ They also note that the ability to work well in heterogeneous groups is particularly important for minorities, who are most likely to work with individuals of backgrounds differing from their own.⁶ These reasons help illustrate why it is necessary, in my opinion, to strive to increase WIB's diversity, no matter what. This study, while pertinent to my research, also presents an opportunity for further research. The questionnaire asked students about the general heterogeneity of their groups, rather

Schoenecker, Timothy S, Kathryn D Martell, and Joseph F. Michlitsch, "Diversity, Performance, and Satisfaction in Student Group Projects: An Empirical Study." Research in Hiher Education, Vol. 38, Iss. 4, August 1997, Pg 479. https://search-proquest-com.ezpprod1.hul.harvard.edu/docview/62504625?accountid=11311&rfr id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprimo.

Ibid. Pg 481.

³ Ibid, Pg 492.

¹ Ibid, Pg 492.

⁵ Ibid, Pg 480.

⁶ Ibid, Pg 480.

than about racial diversity in particular. While racial diversity was the most statistically significant correlation in their findings, my study can uniquely focus solely on increasing the racial diversity of our organization's members.⁷

There is also literature that relates to my research sub-questions regarding the industries to which our members should be exposed. Hosein, Anesa, and Rao discuss undergraduate students' pre-professional ideologies and career trajectories. They identify the existing ethical question of whether the process by which undergraduates form their career decisions is the result of independent decision-making, on the one hand, or indoctrination and socialization, on the other. They explain that for undergraduate disciplines that are not strictly pre-professional, which is largely applicable to the liberal arts nature of Harvard's undergraduate system, students face several competing professional ideologies that allow them to explore multiple professional identities.9 This reality highlights the particularly large impact that a pre-professional organization like WIB can have on Harvard students, who face so many different possible career paths. It also illustrates WIB's responsibility to expose its members to a wide range of industries, so as to preserve the uniquely expansive range of career paths that students are granted access to. Their findings also indicate that students often conform to the expectations of their preprofessional academic disciplines, which points to additional responsibilities that WIB faces in light of the impressionability of undergraduates in regard to career aspirations. 10 This concept is further explored in Greenbank's piece about "Career Decision-Making."

Greenback's study, which entailed in-depth interviews with students in their first and final undergraduate years, found that students were not employing rational decision-making processes about their careers. The findings of this study are particularly relevant to my research project, as the subject group is full-time students in the undergraduate business school. Like WIB members, these subjects had already demonstrated a general interest in the field of business. As is therefore likely with many WIB members, the subjects mostly chose to pursue business-related careers due to desires to keep their career options open. This fundamental

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⁷ Ibid, Pg 489.

⁸ Hosein, Anesa and Namrate Rao, "Pre-Professional Ideologies and Careeer Trajectories of the Allied Professional Undergraduate Student." Yalor & Francis Online, July 19, 2017, Pg 263. https://www-tandfonline-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/doi/abs/10.1080/13596748.2017.1314683.

⁹ Ibid, Pg 254.

¹⁰ Ibid, Pg 252.

¹¹ Greenbank, Paul, "Career Decision-Making: 'I Don't Think Twice, But It'll Be All Right." Research in Post-Compulsory Education, 19:2, 2014, Pg 177,. https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2014.897507.

¹² Ibid, Pg 180.

¹³ Ibid, Pg 183.

desire for flexibility and exposure leads me to even more strongly believe in WIB's duty to expose its members to as wide a range of industries under the umbrella of business as possible. While this study has some overlap with HUWIB due to its business focus, my research will hopefully provide new insights through the unique lens of a pre-professional business student organization within a liberal arts college.

Methods

To collect data, I combined surveys and interviews. In order to guide their work for this semester, many committees required feedback from the general membership before being able to proceed. With input from the Executive Board, my Co-President and I therefore released a Kick-Off Survey at the beginning of the semester to gather information about a wide range of topics. We required all committee and board members to complete the survey and created incentives for the general associates to participate as well. As a result, we received 88 responses. So as to take advantage of this one opportunity to require such a high response rate from the organization, I collaborated with the newly-instated Diversity committee to include several questions pertaining to diversity. We asked members to provide their ethnicity/race, sexual orientation, religion, place of origin, and the names of the cultural groups that they are a part of on campus. We also asked them to indicate which affinity groups they might be interested in joining, to rank their perception of WIB's racial diversity, and to provide any additional ideas they may have about how WIB can increase the racial diversity of its membership. So as to ensure that our respondents were comfortable answering these questions about personal identifiers, we made it so that each of these questions required a write-in answer. We believed that this format, as opposed to a drop-down list or multiple-choice selection, would allow individuals to leave answers blank if not comfortable answering them, or to more freely express themselves if they did provide answers. Regarding diversity of industries, the survey included questions about the industries that members have recruited for and are interested in recruiting for, as well as about whether they would prefer to learn about one industry in-depth or learn more generally about a wider range of industries.

To complement and provide additional insight into the survey findings, I also conducted in-person interviews with nine individuals at different levels within the organization. I interviewed my Co-President, four board members, and four committee members. The four

board members were the Chairs of the Diversity, Sponsorships, Expeditions, and Career Development committees. I chose to interview these individuals, because the work they do relates most directly to the topics of my research. The Diversity committee aims to organically increase the racial and ethnic diversity of our membership; the sponsorships committees liaises with our financial supporters and thus has an important role in which kinds of industries our members are exposed to; the Expeditions committee plans career exploratory trips and significantly reaches out to and selects which companies the attendees visit; and the Career Development committee plans job recruiting events that expose our members to career opportunities. Three of the four committee members I interviewed are the three girls who comprise the Diversity committee, and the fourth is on the Intercollegiate Business Convention (IBC) committee, but has been particularly vocal about and helpful with HUWIB's new diversity initiatives. I contacted all of the interviewees directly through text, as I have a close personal relationship with each. Particularly since my Co-President and I created the Diversity committee as a new committee this year, we have been very proactive about meeting and collaborating the with members of that committee. All of the interviews were conducted in person, except for that of one committee member who sent emailed responses due to limited availability.

It is worth noting the limitations of my research methodology. In regard to the survey, the respondents were almost exclusively board and committee members, as these were the only people from whom we could require completion. For the interviews, I only interviewed board and committee members from specific committees, as they were the ones whom I believed would have the most valuable insight in relation to my specific areas of research. The respondent pool for both the survey and interviews are therefore particularly involved with the organization, as compared with the 500+ general associates who do not have formal positions or responsibilities. However, my research was primarily focused on the opinions of the board and committee members, as they are the individuals who invest the most in the organization and who consequently have the highest expectations of receiving benefits from the organization. Due to my position as Co-President, there is likely an inevitable bias in my analysis of the findings, although I am aiming to be as objective as possible. The interviewees were also less likely to be critical of the organization, as I was the one conducting the interviews and will have a large say in their future appointments to board and committee positions.

Data and Findings

Through conducting research, I gleaned three primary findings – that there is room for growth in terms of our racial and ethnic diversity, that WIB's members' industry-based interests are broader than our present programming offerings, and that WIB has a surprisingly prominent role in, and thus an important responsibility in regard to, members' recruiting processes.

Racial and Ethnic Diversity

Of the survey respondents, 47.7% identified as white, 35.2% as Asian, 8.0% as Hispanic, 4.5% as Black/African American, and 4.5% as Multiracial. As compared with the racial makeup of Harvard's undergraduate body, WIB's membership is similarly White, more Asian, and less Hispanic and African American. The interview responses provided light on what these statistics feel like in real life, with a general trend being that members of minority status feel significantly more comfortable upon joining committees. A Hispanic respondent said, "even though when you look at the numbers it is not that diverse, it feels well balanced." "When I did the comp," she explained, "I felt that the majority of WIB was White. But once I joined committee, I realized WIB members are very diverse." Speaking more generally, she declared, "Once you join, you realize WIB is very diverse, but that's the part we're missing – before joining, we have the stereotype that it's made up of Whites and Asians." Another interviewee shared, "I've noticed I'm one of the only black girls on committee. If anything, that has made me want to get more involved to change that dynamic." Another respondent similarly stated, "my racial and ethnic identity (half black, half Japanese) has definitely affected my experience in WIB by motivating me to diversify the organization as a whole. I hope to recruit more underrepresented individuals who identify as women not only to join the organization, but to run for board as well." In other words, increased discussion about and resources funneled toward diversity seems to encourage these girls of minority status to lean into the problem, rather than run away from it.

The interviews suggest that this racial and ethnic diversity likely stems from racial preprofessional preferences, sense of comfort and self-identification, and ability or lack thereof to picture oneself in leadership. One Asian American respondent stated, "pre-professional opportunities are particularly attractive to Asian Americans, and there are a lot of White students on campus, and a big proportion of them are attracted to business-minded industries." Another interviewee remarked that "a lot of freshmen are intimidated, because they want to join groups they feel naturally comfortable in." Along this vein of the first impression that WIB gives off to new students at the College, one interviewee who is on the Diversity committee said that "people of color would typically be less likely to approach our table at the Activities Fair, so at the Visitas and Opening Days events, we will make sure there are people of color representing the organization." Another girl on the Diversity committee similarly asserted that "we must begin as early as Visitas to ensure that individuals in the minority understand that WIB is an inclusive club that emphasizes the importance of representation."

In regard to the diversity of the leadership, one girl noted "a subconscious assumption that the leaders within [WIB] are of two main groups – Whites and Asians." This girl, who identifies as neither White nor Asian, said that the reality that "there's no one in leadership who looks like [her]" "gives [her] the sense that it's not [her] place and [that she doesn't] have a say of being a leader." For another respondent who is Asian American, she explained that she also "thought about race a lot when deciding to join WIB," specifically by observing the racial identities of the Co-Presidents and board members. In line with this respondent's observations, the survey results also indicate that the racial and ethnic diversity of the board is less than that of the committees. This statistic, in conjunction with the responses of nearly all interviewees when asked to compare the diversity of board members, committee members, and general associates, implies that the general associates are the most diverse in racial makeup. One interviewee said, "it gets less diverse as you move up the organizational structure from associates to committee members to board members. The Diversity committee had as discussion about this after the last Town Hall – we discussed the reality that board isn't as diverse as we'd like it to be, and the same is true about the committee members who show up to the most WIB events and are the most involved."

On a more positive note, several interviewees noted and expressed appreciation for the increased awareness of and discussion about racial diversity over this past semester. One Hispanic freshman who recently joined expressed that "WIB is different from other preprofessional organizations – we're welcoming to everyone, and I didn't feel uncomfortable once I was in it. I consider myself a minority and didn't feel uncomfortable or unwelcomed." Another girl said, "we've started to talk about it, which is definitely a step in the right direction." Yet another remarked that "talking about it more and having more committee members who are committed to this initiative will hopefully continue giving us momentum." As Co-President, one

of my primary goals through the end of my term is to ensure that this momentum continues to build.

Industry-Based Diversity

The findings indicated a surprisingly diverse distribution of industry-based interests, as compared with the programming that WIB offers. Of the 88 individuals who completed the survey, 54 were interested in recruiting for the consulting industry, 46 for finance, 44 for marketing/communications, 29 for tech, 25 for nonprofits/the third sector, and 18 for healthcare. While there are no official statistics on what percentage of our programming is dedicated to each industry, the interviewees on average guessed that 44% of WIB's career programming is related to finance and 26% to consulting, leaving only 30% that would presumably cover all remaining industries. While finance and consulting were the industries that demonstrated the most interest from members through the survey, this expressed interest was disproportionately more diversified when compared with the projected breakdown of programming. For instance, Marketing/ Communications, an industry that we rarely discuss, was only two people less than finance in terms of expressed interest in recruiting. The interviewees' responses provide a clearer sense of how WIB members perceive and the extent to which they are satisfied with the diversity of industries that our programming exposes them to.

The interviewees seemed to be understanding about the disproportionate amount of finance and consulting recruiting, specifically pointing to members' expectations, WIB's sponsorship solicitation logistics, the career-based culture at Harvard, and the recruiting process structures. Reflecting the views expressed by several interviewees, one girl stated that "a lot of people join WIB because they want and expect finance and consulting opportunities." A similar observation was that "the most importance is placed on the industries that people are most interested in." Another interviewee acknowledged the difficulties posed by the nature of our financial supporters, saying, "on a sponsorships note, that's tough, because big finance and consulting firms are the ones with most resources and willing to give us money, so it becomes a vicious cycle because they give us money so that we can give them programming, and then we don't have time for other things." Yet another dynamic at play is that of the broader culture at Harvard. One girl noted that "OCS programming is based around bulge bracket banks and consulting workshops." For WIB, she therefore explained, "it's difficult to break out of...because it's not just the problem of one or two groups – it's become the general culture of

business at Harvard that's associated with finance and consulting." Another respondent similarly stated, "the industries we represent most are not unique to WIB – that's been the Harvard vibe as a whole." Finally, interviewees referenced the limitations posed by the recruiting processes, with one girl saying – "especially with the bulge brackets pushing timelines up, we aren't given time to explore."

The interviewees also helped illuminate ways to increase members' exposure to different industries. As one girl put it, "college is all about exposure – this is when we're starting our careers, so if we don't weigh all of our options, then what's the point?" In terms of whom to focus on, one girl specifically noted the importance of targeting freshmen to ensure that they are "exposed to everything before they realize that Harvard funnels you into those two industries (finance and consulting)." In regard to what kinds of industries to focus on, several respondents noted the tech industry in particular. One girl said, "a lot of women are going into...the business side of tech [that's] more about leadership and managing people." In terms of existing WIB initiatives that could be utilized for this purpose, one girl noted that "Boston Treks (the trips to local Boston companies) are such a great opportunity, because they give us more exposure to start-ups." This year, WIB is also organizing the first-ever Social Impact Conference, which the director of this conference explained as an opportunity to "hopefully show people that they can go into business that isn't finance and consulting, and that they can make an impact on the greater community." Yet another proposed approach is to alter WIB's marketing approach. One respondent stated that "an equal distribution (of the kinds of events publicized) might be more egalitarian, rather than pubbing some things more than others." Another girl even more radically asked - "do we change the language of what WIB is? We should emphasize that even in premed, engineering – you can still run a business."

Upon hearing this final quote, I realized that it would indeed be very powerful to make a video that clarified the range of backgrounds (in terms of race, concentrations, career interests, hobbies, and more) of WIB's membership. I consequently interviewed board and star committees to create an informational video that our organization will be using as a marketing and informational tool, on our social media channels, website, and more. The preliminary video (made exclusively for the purposes of this class, rather than for our promotional materials more broadly), can be viewed at this link: https://vimeo.com/333130854.

WIB's Role in Recruiting Processes

The final primary finding derived from my research was that WIB plays a surprisingly large role in assisting members with their job searches. This influence took different forms among the girls interviewed, including the following. One respondent noted that the "New York career exploratory trip...significantly impacted her decision to go into banking." She will be interning at Bank of America and mentioned that the specific visit to that firm made her feel that she had "a more personal connection with the people who worked there." Another girl noted that the girl who recruited her to a tech start-up was in WIB. A different vein of influence is in regard to the industries that WIB teaches members about. One girl said, "WIB showed me what traditional industries that I didn't understand were." Another similarly said, "WIB opened doors, because it allowed me to explore different industries I didn't consider." A third form of help was through upperclassmen mentorship. One interviewee stated, "upperclassmen in WIB helped me with recruiting early on, when I wouldn't have otherwise had access to people who could help me." Another shared, "I couldn't have gotten where I did without WIB members helping me." She specifically said that board members conducted mock interviews with her, that she obtained contacts through WIB connections, and that the WIB database was her primary networking tool.

Discussion and Conclusion

The final finding about the centrality of WIB's programming and resources to members' career searches truly indicated the weight of the work that we do for our members and reinforced my desire to act upon the findings and proposed next steps, as explicated in this paper. I am so grateful for the opportunity that this class gave me to examine WIB in such depth and through an academic, sociological lens. Some of the action steps proposed in this paper inherently have to play out over a long period of time, while others can be executed more immediately. For instance, increasing the range of industries that our members are exposed to would have to be built into programming over a more extended time, as well as integrated with a reworking of our financial sponsorship models. The Campus Diversity Ambassador Program, on the other hand, could be implemented in the short term. For all of these latter kinds of programs, I have already begun to put steps in motion to allow the visions to come to fruition. For the Campus Diversity Ambassador Program, for example, we handed out fliers at Visitas about the Diversity Ambassador positions that we will open up to the incoming freshman class.

For further research, it would be very helpful to look into the impact that the initiatives that my Co-President and I have already launched this past semester, as well as the ones that we

will launch in response to this research. Due to the newer nature of these discussions about diversity – as pertains to both race and industries, I was unable to study the impact of any of the proposed next steps. Specifically, it would be interesting to examine whether our institution of a Diversity committee and our conscious efforts to push for increased conversations about and remedial actions in regard to increasing WIB's racial diversity will cause the incoming class of WIB members to be more diverse than past years'. I anticipate that Hispanic and African American individuals will also be on board in the coming term, in unprecedented numbers. This assumption is based on observing the performance and passion of many girls of minority status this past year. Consequently, I would be curious to learn about the implications of a board that is more racially diverse. I wonder if, as expected by many interviewees, this increased diversity would have a direct impact on the diversity of the committees and associates.

Finally, it would be fruitful for members of other pre-professional organizations at Harvard and beyond to conduct similar research into the diversity of their own membership and programming, as I would suspect that many of them face similar challenges. It is important to raise awareness about these issues more broadly, so as to hopefully sparks more wide-reaching and long-lasting improvements in inclusivity on college campuses.

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