

# Barriers to Student Access and Success: A Photovoice Project

## Introduction

Photovoice is a participatory and action research method based on the understanding that people are experts on their lives (Wang & Burris, 1996). It is used across the social sciences to examine social issues influencing different communities. With this method, communities themselves explore the issues they want to see changed, and come up with ideas about how to do change them. Photovoice also aims to include policymakers in critical dialogue with communities to begin social change processes (Wang & Burris, 1996).

Our class-wide photovoice project had two main goals. First, through engaging in this project as participants, we hoped to learn how to use this method in our own work. We also wanted to use this project as a way to join in on the conversations happening around campus about being part of an urban-serving university.

## Participants

Participants were 25 students in TPSYCH306: Community Psychology, Research, and Action. Seventeen students (68%) identified as white, and eight students identified as non-white. Among the non-white students, three identified as black or African-American; two identified as part-Native; one identified as Arab-American; one as Indian/Afghan; and another as Puerto Rican. Sixteen (64%) students identified as female and eight students identified as male. One student identified as gender neutral. Twenty-four students identified as heterosexual and one student identified as gay. Students were 24 years of age on average. Eight students (32%) identified as parents. Thirteen students (52%) identified as the first person in their family to attend college. Compared to first-year UWT students, our sample included more females (64% vs. 54%), more white students (68% vs. 44%), and fewer first-generation college students (52% vs. 64%).

## Learning about Photovoice

As per the photovoice method, we spent four weeks learning about the method before using it ourselves. Several assignments helped us learn about it, including reading about a photovoice project in Flint Michigan led by a founder of this method, Caroline Wang (see Wang, Morel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, and Pestronk, 2004). In Flint, the method was used with the Neighborhood Violence Prevention Collaborative to explore and redefine the community's economy, culture, race relations, and well-being (Wang et al., 2004) We also read other empirical examples of photovoice and wrote about why the method was used in each case, what its main steps were, and whether we thought it was effective. Dr. Robin Evans-Agnew from the School of Nursing also presented his photovoice research with Latina mothers of children with asthma to our class. Finally, we went over the ethics of photovoice, including the importance of getting consent or using unidentifiable photos of people. We also had training on how to take good pictures with smartphones.

By, Spring TPSYCH306 Students

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## Initial Photovoice Topics

The class discussed topics related to our UWT experiences that we could explore further through photovoice. Topics we identified initially included:

- High drop-out rate
- Lack of resources for students (childcare)
- Lack of community
  - No spaces to connect
  - Not traditional "college experience"
  - Working students
  - Lack of motivation
  - Lack of unity as student body
  - Parking issues for students
  - Lack of community buildings
  - Lack of mentors for freshmen and sophomore students

## Topic Selection

Through continued discussion, we agreed on three topics to guide our photovoice project:

- Challenges to building community
- Challenges and strengths of being a UWT student
- Uniting communities

We thought that these topics touched on students' main interests and that they were similar enough to lead to a cohesive project.

## Analysis

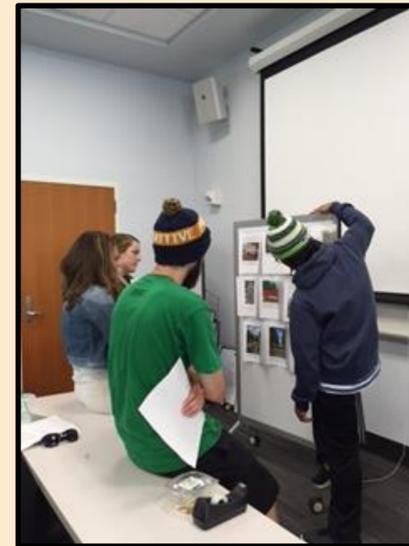
### Small-group Analysis

We met in small groups of five and analyzed our photos following the SHOWeD method of Photovoice. Each student described his/her photos and accompanying narratives, and their peers discussed:



- What do you **See** here?
- What is really **Happening**?
- How does this relate to **Our** lives?
- Why** does this problem or strength exist?
- What can we **Do** about it?

Each group audio-recorded their discussion to document patterns or themes identified across photos, and to select five photos that best reflected shared experiences and concerns.



## Class Analysis and Findings

The entire class discussed the themes and photos they selected in small groups. Students then revised narratives to ensure they reflected the group analysis. Cross-cutting themes were identified from the revised text and selected photos, including:

1. *Isolation and Lonliness*
2. *Lack of Community Space*
3. *Disconnection from UWT*
4. *Parking as a Barrier to Academic Engagement*
5. *Strengths of Being a UWT Student*

## Discussion of Findings

Our findings relate to the questions the administration has been asking about what it means to be an urban-serving university. The administration identified four characteristics of our university that should fit with this title: a focus on maximizing student access and success; use-inspired research; becoming a catalyst for economic vitality; and partnerships with the community.

Our findings suggests that students experience **barriers to access and success**. These barriers include experiencing **lonliness and isolation** daily, making it difficult for students to be at UWT and to excel here (*Poster 1*). Factors contributing to loneliness and isolation include a **lack of community space** (*Poster 2*), such as common areas for eating and socializing. Students also experience **disconnection from UWT** (*Poster 3*) related to challenges to bringing their whole selves to campus. For example, many UWT students are parents and they do not receive much support on campus for their parenthood, such as affordable childcare. Another challenge to success and access is on-campus parking. The high costs of parking, and a lack of free parking, has made **parking a barrier to academic engagement** (*Poster 4*). In spite of these challenges, we also believe UWT has many **strengths**, including the history of Tacoma on our campus (*Poster 5*).

## Future Directions and Actions

We identified some actions that we think would help maximize student access and success:

- Involvement fairs throughout the year
- More chairs for students to sit and wait together outside classrooms
- A dining hall
- Covered seating areas outside
- Social spaces for students in historic buildings on campus
- Sports teams to increase school pride
- Cheaper childcare options on campus for students who are also parents;
- More affordable parking
  - Cheaper parking would increase academic engagement, and the graduation rate
  - More students would be on time to class
  - Students would attend more events on and around campus