

Issues in brief: Representation matters

By Dominic Ledesma

As the UW-Madison campus prepared for UW Homecoming this fall, a promotional video produced by the Wisconsin Alumni Association's (WAA) student Homecoming Committee received a considerable amount of backlash for how it [mis]represented the student body and campus. The issue, and the responses it received from the campus and broader community, remind us of why the accurate and appropriate inclusion of diverse perspectives is [still] a relevant issue.

What was the issue?

While the video was intended to promote and highlight different aspects of campus life that would resonate with alumni, it was criticized for how it failed to reflect the existing diversity of the current student body. Public responses drew attention to the fact that students who appeared in the video were not racially or ethnically diverse and that the campus spaces featured in the video were too narrowly limited to campus icons, such as the football stadium and Memorial Union Terrace. In short, the video overstated UW as a welcoming and inclusive space and understated the range of places and spaces on campus that connect alumni as a broader community of Badgers. On September 30, the campus issued a [statement](#) that apologized for the video and the ways it failed to “ensure active participation and authentic involvement by Badgers of many different identifies in all aspects of campus life.” The statement also mentioned that campus leadership deleted the video.

Why does this issue matter?

Not only the public took note of this issue and why it was problematic in nature, but so did members of the UW faculty. The [Chicanx & Latinx Studies Program](#) at UW-Madison, led by professor Armando Ibarra, issued a [statement](#) that acknowledged the sense of alienation felt by students on campus and how this video perpetuated the disconnect some student populations experience. The statement also urged students, staff and other faculty members to think about their role in shaping a UW campus that promotes inclusion and respect for all Badgers. UW School of Education professor emerita, Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, also weighed in on the issue with an [article](#) that was published in the local media. Dr. Ladson-Billings' response discussed how the efforts to create this video were inherently exclusionary and how it reflects a pattern of missed opportunities at UW to accurately represent and include diverse student perspectives. Her article situates this issue within several historical examples of how students from minoritized communities, particularly students of color, have been overlooked or altogether excluded from the ways they contribute to the University and campus community.

What happened since?

In addition to the statement issued by UW-Madison campus, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, Lori Reesor; Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Inclusion, Patrick Sims; and Executive Director of Wisconsin Alumni Association (WAA), Sarah Schutt, also sent a communication directly to the UW-Madison campus and alumni community. Their communication outlined a series of steps they would take to hear community concerns about the video, introduce training for WAA staff, and provide greater oversight for communications and activities sponsored by the WAA. UW-Madison partnered with the Student Inclusion Coalition to create a new video entitled, [“We are all UW.”](#) Independent of this effort, the [Student Involvement Coalition of UW-Madison](#) also produced a video and released it on social media entitled [“Home is where WI aren’t.”](#) Both videos have received a positive response from the public for how they highlight a broader range of experiences of underrepresented student groups across campus. While acknowledging some of the specific challenges underrepresented students face as they navigate their [Wisconsin Experience](#), the videos highlight the voices of current Badgers and how their involvement is preparing them to become agents of positive change within and beyond campus.

What lessons can be learned from this?

Understanding the complexities of inclusion, and incorporating the perspectives of those we serve, continues to be a relevant issue for any organization or institution. This issue, when situated within historical patterns of missed opportunities and missteps, provides all of us with a moment to pause and reflect. It encourages us to critically think about what we may miss when our institutional efforts are not met with an intentional commitment to include and engage diverse stakeholder groups.