

Using Photovoice to Capture Oregon State University Student Stories

by
Claire Baboyan

A THESIS

submitted to
Oregon State University
Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in Political Science
(Honors Scholar)

Presented May 27, 2022
Commencement June 2022

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Claire Baboyan for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate Arts in Political Science presented on May 27, 2022. Title: Using Photovoice to Capture Oregon State University Student Stories

Abstract approved: _____

Emily Henry

One of the main ways that one can accurately gain knowledge of the experiences of students on a college campus is to talk to the students themselves. In this study, we used Photovoice, a participatory action approach, to help better understand the experiences of the students at Oregon State University who participated in an OSU Open Campus college access program. Of our seven participants, 71% identified as transfer students. Three major themes emerged from the photographs and stories submitted by the students, including: (1) community and support, (2) determination, and (3) accomplishments. These photographs and stories can allow administrators to learn more about students and their backgrounds, how to make changes to better support students (particularly transfer students), and how to better adapt their curriculum to invite all different types of students to succeed on their campus.

Keywords: photovoice, OSU student experience, student stories

Corresponding e-mail address: clairebaboyan@gmail.com

©Copyright by Claire Baboyan
May 27, 2022

Using Photovoice to Capture Oregon State University Student Stories

by
Claire Baboyan

A THESIS

submitted to
Oregon State University
Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in Political Science
(Honors Scholar)

Presented May 27, 2022
Commencement June 2022

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in Political Science project of Claire Baboyan presented on May 27, 2022.

APPROVED:

Emily Henry, Mentor, representing Extension & Engagement

Anna Browne, Committee Member, representing Extension & Engagement

Elena Contreras Chavez, Committee Member, representing College Student Services Administration

Toni Doolen, Dean, Oregon State University Honors College

I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

Claire Baboyan, Author

Introduction

One of the main ways that one can accurately gain knowledge of the experiences of students on a college campus, is to talk to the students themselves. Every student has a different background that they come from and a different story that they want to tell. Students are coming to college with multiple identities and questions about who they will become and what they will do as an undergraduate (Jehangir et al., 2019). Access to college is still not something that is attainable for every student that wants to obtain a higher education. Even if students are able to access college, there are many other avenues and barriers that one must navigate. Each student creates their own path in college, and those challenges and celebrations are all a part of the student experience.

Part of a college students experience goes way beyond attending class, taking exams, and making social connections. Talking with students about their experiences is one of the ways that we can get genuine responses on what it is to be a student on a college campus. Each student has their own path that they take when they are in college and that path comes with many challenges and achievements, and many ups and downs, and the best way to learn about these are from the students' perspective themselves. It is not easy to talk about the hard things in college, but the hard things are sometimes the most real things that are happening around us.

In this study, we used Photovoice to learn more about the experiences of Oregon State University students through their own pictures and stories. Photovoice, developed by Wang and Burris (1997), is a method where research participants tell their stories while also encouraging discussion around the issues they raise in their photographs and stories.

Photovoice is a type of research categorized as “participatory action research” (Jehangir et al., 2019). This puts the power and control of the study and the outcomes in the hands of the individuals that are part of the study (Budig et al., 2018). Photovoice captures pictures and descriptions of a topic that the participant chooses in connection with the research question posed by our research team (Besterman-Dahan et al., 2021).

This study focuses specifically on the application of Photovoice to a group of students that attend Oregon State University after participating in a college access program offered by OSU Open Campus (e.g., Juntos, STEM camps, transfer student advising) during middle school or high school. This study is designed to help us better understand students’ experiences and highlight the positives of college life, but also to bring attention to the challenges and hardships that come with being a college student. There were a variety of students that participated in our study in terms of background and demographics. This variety in the participant pool has allowed the study to get a multi-sided view of life as an Oregon State University student.

Aims of the Study

The aim of the study is to employ Photovoice, a participatory action approach, to help better understand the stories of the students at Oregon State University who participated in an OSU Open Campus college access program. Open Campus programs focus on students who have historically been marginalized, including Latinx and BIPOC students, first-generation students, transfer students, and underrepresented students in STEM fields (primarily women/girls and BIPOC students). According to an article by Tevis & Britton, there are a

multitude of factors that affect students' transition to and retention in college, including academic performance, institutional factors, financial variables, etc. (Tevis & Britton, 2020). Those factors were specifically stated to have an effect on first-year student experiences (Tevis & Britton, 2020). It can be inferred that those factors can influence students far beyond their first year. In addition, we know that transfer students face a range of challenges including credit loss during transfer, institutional biases, and may feel like they don't belong at their four-year institution (Wyner et al., 2016).

These challenges in a college student's day-to-day life can go unnoticed by administration and faculty of a college. Photovoice is commonly used to give a voice to those who may not always be heard by their communities and has been used with college students in a number of previous studies. For example, an article by Jehangir et al (2019) looks at using Photovoice to examine career aspirations of first-generation college students. The aim of the study was to better educate others on the barriers that first-generation and low-income students face; first-generation students face a number of barriers and have lower rates of degree completion (Jehangir et al., 2019). Their study looked at images and narratives that their participants chose based on their definition of career and work and where they say their futures are going; they found four themes that captured the participants' future career aspirations, both internally and externally (Jehangir et al., 2019).

Our study goes beyond the surface of what it is to be a student and asks students to share, in their own pictures and words, the experiences they have faced as OSU students. Participants were able to interpret the questions how they wanted as long as they stayed in the scope of 'their OSU student experience.' This study also seeks to look at some of the barriers to education as shared by these students. There are many resources that a college

campus has, but for many reasons, students may come into college not knowing how to access those resources. In addition to sharing our findings with OSU, our research team also wants to share the stories of participants throughout the state of Oregon and with other universities to better understand the many levels of experiences that students have during their time in college.

Methods

Study Participants

This section looks at the participating sample of this study, and the criteria that were set for the participants. Participants that were invited to be in this study were pulled from a database of students who are now at OSU and previously participated in an Open Campus college access program, including Juntos, STEM camps, or transfer advising. Students were contacted via their OSU email detailing what this study was and what their role would be. The first session of the study had five participants and the second session had three, and one student was in both sessions. This study was approved through Oregon State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB-2020-0542) and all participants provided signed consent to be part of this study, including sharing their photographs and stories publicly.

The research team asked students to fill out a survey prior to starting the study so we could better understand the participants and their identities. Along with the basic demographic information, we asked about OSU major and age. There was a wide range of majors that include: Kinesiology, Liberal Studies, Biochemistry and Biophysics, Ecological

Engineering, and Bio Health Sciences. Our participants are in this study because they attend Oregon State University; therefore, it seemed important to know their majors as they would relate to many of the day-to-day things a student thinks about. We also asked about age and of those reported at the time of the study, our age range was between 19 – 22 years old.

Of the seven individual participants, three identified as female, one identified as male, one identified as nonbinary, and two did not respond on the question of gender. Participants were able to choose more than one gender identity.

Self-Reported Gender (can choose more than one; n = 7)

	Count
Male	1
Female	3
Nonbinary	1
Transgender	0
Did not report	2

When asked to identify by race/ethnicity, two identified as Asian, two identified as Latinx or Hispanic, two identified as white, one identified as self-described, and one preferred not to answer. In the race/ethnicity category, participants could choose more than one that they identified with.

Self-Reported Race/Ethnicity (can choose more than one; n = 7)

	Count
Asian	2
Black or African American	0
Latinx or Hispanic	2
Middle Eastern or North African	0
Native American, American Indian, Alaska Native	0
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0
White	2
Self-Describe	1
Prefer not to answer	1

Another question we asked our participants was whether they were transfer students or not. Five out of seven students, or 71%, said that they were transfer students. This information ended up being a key part of the study as transfer students bring a unique perspective in comparison to other students' experiences in college.

Do you identity as a transfer student? (n = 7)

	Count
Yes	5
No	2
Prefer not to answer	0

Data Collection

Students who consented to participate in the study were invited to a series of four virtual sessions (through Zoom) including: (1) a kick-off session where we shared the

research question, (2) a meeting where the students shared photographs and stories (anonymously) and discussed themes, (3) a second meeting of sharing additional photographs and stories (anonymously) that continued to build on the research question(s) and themes identified in the previous session, and (4) a final wrap-up to discuss the gallery display of photographs and stories. In the first session of the study, we asked participants, “What is your experience as an OSU student?” We used this question for both weeks and both Zoom sessions since this was the first round of the study that we were doing. We decided that it was important to have a question posed by the research team that was broad enough that students could have some freedom, but also a little bit more specific to their college experience.

In the second session of the study, we asked two different questions. The first question for week one was, “Thinking about your experience as an OSU student, what is something you learned as a result of your experience?” and the second question for week two was, “What are some memorable moments, good or bad, that you have had as an Oregon State student?” We built off of the first session of the study and came up with questions that were a little bit more specific and that we thought would give us another perspective into the student experience and the participants had input on the second question, as is typical with participatory action research.

Students were asked each week to produce 3-4 photographs and narratives that correspond with the question that the research team posed. Students were able to take photographs of anything they deemed appropriate for the question. The research team put in some limits for photographs such as drugs/alcohol, nudity, and any sort of violent, inappropriate, or illegal behavior was not allowed. Students were able to produce narratives along with their photographs that were a few words, a few sentences, or even a paragraph,

whatever they decided was important for them to provide to the study. After a week to submit photographs and narratives, the research team and all the participants reconvened and discussed the photographs/narratives through a guided discussion, including identifying themes that we saw emerge. The research team guided the discussion, but ultimately we wanted the students to be able to come up with their own thoughts and themes before we interject and gave thoughts of our own. This led to some really interesting conversations, themes, and topics that emerged from the student perspective compared to that of the research team.

Data Analysis

During our guided discussions with the participants, one of the tools that we used was a modified version of the SHOWED method to guide the observations of the participants (Hergenrather et al., 2009). SHOWED stands for: what do you see, what is happening, how does this relate to our lives, and what themes do you see? (Hergenrather et al., 2009). As we flipped through the photographs and narratives, this method allowed the participants and the research team to fill out a SHOWED worksheet as we are discussing what we are seeing and talking about. Along with the SHOWED worksheet, we picked out some recurring themes that the participants identified and had a more in-depth discussion about what those themes meant and if they could be grouped into a bigger theme that encompasses a collection of photographs/narratives.

The research team has started doing a thematic analysis of the photographs/narratives. In Jehangir's (2019) research *Using Photovoice to Bring Career into a New Focus for First-*

Generation College Students, they used multiple phases when analyzing their data. Our research team is currently doing something very similar in terms of analyzing the photos and narratives together, coding those photos and narratives, and then creating themes based on those codes.

Thematic analysis is a common method for analyzing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and is often used to analyze the data generated in Photovoice studies (for example, see Besterman et al., 2021). In a thematic analysis, the researcher looks at all the different parts of the research; in this case, we looked at all the photographs and narratives, and the transcript from the Zoom meetings, and came up with codes that describe the content. Coding involves coming up with codes to break down and describe the content (we used an inductive approach, as described in Braun & Clarke, 2006) and then highlighting sections of the texts, in our case narratives and the transcripts, that match each code. Some of the codes that we came up with during our analysis include pets, friends, family, physical and academic challenges, joy/happiness, stress/distraction, and many more. After we have looked through all of our data and created codes, we look over all the codes and identify patterns that we see and connect them to create a theme, which includes a collection of codes that relate to one another to form a theme (following Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

In both groups of students, participants produced photographs along with narratives that they believed best described their experience as OSU students as their experiences related to the research questions. These images and narratives have allowed the student

participants and the research team to begin to identify themes that emerged from the data set. There were multiple themes that our research team and our student participants inferred, but there were some that stood out more than others, which are described in more detail below.

The first group of students were asked, “What is your experience as an OSU student?” Two key themes that emerged from this study were (1) community and support and (2) determination. These themes captured what students ultimately felt about their OSU experience, both internally and externally, as shared through their photographs and narratives.

Community and support

The first theme that emerged from multiple images and narratives was community and support from others. Students mentioned their friends, family, pets, campus community, teachers, etc. Below are several examples of photographs and narratives where this theme was featured, which you can see by the highlighted sections.



Student wrote:

During this pandemic, it has been hard to find ways to get outside and exercise. Last spring, I was able to ride my bike on campus and go for runs but now that I moved back home it has been much harder to get out since I live in the country. My mom and I have been finding ways to get outside and move. Going for walks each night at my old high school has been the highlight of the fall term. Even when it is freezing cold and raining we motivate each other to bundle up and go for a walk to help our brains and bodies. As you can see, my dog loves it too.



Student wrote:

Here is my mother holding me, we were both safe in each other arms. She had and always will fight the odds for me and for herself, domestic violence, hunger, uncertainty... you name it. My mother taught me how to fight the odds, and showed me it does not matter where I came from, it matters what I care about, and it matters to be seen and make my voice heard

as a person of color. My mother taught me that it does not matter what people assume or think of me, I am going to be successful and help others in their health and fitness journey.

No matter what, I'll get there.



Student wrote:

This is a photo of where I am living back home now. This fall term has been stressful with the pandemic, moving home, and a presidential election in the middle of all of it but it is nice to now open up my childhood home to friends that needed a place to live. With many people living in my house from different backgrounds, gender identities, and sexualities we decided to put up our flags to show our pride and support during this historic time. We chose to include the American flag between the other two flags to show that it does not need to be a symbol of hatred but instead can grow along with our country and become a symbol of hope and love.

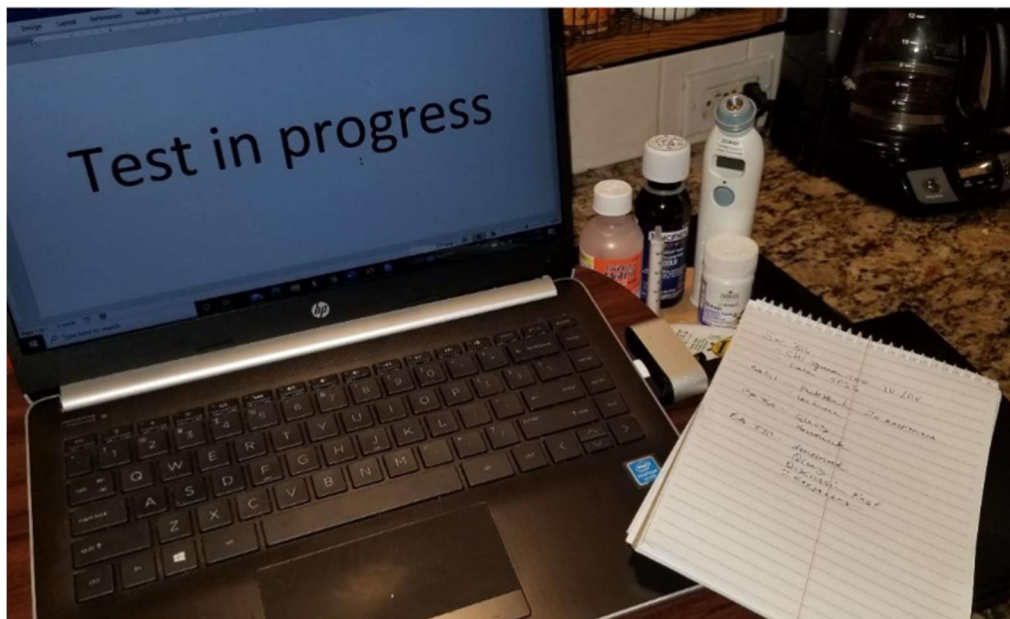
Determination

Another theme that came up in the first session was determination, and this theme emerged in many different ways. Students shared their academic determination, such as studying for a test, determination to be a better student or friend, and determination to overcome personal challenges. Again, you can see the theme in the highlighted sections below.



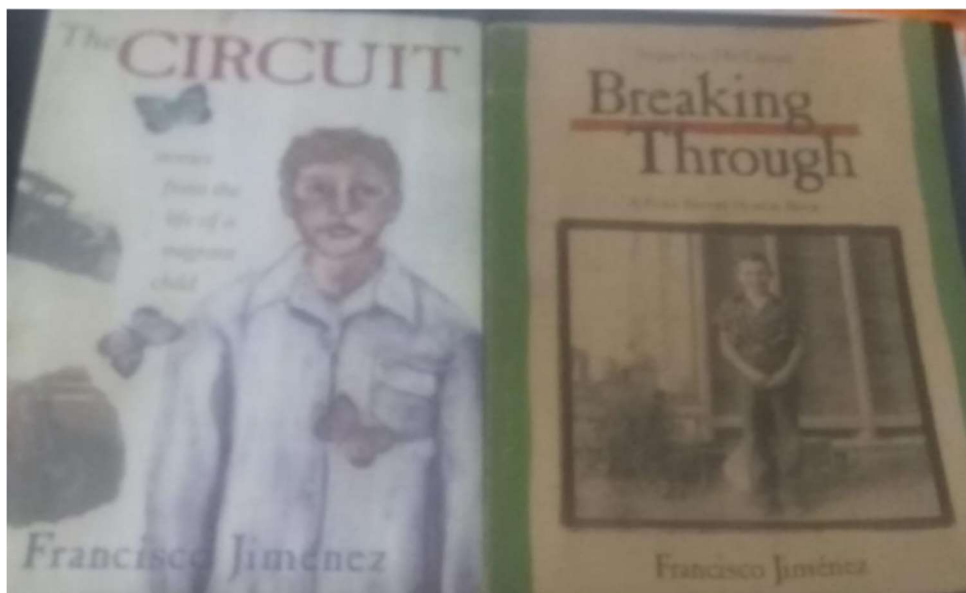
Student wrote:

November 14th marks the anniversary of my first injection. My freshman year of college, I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, which meant I have to do injections three times a week for the rest of my life. It's been two years now and my injection count is at 309.



Student wrote:

No narrative.

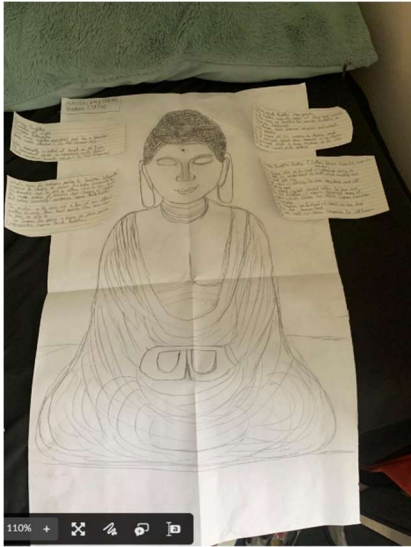


Student wrote:

Inspired by Panchito Francisco Jimenez is the author of great creations such as "The Circuit" and "Breaking Through". These two books narrated the story of the author, son of Mexican immigrant parents, the young man who made possible his dream of having an education and go to college. For me, as Mexican-American, Panchito truly impacted me. He had countless struggles, difficult situations, and injustices, which could discourage him easily from continuing with his journey. Instead, he decided to believe in himself, to have faith in himself, something that not everyone has nowadays.

From our second session of the study, we asked two different questions to get a more detailed look into the lives of OSU students and their experiences. We are still in the process of analyzing all the data but we did find one theme while we were putting the photos together that was really important to the study and that came up more the second time we did this study as compared to the first. That theme was accomplishments, and this theme can be looked at from a lot of different perspectives, including personal and academic accomplishments. From the photos here we can see our participants have highlighted a lot of their accomplishments, such as art, science, and cooking, as a part of their OSU student experience.

Accomplishments



Student wrote:

What I am able to accomplish when I live in the moment.



Student wrote:

Coming to OSU has helped me learn how to cook new meals. I've branched from my most basic meals to utilizing simple ingredients to create a blast-filled flavor combination.



Student wrote:

*After the 2020 Wildfires I decided to learn how to grow fire-resistant trees from the family *Sequoioideae*. The experience taught me a lot about plant biology, organization, process management, and more. As you can see, the seeds from Giant Sequoias, Coastal Redwoods, and Meta Sequoias are coated in a beautiful red-pigmented water-soluble compound that inhibits germination.*

In the overall study, 71% of participants were transfer students, and in the second study that we did, specifically for my thesis, all three students (100%) were transfer students. One of the main topics that got brought up during our discussions and as we were looking through the photographs is that there needs to be more communication and connection for transfer students and resources on campus. There are so many resources on the Oregon State campus, from cultural centers to different clubs and even access to the Honors College. It may be challenging for transfer students to find these resources because they may not come on to campus and live in the dorms, or they may not know that those resources also extend to them even though they are not first-year students. It is important that resources on campus also be readily talked about and available to transfer students in order for them to succeed as well.

Limitations

There were some limitations that came up during my study. First off was the sample size of the participants that we had in the studies. Photovoice studies do not normally have a large sample size; in one review of Photovoice studies, they found anywhere between seven and 49 participants in the Photovoice studies they reviewed (Evans-Agnew & Rosemberg, 2016). However, there are definitely some limitations with only having seven students. This means that there is only a portion of the student population that is being shared in this study and there are a lot more perspectives that would be beneficial. Another limitation that we especially had was that our study was mostly done virtually, via Zoom and email. Photovoice is not necessarily set up to be done virtually, therefore a lot of the literature that we read

talked about Photovoice studies that were done in person. A limiting factor of being on Zoom is that it is harder to get participants to discuss and engage. On Zoom it is easy to not turn your camera on and just message in the chat and I think that can sometimes take away from the discussion that we are trying to have the participants have with us and each other. The last factor is that this study was done during a pandemic, Covid-19. Although there were only a handful of photographs and narratives that especially talked about Covid-19, I still think that it was a limiting factor for this study. I think that it could have affected the way students were perceiving the world and what was happening around them and their education and that could have affected their photographs and narratives. Other than being on Zoom, I think that the pandemic itself definitely impacted the participants.

Conclusion

This research is important because each student at Oregon State has a different story. Photovoice allows the participants to share their stories through their own experiences, which can provide insight into the actual challenges and celebrations that real college students face on a daily basis. From both of our studies, we were able to pick out major themes that have affected students' college lives and have given them a platform to talk about their experiences as well. One of the main things that we saw emerge in both studies was the importance of community and support. A lot of the photographs and narratives that were submitted either had friends/family members in them or alluded to some sort of community aspect. One thing that was talked about during our guided discussions was the ability to have support and community coming into college and the impact that has on a student's overall success and experience. We stated above that five out of the seven of our participants identified as

transfer students, which means that they transferred to Oregon State University after their first year of college. This can be a barrier because a student is not coming in with the same cohort and it may be hard to start in a new environment as an upperclassman. If OSU could provide transfer students with an experience more similar to first-year students, transfer students may know more about the programs and resources available (Wyner et al., 2016).

Recommendations for this study moving forward are to open up our participant pool to all OSU students. During our study, we stayed with students who had participated in OSU Open Campus college access programs because that was part of the focus of the initial study. Another recommendation would be to specifically look at different groups of students on campus, whether that criteria is based on demographic or major, and see if the themes shift or stay pretty consistent along with this study.

In conclusion, I think that the main thing that I learned from this study was the impact that these photographs and stories could make on a bigger platform. I think that this study and the Photovoice method could be really useful when talking to university administrators about what they need to improve on to be better advocates for students. These stories can allow administrators to learn more about students, their backgrounds, how to make changes, and how to better adapt their curriculum to invite all different types of students to succeed on their campus. If there is one thing that I am going to take away from this study, it is that each student has their own story and their own experience of where they got to today, and all we have to do is be open to hearing those stories in order to know what change needs to be made.

References

- Besterman-Dahan, K., Bradley, S. E., Arriola, N. B., & Downs, K. (2021). Blocking out the rabbit holes: Photovoice and community gardening as a healing space for veterans. *Wellbeing, Space and Society*, 2, 100061. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wss.2021.100061>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Budig, K., Diez, J., Conde, P., Sastre, M., Hernán, M., & Franco, M. (2018). Photovoice and empowerment: Evaluation the transformative potential of a participatory action research project. *BMC Public Health*, 18(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-5335-7>
- Evans-Agnew, R. A., & Rosemberg, M.-A. S. (2016). Questioning photovoice research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(8), 1019–1030. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315624223>
- Hergenrather, K. C., Rhodes, S. D., Cowan, C. A., Bardhoshi, G., & Pula, S. (2009). Photovoice as community-based participatory research: A qualitative review. *American Journal of Health Behavior*, 33(6), 686–698. <https://doi.org/10.5993/ajhb.33.6.6>
- Jehangir, R. R., Telles, A. B., & Deenanath, V. (2019). Using photovoice to bring career into a new focus for first-generation college students. *Journal of Career Development*, 47(1), 59–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845318824746>
- Tevis, T., & Britton, K. (2020). First-year student experiences: Uncovering the hidden expectations of frontline faculty members and Student Services Administrators. *Innovative Higher Education*, 45(4), 333–349. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-020-09511-z>

Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior*, 24(3), 369–387.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309>

Wyner, J., Deane, K. C., Jenkins, D., & Fink, J. (2016). The Transfer Playbook: Essential Practices for Two- and Four-Year Colleges. In *Aspen Institute*. Aspen Institute.

<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED565894>

