

Student Well-Being as a Function of Identity Development

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WHEN I LEFT FOR COLLEGE, many of my friends and family said that I would go away and never come back, or worse yet, that I would change—and not in a positive way. My mom and dad probably feared it too, but they loved me, so if I changed, in whatever way, they were okay with it as long as I became a college graduate.

I, however, swore I would never change, and I would always be a ghetto girl from the projects. Yet in my freshman year of college, the questions of who I was and where I fit in this great American society began to haunt me.

One of the social indicators among Hispanics is language, and among Puerto Ricans, the way you pronounce certain words in particular indicates class. Swallowing the final syllable suggests you are uneducated or part of the lowest social strata. The word *lado*, for example, means side; I pronounced it my entire eighteen years before college as *lao*, dropping the *d*. At some point, after heart wrenching self-debate, I decided that I would always, for the rest of my life, drop the *d* when I went home, so that when I spoke with pre-college friends or my family, I would show them I had not changed.

Today, like me, many of our students come to college with issues of identity based on class, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. As President of Eastern Connecticut State University, I am concerned about retention and graduation rates, though we have the highest rates of all the public state universities in Connecticut. Part of our focus has been on the issues of identity that our students face. This focus, we believe, is crucial to our impressive outcomes and central to our students' well-being.

The focal point of this essay is well-being—the quality of a student's life—and its effect on learning. Through impressive studies led by Bringing Theory to Practice and others, we have come to recognize that how students feel about themselves and the world around them is central to their motivation and capacity to learn. For instance, significant work has been done to show how experiential learning and community engagement positively affect students' well-being—how those practices contribute to a student's social and psychological health.¹ I would like to direct my comments to another important aspect of student well-being: how our campuses can best support the development of gender, racial, and class identity. In a brief essay, I cannot give you a comprehensive analysis of these issues, but I think I have found some interesting ideas that may provoke more thought and discussion.

First, on the matter of gender. Even though researchers suggest that sexual awareness and the development of gender identity take place at an earlier age than fifty years ago,

eighteen-year-old freshmen on college campuses are still exploring their sexuality—some for the first time—in an environment that is new and unfamiliar. They are living away from home. They are managing freedoms they have not had previously and dealing with multiple layers of uncharted territory: new academic expectations and opportunities, new living conditions, new social circles.²

One could well argue that gender is the most fundamental element of personal identity—more basic than ethnicity or social class. To explore, confirm, and embrace one's gender identity while going through all the other discoveries inherent to being a college freshman is a significant process for all students, regardless of their gender or sexuality. How college campuses provide support during this process is as critical to a student's acclimation to and success on campus as any other element of personal identity.

One of the first researchers to speak about gay and lesbian sexual identity as a normal developmental process rather than a disease or condition to be treated was Vivienne Cass in 1979.³ Cass articulated six stages of identity development, including identity confusion and identity tolerance. Embedded in her writings were discussions of denial and rejection

of one's sexual orientation. We have come a long way in twenty-five years. Reflecting the evolution of our society's acceptance of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community, the stages of gender identity development have also evolved. A baseline of tolerance and acceptance by LGBT individuals and their straight counterparts has evolved to a baseline of identity integration and public pride. Even so, individual students as well as LGBT groups on campus must still be supported to move through the process of gender identity development.

In focusing on gender identity development among heterosexual students, Roger Worthington and his colleagues

note that while “virtually all literature regarding sexual orientation is situated in volumes designed to address lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) issues,” similar research on heterosexual sexual identity is “all but nonexistent.”⁴ Worthington and his co-authors discuss the importance of providing heterosexual students with the same resources as LGB students to help them explore, affirm, and internalize their gender identities. By engaging in a frank and supportive discussion of sexual identity on college campuses, gender identity becomes a common developmental process shared by all students, regardless of their sexual orientations.

Second, on the matter of race. While discussions of gender and sexual orientation usually have two axes—male and female, straight and gay—in comparison, the issue of race on our campuses has many foci. For the purposes of this brief provocation, I want to focus on three: Latino, African American, and white.

Part of the issue of racial identity development across all races and ethnicities is the need to educate people about the definitions of those terms. The inaccurate terminology we use to describe the groups I just mentioned is a symbol of the need for more education regarding race and ethnicity. For instance, Latino or Hispanic does not constitute a race or an ethnicity. More than 20 nations of origin are represented under the umbrella term Latino. The Pew Research Center found that 52 percent of young Latinos (ages 16–25) identify themselves by their nations of origin: Cuban, Puerto Rican, Mexican.

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They are more likely to identify themselves as Americans (24 percent) than as Latinos (20 percent).⁵

In the same way that much of the early research on gender identity focused on minority subgroups (gays and lesbians), most of the literature and discussion about racial identity on college campuses focuses on minority students—African Americans and Latinos in particular. In the 1990s, Janet Helms advanced a White Racial Identity Development Model that focused on developing racial awareness as a key component of white racial identity.⁶ Helms and Tina Richardson acknowledge that racism exists and that confronting one's own racism as a white person ("abandonment of white privilege") is central to the development of white racial identity. Only by interacting with students of color in trusting, positive, campus environments and activities can white students confront and respond to their own racism and at the same time build relationships and develop non-racist, white identities.⁷

Helms and Richardson delve into racial identity for minorities and make the point that the development of racial identity is similar for all people of color, regardless of race, and involves cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes in response to "surmounting internalized racism in its various manifestations." Early stages in racial identity development include conforming to racial stereotypes, even to the point of trying to "act white"; advanced stages include expressing a positive racial self-identity, actively rejecting and combating racial stereotypes, and developing positive individual and group self-expression.⁸

On our campuses, we need to create a deeper, more substantive understanding of race, ethnicity, and culture. For instance, while celebrating Latin American Awareness Month and Hispanic Heritage Month, we also need to celebrate Mexican history, Puerto Rican holidays, and Guatemalan culture—to name just three possibilities—so that students from those countries can share their pride and so white students can begin to understand the nuances and richness of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. In addition, in our classrooms, we need to extend the intellectual discussion of race and culture to include deeper meanings.

Third, on the matter of socioeconomic class. Education, income and wealth, prestige conferred on the basis of family history, where you live, the make of car you drive, the clothes you wear—these are all symbols of class. How do students on campuses perceive these distinctions? In a 2014 study of hundreds of college students at a northern California public university, investigators focused on the issue of class identity. They hypothesized that that social class would be less important to students' self-identity than gender or ethnicity. Instead, they discovered that the majority of students saw social class as most central to their identities, a finding that crossed all social classes in the study. They also found that interacting with peers on campus became a central condition for students to examine, understand, and reconcile their class identities. In these peer interactions, students clearly recognized class distinctions in speech, dress, etiquette, and behavior.⁹

During interviews, students expressed a wide range of emotions. Affluent students expressed guilt, denial, and justification—although one student described privilege as a "blessing and a curse"—while lower-income students expressed anger and also pride in working hard and earning everything they had. One interesting outcome was the prevalence of the myth of meritocracy and the American Dream in the visions of lower-income students. Whereas affluent students understood the potential for downward mobility,

students from low-income families repeatedly envisioned some point in the future when they would surely be able to “move up.”¹⁰

How can we affect this class consciousness on our campuses? As with gender and race, we need to help students develop their personal identities in terms of class and also provide opportunities for them to understand how class affects their peers and the world at large. From the study cited above, we can see that peer interaction on our campuses is a series of teachable moments. We can add to those interactions with planned activities that help students from all classes learn from each other, including residential hall activities, community service opportunities, intramural teams, and campus organizations.

On an intellectual level, we need to raise the level of discussion of income inequity on our campuses. Recently, the head of the Federal Reserve Board wrote that income inequity threatens our social order and economic future as a nation.¹¹ Students need to

engage in that discussion, not only in terms of using their own experiences and peer comparisons, but also by engaging in a discussion of the effect of income inequity on our nation and the global community.

In conclusion, gender, race, and class are elements of the personal and group identities of each person and every student on our campuses. So what are the key takeaways regarding the issue of identity development in these three areas, and how we can support our students as they learn more about themselves and their fellow students?

When we talk about identity development on our campuses, we inevitably think about how best to support minority groups based on ethnicity, sexual or gender identity, or socioeconomic status. As the literature clearly suggests, developing healthy attitudes among majority students—those who are heterosexual, white, and middle-class—is every bit as important as programming to support identity development for minority populations.

While developing their identities, it is important for white students to acknowledge institutional racism and take steps to understand, respect, and support ethnic minorities. It is important for heterosexual students to move from tolerance to affirmative support of their friends with different sexual identities. It is important to have middle-class students look past the perspective of privilege to understand that the efforts to address income inequity must run parallel to steps taken to support gender, ethnic, and economic minorities on campus. At the same time, all students—by engaging in shared activities and discussions on gender, race, and class—can develop deeper intellectual understanding of those issues. They can develop, internalize, and celebrate their own personal identities while better understanding and supporting students who may fall outside of their own groups. This is all important to each student’s well-being.

One of the most important decisions I made in my life was to continue to drop the *d* in the presence of my family and old friends, and to this day we are very close.

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NOTES

1. See George D. Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008); Jean Jaymes West and Donna Simmons, "Preparing Hispanic Students for the Real World: Benefits of Problem-Based Service Learning Projects," *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 11, no. 2 (2012): 123–135; Janet Eyer, Dwight Giles, Charlene Gray, and Christine Stenson, "At a Glance: What We Know About the Effects of Service Learning on College Students, Faculty, Institutions and Communities, 1993–2000: Third Edition" August 31, 2001, <http://www.compact.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/downloads/aag.pdf>.
2. See Freya Sonenstein, Joseph Pleck and Leighton Ku, "Levels of Sexual Activity Among Adolescent Males in the United States," *Family Planning Perspectives* 23, no. 4 (1991): 162–167; American Psychological Association, Task Force on Gender Identity and Gender Variance, "Report of the APA Task Force on Gender Identity and Gender Variance," Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009, <https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/policy/gender-identity-report.pdf>.
3. Vivienne C. Cass, "Homosexuality Identity Formation: The Cass Model," *Journal of Homosexuality* 4, no. 3 (1979): 219–235.
4. Roger L. Worthington, Holly Bielstein Savoy, Frank R. Dillon, and Elizabeth R. Vernaglia, "Heterosexual Identity Development: A Multidimensional Model of Individual and Social Identity," *The Counseling Psychologist* 30, no. 4 (2002): 496–531.
5. See Pew Research Center, "Latino Youths Optimistic But Beset by Problems," December 11, 2009, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2009/12/11/latino-youths-optimistic-but-beset-by-problems/>; Pew Research Center, "Between Two Worlds: How Young Latinos Come of Age in America," Updated July 1, 2013, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2009/12/11/between-two-worlds-how-young-latinos-come-of-age-in-america/>.
6. Janet E. Helms, *Black and White Racial Identity: Theory, Research, and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1990).
7. Janet E. Helms and Tina Q. Richardson, "How 'Multiculturalism' Obscures Race and Culture as Different Aspects of Counseling Competency," in *Multicultural Counseling Competencies*, eds. Donald B. Pope-Davis and Hardin L. K. Coleman (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997).
8. Ibid.
9. Virginia Thomas and Margarita Azmitia, "Does Class Matter? The Centrality and Meaning of Social Class Identity in Emerging Adulthood," *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research* 14, no. 3 (2014): 195–213.
10. Ibid.
11. Jeffrey P. Thompson and Timothy M. Smeeding, "Inequality and Poverty in the United States: The Aftermath of the Great Recession," Washington, DC: The Federal Reserve Board, 2013, <http://www.federalreserve.gov/pubs/feds/2013/201351/201351abs.html>.