The Whole Student: Finding Balance at the Intersections of Identity and Belonging

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Sculptor Alexander Calder is well known for his mobiles, each consisting of a series of parts of different shapes, sizes, and colors. As Calder constructed these artworks, he found that when he changed one part, he would need to change all the others to create balance within the sculpture. The finished mobiles are sensitive to the conditions of their environment; they move as viewers passing nearby cause currents in the air.

Calder’s mobiles reflect similar dynamics as those within each individual. At different times in a person’s life, different identities may be more salient than others—but as individuals, we are always seeking balance. And like Calder’s mobiles, our complex identities shift in interaction with our environments.

This evocative metaphor has serious implications for educators as we strive to support students as whole people within our colleges and universities. As we argue below, an intersectional approach is essential to our ongoing efforts to create inclusive higher education environments that truly nurture the well-being of all students.

Intersectionality and Well-Being

Our understanding of intersectionality and well-being is informed by our perspective as contributors to the Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) project, now in its fifteenth year of
Belonging
Educating for Wholeness in the Intersections
Lessons in Resistance and Resilience
Alternate Conversations for Creating Whole-System Change around Diversity and Inclusion
Critical Learning, Radical Healing, and Community Engagement in Prison
Navigating the First Year in Community Reflexivity in Cross-Cultural Collaboration
Two Perspectives on a Cross-Cultural Mentoring Relationship
What Now? Creating Cultures of Liberation in Higher Education

supporting colleges and universities in exploring the connections among engaged learning, well-being, and civic engagement and development. Throughout the project’s history, its theoretical foci and programs have evolved to reflect an increasingly complex understanding of these concepts. Initially focused on exploring possible connections between mental health and civic engagement, the project has expanded to examine the idea that wellness is the presence and even flourishing of mental health rather than simply the absence of mental illness (Keyes 2016); that the wholeness of students as complex individuals in specific contextual environments matters; and that active student participation in the classroom, on campus, and in the community—including engagement with difference—is critical.

In its work, BTToP has followed the lead of many scholars and practitioners who have focused on the “whole student” for some time, as we discuss below. But attention to the whole student has typically been siloed in student affairs contexts or in faith-based institutions, where it is often expressed directly in institutional missions. Recently, however, many in higher education have turned their focus to well-being in specific campus contexts (Harward 2016), and governments across the world (most notably in Bhutan) are measuring well-being instead of gross domestic product (Kelly 2012)—thus opening the door to holistic explorations of student well-being. We felt that these new explorations had implications for BTtoP’s work, and specifically for our understanding of well-being within and across disciplines, populations, institutions, and communities. We wanted to explore how to shape educational environments to support the well-being of increasingly diverse student bodies, campuses, and communities.

We believe that intersectionality is a natural framework for understanding the conditions that foster wellness for broad groups of students in complex and dynamic situational contexts. To address issues of student well-being, educators, practitioners, and administrators must first truly try to understand who their students are, how their lived experiences inform their learning, and how they may struggle to integrate the multiple identity formations that may pull them in many directions. BTToP is committed to encouraging and supporting
conversations that advance that understanding in the interest of supporting student well-being across higher education.

A National Conversation

In May 2017, BTtoP offered a national conference on “The Whole Student: Intersectionality and Well-Being.” We conceived of the conference with three tenets in mind:

1. **Interdisciplinary engagement.** We sought to convene scholars from multiple academic disciplines to engage in dialogue about critical issues of intersectionality and its importance to understanding and shaping generative college and university environments and cultures.

2. **Intergenerational engagement.** We recognized that different generations experience concepts and environments differently. Across generations, individuals may understand the complexity of identity differently and have different experiences in the intersections, particularly within educational environments.

3. **Diverse campus constituency representation.** We wanted to bring together individuals representing different campus roles (including students, faculty, student affairs staff, and academic administrators). We suspected that work on integrating intersectionality and well-being was happening within, but perhaps not across, various disciplines and, further, that each campus constituency interacts with and understands the campus in a unique way. Therefore, each constituency would offer valuable perspectives on theoretical and practical applications of the topics attendees would explore and the action plans they would take back to their campuses.

We hoped to design a conference that would engage people in conversations promoting a deeper understanding of relationships among social identities and well-being. We wanted to emphasize that administrators, educators, counselors, and others responsible for creating inclusive campus cultures have a moral obligation to mitigate against the unhealthy conditions that result when members of a community fail to recognize the
power of intersectionality and how students, staff, and faculty experience it. We therefore designed the conference as an intersection that, like the college or university campus, would have the potential to be a nexus of respectful engagement in which individuals could explore their own intersectional identities and those of others while developing the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in a complex society.

This issue of *Diversity & Democracy* reflects and builds upon some of the topics explored at the conference, suggesting how intersectional theory and practice can enhance our approach to supporting the whole student.

**Student Development and the Whole Student**

American higher education’s commitment to the whole student has a rich history, as articulated in the scholarship of student development. Student affairs educators have long seen students as complex beings whose intellectual, interpersonal, identity, and intercultural development are deeply intertwined. “The Student Personnel Point of View” (American Council on Education 1937) committed the profession to the development of the whole student and to creating educational experiences and cultures that fostered such development by helping students explore their own identities and develop mature selves. The whole student was conceptualized as more than the sum of multiple identity aspects (e.g., interpersonal, career, moral, intellectual, intercultural, physical, spiritual).

In the mid-twentieth century, educators conceived of student development as occurring along a trajectory, with students forming an integrated identity out of a scattered sense of self. These educators believed, as educational reformer John Dewey did, that the purpose of lifelong learning was to build capacity for what Dewey (1916) called “associated living.” Wellness was not just an individual trait; it was a societal trait. These society-wide implications were clear after World War II, when campuses took character development very seriously as a response to authoritarian regimes and their effects, and issues of wellness and mental health evolved into major movements. In the 1960s and ’70s, student development theory underwent intense
specialization as scholars developed models grounded in particular areas of work (such as intellectual development, moral and ethical development, or faith development). In the 1980s, student development scholars began to emphasize the study of student diversity, developing a significant body of scholarship on racial, ethnic, sexual, and other social identities—directly challenging a three-hundred-year history of campus cultures designed from and for a more dominant, privileged point of view.

The theoretical scholarship of intersectionality and its practical implications for designing effective, empowering educational experiences are major resources for all members of a campus community. But to optimize these resources, we will need to integrate our knowledge of student development with new, multidisciplinary understandings of intersectionality. We will need to see all aspects of a student’s identity as braided with one another. While we can separate and study each strand of the braid, we need to hold sight of the whole and its unique form.

The History and Scholarship of Intersectionality

The history of what we call “intersectionality” is rich and diverse. While the concept is centrally located in black feminist scholarship (Butler 2017; Collins 1993; Crenshaw 1989; Ward 2000), many scholars of race and ethnicity (Anzaldúa 1987; Beck 1984; Brettschneider 2016; Lorde 1984; Rendón 2009) have also explored how multiple, complementary, competing, and conflicting identities can intersect within an individual. These scholars have also examined how systems of power and privilege oppress people whose intersecting identities have been devalued, with implications for who is allowed or empowered to participate in different roles in different settings. The fields of intercultural communication and multicultural psychology have long made intersectionality foundational to their research and practice (Cross 1991; Sue 2010; Ting-Toomey and Chung 2012). This is increasingly true of student development scholarship (King and Kitchener 1994; Knefelkamp 1990; Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller 2004).
Johnella Butler’s 2017 article “Intersectionality and Liberal Education” is an excellent overview of the core concepts of intersectionality. She makes salient two key points: (1) the individual self is an integration of multiple identities (gender, race, and ethnicity are core, but other identity statuses are also prominent, including culture, role, sexual orientation, religion, class, and disability), and (2) different environments are designed to facilitate or inhibit aspects of one’s identity. Her article challenges us to think more inclusively and with more complexity about aspects of our daily work in higher education.

Educational research provides a provocative example. Researchers often collect data on “the student experience” but may not disaggregate the data when presenting them. Students may, on average, indicate that their campus experiences are “satisfactory,” but the disaggregated data may show that students have quite different campus experiences depending on their race, LGBTQ status, socioeconomic class, and other factors. Without complete data, campuses may not see the need to change current practices. Worse, campus leaders who prevent complex data from being presented are avoiding the moral obligation to change the campus culture to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Recently, the field of organizational development and change has adopted a focus on intersectionality. Scholars of organizational change have long been aware that efforts to change organizational climate must involve all aspects of the culture. Too often, organizations settle for the least amount of effort or a partial effort, but focusing on just one aspect of the culture does not lead to lasting organizational or cultural change. (See the article by Frank D. Golom in this issue.) Scholars of intersectionality are always asking about how to effect larger organizational or structural change. They dare us to touch the third rail of power and privilege.

Another major area of scholarship centers on curriculum and effective pedagogy. Students need to be personally involved in the learning process. They need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum to actively participate with their peers in meaningful application of their knowledge through projects, and
to engage in respectful dialogue—especially with those with whom they disagree. As educator Emily Style (1988) posits, the curriculum should be both a mirror that reflects and validates students’ reality and a window that enables students to see others’ realities. The recurring questions of whose story is told, and by whom, are core to developing more inclusive course and program offerings. Students need the opportunity to tell their own stories, without being called upon to speak as sole representatives of their groups.

When considering the interactions between students and higher education environments, it is helpful to refer to the work of psychologist Kurt Lewin (1935). Lewin’s equation states that behavior is a function of a person in an environment. People seek to have their needs met within particular environments; environments place pressure on people to meet the environments’ needs. When this interaction is beneficial to both the individual and the environment, the relationship is seen as a good “fit.” When it is not, the fit is understood to be poor—as has been the case for students of color, first-generation students, women, immigrants, and others in higher education. In the past, students were expected to conform, to “fit,” into the existing educational environment. Work in women’s studies, racial and ethnic studies, and other areas of scholarship challenged this expectation by suggesting that environments needed to change not just to be more responsive to student needs, but also to avoid punishing students. Higher education as a whole would benefit from finding new ways to apply this scholarship.

**Coming into Balance**

Intersectionality theory reminds us that each individual is made up of multiple aspects of identity and that, depending on the environment, some aspects may be more welcomed and rewarded than others. One need only study the different stories of faculty, staff, and students reflecting on their experiences related to gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class to see that the environment is not a neutral place. Indeed, with respect to psychological wellness, it may be an unsafe place (Sedlacek 2004; Sue 2010; Ward 2000). More than just a “chilly climate”
(Hall and Sandler 1982), it may be a harmful one. It is incumbent upon educators to recognize that reality and deliberately work to make positive changes.

We hope that, like the studio where Calder built his mobiles, the conference was an intersection where participants could seek balance within their own work and on campus. And we hope that this issue of *Diversity & Democracy* will encourage further conversations about intersectionality and well-being. Such explorations are critical if we are to support the well-being of all students on all our campuses, in every facet of their complex identities.

**References**


http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf.


**Additional Resources**


Note

1. Throughout this article, we use the word “intersection” in various ways. First and foremost, we use it as part of the term “intersectionality,” which has a rich history that we discuss here. But we also use it as a metaphor referencing the physicality of an actual intersection—a point where multiple objects, processes, or pathways cross. This metaphor informs our understanding of how intrapersonal identities and intellectual ideas intersect and has led us to see the campus itself as an intersection.

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