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Constructing Belonging in a Diverse Campus Community

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Abstract

A diverse student body holds the promise of enriching the learning experience of all students at a particular college or university. What is less clear is whether this diversity inhibits students' sense of belonging at that institution. This essay discusses how the sense of belonging relates to student success. It also explores how higher education professionals can support students through the purposeful cultivation of collective identity among a diverse student body, as well as through the use of cultural tools that promote a sense of belonging. In addition, this article describes a model of student engagement recently developed at one large, private university in the Southeast with a highly diverse student body.

A diverse student body holds the promise of enriching the learning experience of all students at a particular college or university. What is less clear is whether this diversity impacts students' sense of belonging at that institution. Students with different backgrounds may have different versions of "the college experience." In order to persist in their education, however, all students need to feel they are in a campus community that supports and values them, where learning opportunities are developmental, and where they feel a strong sense of identity and affinity with the school. The feeling that they are cared about and seen as part of the campus community is tied to students' sense of belonging; this feeling in turn is tied to student persistence (Cheng, 2004). This sense of belonging has been referred to as "embeddedness" (Roberts and Rosenwald, 2001, p. 112) and has also been associated with "mattering" (Schlossberg, 1989). A challenge for higher education professionals is to develop this sense of belonging within a student body that is highly diverse—not only in terms of ethnicity, but also in terms of age, academic program, location of study (for universities with multiple campuses), and program delivery format (for universities offering both residential and online courses). Achieving this goal contributes not only to increasing student success but also to answering calls for higher education to prepare students to thrive after graduation as citizens of a diverse, global environment (Hurtado, 2007).

One approach that institutional leaders can take to nurture belonging is to recognize and honor difference while at the same time developing and promoting shared values within a diverse campus community. What might the notion of collective identity as understood in the social sciences contribute to the development of shared values and to the larger objective of promoting student success? What can a constructionist conceptualization of culture, which sees culture as the product of social processes and therefore fluid, offer higher education professionals who are seeking to create a supportive, inclusive environment for their students? These are the key questions explored in this essay. In addition to exploring these themes, this article describes a model of student engagement recently developed at one large, private university in the Southeastern United States with a highly diverse student body. The purpose of this initiative is to

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create a sense of belonging among students in order to support their engagement at the university and their overall success.

Student Success and the Sense of Belonging

Extensive research has been conducted over the past two decades on the factors contributing to student retention and student attrition. Vincent Tinto's pivotal work on the subject has highlighted the relationship between "the willingness of institutions to involve themselves in the social and intellectual development of their students" and "student commitment to the institution" (1987, p. 7). While personal considerations such as financial limitations and challenges associated with the family can influence students' decisions to leave college, participation in school activities and identification with a university can strongly impact students' decisions to remain enrolled (Dunwoody and Frank, 1995; Zea, Reisen, Beil, and Caplan, 1997). Other factors that contribute to retention, particularly for minority students, include experiences of feeling respected, as well as support services and academic advising (Zea et. al., 1997; McDaniel and Graham, 2001; Liu and Liu, 1999).

While ethnicity, gender, and residential versus commuter status have been associated with varying findings in terms of student retention, numerous studies have supported Tinto's theory that student involvement—often called student engagement—positively impacts student retention for all student groups (e.g., Peltier, Laden, and Matranga, 1999; Zea et. al., 1997). The crucial role of student involvement has also been emphasized by Alexander Astin (1984) and affirmed in the following statement by the American Council of Education: "Students learn most effectively when they are actively engaged with their work in the classroom and in student life" (Cited in National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1987, p. 13). Out-of-class experiences have been found to contribute to students' learning experiences and achievement of learning outcomes (Whitt and Miller, 1999). Scholars have identified some of the factors that either hinder or enhance the usefulness of out-of-classroom learning. One finding is that programs are less effective than opportunities for active involvement such as research projects, service learning opportunities, and campus clubs and organizations (McKinney, Medvedeva, Vacca, and Malak, 2004).

All of the examples of the literature on student success cited above highlight the importance of students being engaged at their institutions. It is here that an interdisciplinary social science perspective can be useful to higher education professionals in considering the distinct yet related concepts of community and belonging. In his seminal work on nationalism, Benedict Anderson (1983) introduced the famous notion of "imagined communities." This term indicates that although we do not literally know everyone within our nation's borders, we nevertheless feel an affinity and bond with our fellow-citizens. We imagine them to be like us, with shared values and interests. Higher education professionals seeking to develop among their students a strong sense of affinity for their college or university might relate to this notion. Is not the campus community also an "imagined community"? A student does not know every other student, faculty member, or staff member, and yet the hope is that the student will feel a part of something larger. Administrators and faculty members want students to have a sense that they have a "place" at the school. They hope that students do not merely see themselves as located within a community but that they feel they belong there. This sense of belonging has been referred to in other contexts as an individual experience of place "saturated with meaning and intention" (Crossley, 2001, p. 283).

If a key to student persistence is successful social integration in the campus community, it is important to develop pathways for students to become engaged that take into account diverse student demographics (Tinto, 1987; Raley, 2007). Differences in ethnicity, age, socioeconomic

status, sexual orientation, and so forth among a student body require creative and original approaches to nurturing student engagement and fostering students' ability to persist successfully until graduation. The perception of sharing certain common values and similar interests that Anderson (1983) associated with the imagined community of a nation can support belonging in a campus community. This is a concept Ernest Boyer pointed towards in identifying principles that promote a learning community (1990). Administrators and faculty members can intentionally foster a sense of belonging not only by encouraging student involvement, but also by identifying institutional values that can be expressed by students in many different ways. For example, a college might highlight service as a core value. Members of a fraternity could express service in a community volunteer effort, an adult student who works full-time and takes evening classes might sign up through the college's civic engagement office to serve in a local soup kitchen on the weekend, or a class might engage in a service learning project. These expressions of service reflect the diversity within the student body; yet if they are consciously undertaken in support of an institutional value, they can serve to unify these students in a larger purpose and sense of belonging within that learning community.

Recognizing and Reinventing Campus Cultures

One of the key factors to consider in fostering a sense of belonging for students is that of campus culture. In the 1970s and 1980s, organizational scholars began exploring theories related to the notion of culture, drawing upon the rich body of scholarship on culture in the field of anthropology. By the end of the 1980s, scholars in the field of education saw the value of applying theories of organizational culture in institutions of higher education, recognizing that colleges and universities can have widely differing cultures, reflected in organizational goals, processes, values, and attitudes (Tierney, 1988). Tierney provided a framework for diagnosing the culture of a college or university; he suggested that a diagnosis of culture involves analyzing the following factors: environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership. In the past decade or so, this field of scholarship has developed further. Some scholars have posited that there are four general types of culture in institutions of higher education and that an institution needs to align its mission with its culture type (Fjortoft and Smart, 1994). The four culture types were identified as clan, hierarchy, market, and adhocracy (Cameron and Ettington, 1988). The clan culture was seen as encompassing a mentoring leadership style and the use of tradition to achieve cohesion. The hierarchy culture relies upon an organizing leadership style, which uses rules and policies to maintain stability. The adhocracy culture is reflected in an emphasis on innovation and a focus on growth, while the market culture emphasizes achievement through productivity and goal accomplishment. Another theory on this subject is that irrespective of what type of culture is found at a college, if that culture is strongly woven into the policies and norms of the school, this will contribute to greater institutional effectiveness (Smart and St. John, 1996). In addition, research has shown that successfully implementing organizational change in institutions of higher education is directly related to utilizing change strategies that take into account organizational culture (Kezar and Eckel, 2002).

These works contribute valuable ideas for higher education professionals seeking to nurture a supportive campus environment. At the same time, they minimize the idea that multiple forms of culture exist on any given campus. The recognition is widespread within the social sciences that culture is not "fixed" and should not be reified as a unified, historically continuous set of practices or norms. While in earlier decades, social scientists subscribed to positivist, primordial notions of culture and ethnicity, these have been challenged as faulty or inadequate conceptualizations (Banks, 1996; Jenkins, 1997; Avruch, 1998;Wimmer, 2002). Scholars have

effectively deconstructed culture, as in the classic work *The Invention of Tradition* by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983). Culture is not a "thing," notes Avruch (1998, p. 14), nor does someone have only a single culture. Social constructionists recognize culture as a fluid, multifaceted construct which continually evolves.

There are at least two ways in which this constructionist notion of culture might contribute to the efforts of those seeking to enhance student success. First, this conceptualization of culture would suggest that the goal of creating a single, clearly bounded campus culture is rather illusory. Higher education professionals at an institution with a diverse student body might imagine that they need to form one shared culture in order to support belonging and retention, yet this could be a frustrating and unnecessary endeavor. Efforts would be better directed toward fostering shared values; these in turn would contribute to multiple positive, healthy cultures on campus. Second, the social constructionist perspective suggests those working in higher education can indeed make a positive difference, because of the constructed, changing nature of culture. One need not become resigned to the idea that some students will inevitably feel alienated or like "outsiders" at their school. In an environment that embraces multiple cultures under the umbrella of the larger school community, there can be a "place" or culture where each student can feel that he or she belongs.

Recognizing that there are multiple cultures on a campus does not preclude these cultures from sharing certain common values which are purposefully promoted by the institution's leadership. Leaders seeking change can use such cultural tools as symbols and rituals to assist in bringing about cultural change on campus (Thornton and Jaeger, 2007). Tradition can be invented; ritual can be purposefully designed and "used" to promote particular common values within the campus community. As mentioned earlier, Ernest Boyer characterizes the principles of a community of learning as purposeful, open, just, disciplined, caring, and celebrative (1990). This is one example of a set of values that could be highlighted within a campus community. Student affairs professionals, faculty members, and university administrators could collaborate in consciously creating campus "traditions" that foster these aspects of a supportive learning community. In a university with a law school and business school, for example, law students might be encouraged to promote the value of justice through a student organization that works to overturn wrongful convictions. On the same campus, the business students might form a student organization that supports the value of justice by working to expose fraudulent business practices. Student affairs personnel could work with a diverse group of students to develop an honor code that highlights justice in regard to academic integrity and cheating. Difference is celebrated, yet the values unite those students in a larger university purpose.

Cultivating Collective Identity

When considering the issue of student success and its relationship to student engagement, questions arise concerning why students do or do not choose to get involved in their campus communities. This issue relates to the notion of how students perceive themselves and construct their identities as college students. Many social scientists embrace a social constructionist view of identity as a continually evolving construct impacted by historical, political, cultural, and personal circumstances (Cerulo, 1997). A postmodern perspective on identity highlights the multiple, fragmented nature of identity (Collins, 1991; Flax, 1990). No one has just one identity; no one's identity exists as a permanent, objective entity. It is a cognitive structure, constantly being constructed and reconstructed. Each individual has multiple selves and places different degrees of value upon those different selves (Hoelter, 1983).

Identity theory explores the question of "how and why individuals select among role performances given the various possible alternatives" (Serpe, 1987, p. 44). The notion of identity

salience is used to explain why these choices are made. The salience of a given identity is influenced by the level of commitment, as well by the extent of involvement and the intensity of identification with a particular aspect of one's multiple identities (Serpe, 1987). Because of the socially constructed nature of identity, students go through a process in coming to identify with a particular college student role (Collier 2000). Collier notes, "A crucial element of an individual's successful 'navigation' of the college experience involves learning the meaning of the role of college student and subsequently developing a conception of self in terms of that role" (p. 285).

In addition to considering conceptions of self, it is also useful to consider the notion of collective identity. Collective identity refers to the elements of identity related to belonging to a particular group or social category (Cerulo, 1997; Kreisberg, 2007). Both the constructed nature of identity and the notion of collective identity are highly relevant to higher education professionals' goals of promoting shared values and a sense of belonging. Linstroth (2002) has written of the production and consumption of collective identity through the means of media images and material objects. In the college context, we see this production of a shared identity in any college or university's brochures and billboards that depict smiling students arm in arm. We see the consumption of a collective college identity in the school t-shirts, sweatshirts, hats, and mugs visible all across campus.

Material goods with a school logo can contribute to a collective identity, but the research on student success indicates more is needed than wearing a school sweatshirt. It is important to recognize the multiple identities of students and to help students develop confidence within those identities on the individual level. Knowing that identity is a complex, fluid, evolving construct, higher education professionals can consider how they might support students in developing a role as college students that contributes to both engagement and persistence. In addition, such professionals can intentionally cultivate students' collective identity as members of the college or university community. A given student might have multiple identities under the umbrella of his or her university identity—as basketball player, pre-law student, residence of a particular residential hall, and so forth. The key is to be sure that these identities are actively promoted so that every student feels connected and part of at least one collective identity related to the university.

One Model for Constructing Belonging

In order to be successful in college and as world citizens, students need to develop key competencies and engage in a process of identity development and meaning-making. Colleges and universities need to design pathways for this competency building and identity development and also need to establish assessment procedures to determine how effective these pathways are in supporting student success (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and The American College Personnel Association, 2004). This process of creating pathways for student development involves starting with the mission of the institution and then crafting and assessing learning outcomes that support students' ability to achieve success in fulfilling that institutional mission (Keeling, 2006). Under the leadership of the dean of student affairs, a task force at a large, private university in the Southeast with a very diverse student body was formed to consider these issues. The committee recognized early on that a one-size-fits-all approach would not work. At the same time, in order to bring about systemic change, a model would be needed that would embrace and impact all students.

The task force developed a model of student engagement that focuses on the overlapping yet distinct components of developmental involvement, identity, support, and recognition (NSU Experience Task Force, 2008). Involvement was selected based on the literature highlighting the importance of involvement to student success (Tinto 1987; Astin 1984). Identity was emphasized purposefully to celebrate diversity while also fostering collective identities that contribute to the

sense of being part of a community. Support and recognition were chosen in order to nurture the students' perception of mattering, being cared about and valued (Schlossberg, 1989; Cheng 2004). These components are designed to work together to contribute to a sense of belonging that would support effective student engagement. The task force conceptualized developmental involvement as providing opportunities to promote student growth and development through the application of learning outcomes. They envisioned the identity component as facilitating affinity to one or more groups so that students experience a connection to the university. The task force defined support as knowing students' needs, assisting and providing comfort and caring, and facilitating access to internal or external resources. They conceptualized recognition as incorporating acknowledgement of accomplishment, being celebratory, making sure students know they matter, and rewarding what reflects university values.

This model provides clear focus on these four key areas, while at the same time offers the flexibility of developing these four areas in multiple, customized ways for many different students among the student population. For example, developmental involvement might include educational discipline, student involvement in event planning, student government, civic engagement, career counseling, and leadership roles on campus. Affinity groups that could be fostered to develop a sense of student identity could encompass the categories of academic program, Greek life, research group, intramural team, student club, residence hall floor, international student, first year student, and university student. Examples of support would include recognizing students' stress and referring students to counseling, contacting students prior to their attending the university and/or after their first few weeks, providing needed services/assistance to online students, as well as offering conflict resolution services and disability services. Finally, recognition would be demonstrated not only in awards but also in providing verbal feedback to student employees, acknowledging students' presence and individuality, marking milestones in their academic careers, sending birthday cards on behalf of the university, and using student media to give wider attention to student accomplishments. Involvement, support, and recognition might take countless forms; what matters is that every student feels involved, supported, and recognized in some way. Thus, this model is not program-based; it is based on the shared values of involvement, identity, support, and recognition.

Staff members are developing this approach to student engagement at the structural, systemic level; the student would not necessarily be aware that aspects of their student experience have been intentionally designed to support their sense of belonging and persistence at the university. At the same time, the expectation is that opportunities for involvement and effective support and recognition will inspire students to aspire to make lasting contributions to the traditions and achievements of the university community. The next few years will provide an opportunity to implement and assess this approach to creating a sense of belonging among students. There will be a learning curve, and adjustments will be made along the way. The hope, however, is that the students will benefit from this model of student engagement. As students are supported in their involvement with the university, as they develop a stronger identity as university students and feel recognized for their accomplishments, they should be more likely to persist in their education until graduation. It is too early to provide data on the results of this new approach to student engagement. However, this example is not included to promote the adoption of a specific model but rather to illustrate how a social constructionist conceptualization of culture and collective identity might contribute to student engagement efforts.

Conclusion

The more administrators and faculty can learn about factors that support student success, the more they can assist students and create a more beneficial experience for them. The objective

of this article was to consider specifically the sense of belonging among students within a diverse campus community. The research shows that "a sense of belonging is an influential factor in whether a student succeeds and develops in college" (Hamrick, Evans, and Schuh, 2002, p. 86). That sense of belonging is developed through a form of student engagement that is far more than mere participation and instead involves some measure of emotional commitment and investment (Hoffman, Perillo, Hawthorne Calizo, Hadfield, and Lee, 2005). It is a form of engagement not based upon programming and publicity, but rather on a holistic student experience that fosters student learning. A number of studies have shown that a significant factor associated with student persistence is the level of engagement of students with their college or university community outside of classes. Those students engaged in athletics, student government, student organizations, or research groups, for instance, tend to achieve greater success academically as well (Peltier et. al., 1999).

As campus communities become ever-more diverse, it is vital that all students feel a sense of belonging, even while embracing multiple campus cultures within a single institution. Traditionally, culture and identity have been thought of as independent variables, so to speak. Yet the social constructionist perspective sheds a different light on these concepts. Recognizing the constructed, fluid, and complex nature of both culture and identity highlights the promise and possibility of supporting student success in new ways. Supporting students can be done in part by recognizing the multiple cultures present on any college or university campus, and purposefully identifying core values that both transcend and unify these diverse cultures. Likewise, cultivating collective identity within the student body will strengthen students' affinity and affiliation with the institution—not just as students of that particular college or university, but also as students identified with specific collective identities, such as pre-med students, members of the Indo-Caribbean Student Association, residents of a particular hall, and so on. Higher education professionals can purposefully address the need for a sense of belonging through consciously developing traditions and rituals that promote shared values and by cultivating collective identities among the students that celebrate those shared values.

Selecting values to emphasize, designing new traditions, and cultivating collective identities sound a bit like social engineering, and so it is important to consider the ethical issues associated with constructing belonging. Are these efforts manipulative or harmful to students? On the contrary, these ideas reflect an approach to community-building that takes into account the diversity of the student body at many colleges and universities today. This approach seeks to create a more supportive learning environment for this wide range of students. Higher education professionals want to be sure that all students feel included and perceive themselves as having a place at their school—in other words, that they have a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging will support those students in persisting in their education, as well as in finding greater meaning in their college experience.

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