

**Presentation: Student Well-Being as a Function of Identity Development
AAC&U Centennial Symposium: “Flourishing and Well-being: Essential Dimensions of
Higher Education’s Core Purposes, Values, and Promise”
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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, I would change. They meant for the worst, of course. My Mom and Dad probably feared it too, but they loved me, so if I changed, in whatever way, they were OK 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. 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 marks among Hispanics is language. Among Puerto Ricans, a marker of class is the way you pronounce words. Swallowing the final syllable of words indicates you are uneducated or part of the lowest social strata. The word *lado*, for example, means side; I pronounced it my entire 18 years before college as *Lao*, dropping the "d". At some point, after heart-wrenching self-debate, I decided that, for the rest of my life, I would always drop the "d" when I went home. In that way, when I spoke with pre-college friends or my family, I could show them I had not changed.

Today 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 our retention and graduation rates. Eastern has the highest retention and graduation 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 today's discussion is “well-being”—the quality of a student's life—and its impact on learning. Through impressive studies led by BTtoP's Don Harward 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 on the impact of experiential learning and community engagement in positively impacting students' well-being—how those practices contribute to a student's social and psychological health. I would like to direct my comments to another important aspect of student well-being: how our campuses can best support gender, racial, and class identity development.

First, on the matter of gender. Even though research suggests that sexual awareness and gender identity development is taking place at an earlier age than it did 50 years ago, 18-year-old freshmen on college campuses are still dealing with gender identity and exploring their sexuality—some for the first time—in an environment that is new and unfamiliar. They are living away from home, most of them for the first time.

They are managing freedoms they have not had previously and dealing with multiple layers of unfamiliar territory—new academic expectations and opportunities, new living conditions, new social circles.

One can 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 heterosexual students and homosexual students alike, as well as transgendered students. How college campuses provide support in the process of gender identity development 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. Cass’s model 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 25 years. Reflecting the evolution of our society’s acceptance of the LGBT community, the stages of gender identity development have also evolved. A baseline of tolerance and acceptance—both 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 in moving through the gender identity development process.

In focusing on gender identity development among heterosexual students, Roger Worthington and his colleagues noted in 2002 that “virtually all literature regarding sexual orientation is designed to address lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues.” Worthington and his co-authors discussed the importance of providing heterosexual students with the same resources needed to help them explore, affirm, and internalize their gender identity. By engaging in a frank and supportive discussion of sexual identity on college campuses, gender identity development becomes a common developmental process shared by all students, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Second, on the matter of race. While discussions of gender and sexual orientation basically have two axes—male and female, straight and gay—the issue of race on our campuses has many more groups to consider. For the purposes of this short essay, I want to focus on three groups: Latinos, African Americans, and Whites.

Part of the issue of racial identity development—across all races and ethnicities—is the need to educate people about the definitions of race and ethnicity. The inaccurate terminology we use to describe the groups I have just mentioned is a symbol of the need for more education. For instance, Latinos or Hispanics do not constitute a race or an ethnicity. There are more than 20 nations of origin represented under the umbrella term, “Latino.” The Pew Research Center found that 80 percent of young Latinos identify themselves by their nation of origin—“Cuban,” “Puerto Rican,” “Mexican.” They

are even more likely to identify themselves as “Americans” than “Latinos.” Similarly, “blacks” in our country range from native-born African Americans whose ancestors arrived on these shores as slaves, to Caribbean immigrants with African heritage, to people who have come to the United States directly from Africa, to people from India and other countries.

In the same way that much of the early research into 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 was significant in that it focused on developing racial awareness as a key component of white racial identity. Helms considered the acknowledgement that racism exists and confronting one’s own racism as a white person (“abandonment of white privilege”) to be central to white racial identity development. Only by interacting with students of color in trusting, positive campus environments and activities can white students confront and respond to their own racism, at the same time building relationships and developing a “non-racist white identity.”

In her later work, Helms delved into racial identity for minorities. She made the point that racial identity development 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,” while advanced stages include expressing a positive racial self-identity, actively rejecting and combating racial stereotypes, and developing positive individual and group self-expression.

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 nations—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 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? A 2014 study of hundreds of college students at a northern California public university focused on the issue of class identity. The hypothesis was that social class would be less important to students’ self-identity than gender or ethnicity. Instead, the researchers discovered that the majority of students saw social class as most central

to their identity, 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 identity. In these peer interactions, students clearly recognized class distinctions in speech, dress, etiquette, and behavior.

During the study's interviews, students expressed a wide range of emotions. Affluent students conveyed guilt, denial, and justification—although one student described privilege as a “blessing and a curse”—while lower-income students expressed anger, yet 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 vision 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.”

How can we impact this class consciousness on our campuses? As with gender and race, we need to help students develop their sense of personal identity in terms of class while also providing opportunities for them to understand how class impacts their peers and the world at large. From the study I cited, 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—in residential hall activities, performing community service together, playing on intramural teams together, and getting involved in campus organizations together.

On an intellectual level, we need to raise the level of discussion of income inequity on our campuses. In early 2015, the head of the Federal Reserve Board wrote that income inequity threatens our social order and economic future as a nation. 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 impact 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. 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—ethnic minorities, gays/lesbians, economically disadvantaged students. As the literature clearly suggests, developing healthy attitudes among majority students as well—heterosexuals, whites, and middle-class students—is every bit as important a goal of any programming that we create to support identity development for minority populations on campus.

While developing their self-identity, having white students acknowledge institutional racism and take steps to understand, respect, and support ethnic minorities; having heterosexual students move from tolerance to affirmative support of their gay and lesbian friends; and having middle-class students look past the perspective of privilege to understand the impact of 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 a 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.