THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

Promoting Inclusion and Identity Safety to Support College Success

MAY 18, 2016 — MARY MURPHY AND MESMIN DESTIN

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"When I first arrived at school as a first-generation college student, I didn't know anyone on campus except my brother. I didn't know how to pick the right classes or find the right buildings. I didn't even bring the right size sheets for my dorm room bed. I didn't realize those beds were so long. So I was a little overwhelmed and a little isolated."

—MICHELLE OBAMA,
COLLEGE OPPORTUNITY SUMMIT, 2014

"[At Princeton, I felt like] a visitor landing in an alien land. . . . I have spent my years since Princeton, while at law school . . . not feeling completely a part of the worlds I inhabit."

—SONIA SOTOMAYOR, MY BELOVED WORLD, 2013

Going to college is one of the single most effective things people can do to improve their life outcomes. Research shows that higher education confers a wealth of benefits.[1] Through successful college completion, people gain resources that shape their lives, including career advancement, economic earnings, and good mental and physical health.[2] Yet in the United States and many other post-industrial nations, there are large disparities in the extent to which individuals from different social groups thrive and reap these accompanying benefits.3 One of the reasons that people from different social groups complete college at different rates is because the *experience* of college—the challenges and barriers students must contend with to successfully complete college—varies greatly depending on students' social group memberships and backgrounds.

As the accounts from Michelle Obama and Sonia Sotomayor poignantly illustrate, going to college can often be an ambivalent experience for low-income, first-generation, and racial and ethnic minority students. While college admission is an exciting accomplishment to be celebrated, attending college can be rife with feelings of isolation and uncertainty about whether one belongs. These concerns are more strongly experienced in college and university settings by those who belong to negatively stereotyped social groups that have been—and continue to be—underrepresented (for example, racial/ethnic minorities, low-income students, and students who are first in their family to attend college). Drawing on empirical evidence, this paper reviews some of the obstacles and barriers to college success for students from low-income and minority backgrounds and describes what institutions and faculty can do to create an environment of identity safety—where all students are valued, included, and can perform to their highest potential. We review this work through a social psychological framework, which examines the student in context—focusing on the ways that cultural stereotypes, social identity, and the cultural

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and institutional structures of college shape students' motivation, identity, and academic success. This framework suggests that, to understand and address student outcomes, one must consider college from students' perspectives and appreciate the processes that unfold over time between the local environment and the student. Only then—with a full understanding of what underrepresented students contend with—can we create settings that effectively support these students' journeys through college.

The college enrollment, retention, and completion gaps between "socially disadvantaged" and "socially advantaged" students are relatively well-known and lamented by most who value higher education. In his 2009 address to the Joint Session of Congress, President Barack Obama set a bold goal for the country: that by 2020, America would once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. To make this goal a reality, we must find ways to improve the college outcomes of first-generation students, low-income students, and racial and ethnic minority students—all of whom are woefully underrepresented among the number of college graduates in America. In 2012, only 36.9 percent and 34.7 percent of black and Latino/a 18–24 year olds, respectively, were enrolled in college, compared with 45.1 percent of white young adults in the same age cohort.[4] Similar gaps are found by income and are especially wide for college completion. When it comes to college graduation, a nationally representative longitudinal study started in 2002 found that among low-income tenth-grade students, only 14 percent had completed a bachelor's degree ten years later, compared with 60 percent of high-income students.[5]

Why might these enrollment, retention, and completion gaps occur? One explanation is that the people within college and university settings (professors, administrators, staff) are biased in favor of individuals who belong to certain high-status groups over those who belong to low-status groups. However, even when colleges and universities make efforts to reduce bias and prejudice, inequalities in students' daily experiences and their downstream academic outcomes often persist.[6] What then can institutions do to close these gaps and promote equal opportunities across social groups? We propose that a focus on bias—while important—does not provide a sufficient antidote. To understand disparities among underrepresented students' experiences of college, one must understand how college contexts and societal stereotypes shape students' thoughts, feelings, and behavior—and how "the college experience" can be substantially different for people who belong to high-status groups and low-status groups. In effect, the college environment itself often fails to promote a sense of inclusion, support, and identity safety for students from low-status groups, which would otherwise allow them to reach their social and academic potential. Instead, students from low-status groups often encounter situations, experiences, and various forms of forms of "identity threat," whereby social cues and stereotypes can negatively affect their social and academic performance. This report will explore the different ways that colleges promote a sense of identity safety or identity threat for underrepresented students and propose ways that administrators and faculty members can construct campuses that allow all students to reach their social and academic potential.

The Many Types of Identity Threat

When students belong to historically underrepresented and negatively stereotyped social groups, they are vigilant to situational cues and messages from institutions, faculty, and peers that signal whether they are valued, included, and respected.[7] This vigilance serves to alert and protect individuals from both psychological and physical threats in the local environment. Stereotype threat, for example, is a form of social identity threat that is experienced when people become concerned that they might confirm—or be expected (by others) to confirm—negative stereotypes about their group.[8] We can all experience stereotype threat because we all belong to social groups that are negatively stereotyped in one way or another. For example, women—aware of the negative stereotypes about their group's math and spatial abilities—may underperform on tasks that involve these skills.[9] Similarly, men may underperform on tests of social-emotional intelligence, knowing that cultural stereotypes suggest that their group is not very good at identifying the emotions of others.[10] White men taking math

tests, knowing that their performance is being compared to Asian men; women driving; white individuals—concerned about the stereotype that their group may be racially biased—may behave awkwardly when interacting with black individuals.[11] The feeling of pressure that subsequently comes from wanting to disprove negative stereotypes about the groups to which we belong can be distracting at best and debilitating at worst in both intellectual and social situations.

In the context of higher education, however, negative stereotypes regarding students' ability and intelligence place low-income and racial/ethnic minority students at a particular disadvantage. When situational cues in the college environment suggest that it is possible one might be viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, stereotype threat is triggered.[12] This impairs academic performance because it consumes mental resources required for academic performance and increases anxiety and physiological stress, distracting students from the intellectual tasks at hand.[13]

However, concerns about being judged in terms of negative stereotypes (by peers or professors) are not the only concerns that low-income and racial/ethnic minority students contend with. Being a member of a negatively stereotyped group in educational contexts engenders many concerns that are triggered by situational cues in the local class and college environment. If we are to create institutions of higher education that support students from underrepresented backgrounds, it is essential to see the environment through students' eyes and understand the ways in which the local environment may, even unintentionally, signal identity threat. By attending to the messages these cues send, we can identify points of intervention. What follows is an illustrative list of identity threat concerns experienced by students from underrepresented backgrounds and the cues that often trigger those concerns. By attending to the messages these cues send, we can identify points of intervention.

Stigma and Stereotyping

As described above, stigma and stereotyping concerns derive from situational cues that speak to the possibility that one's behavior will be interpreted through the lens of negative group stereotypes—that one is at risk of inadvertently confirming a stereotype about one's group to oneself or to others.[14] Previous research has shown that people often see themselves in terms of their social identity that is most stigmatized in a current setting.[15] Given this tendency, cues such as being numerically underrepresented or encountering tests that are framed as diagnostic of innate ability increase the pressure to represent one's group and disprove intellectual stereotypes. For example, if students are told that an upcoming test is designed to "weed out" out students who do not have the ability to succeed in a given field, an African American or Latino/a student is likely to feel pressured by the stereotype that members of his or her group are less likely to succeed. Such cues make it seem that people's group memberships may be central to their evaluation and treatment in a setting, thus engendering identity threat and reducing test performance.

Belonging

Stigmatized individuals are vigilant for cues to belonging. Belonging to valued social groups is a fundamental human need,16 but a sense of inclusion is particularly important for stigmatized groups when stereotypes imply that they might be unsuitable to certain settings, such as rigorous academic classes.[17] Feeling a sense of fit and acceptance by others[18] is crucial for the sustained motivation of stigmatized individuals. Belonging concerns can be triggered by physical cues in a college environment such as the presence or absence of other people who share one's identity.[19] For example, a female student in a STEM class is likely to feel a greater sense of belonging if she observes other women in the classroom than if she is in a classroom predominantly comprised of male students. Inanimate objects and posters can cue similar experiences of threat by primarily featuring the interests and faces of the majority, or by featuring minorities in stereotypical ways.[20]

Authenticity

Stigmatized individuals are also vigilant to cues that indicate the likelihood that they can be themselves in a setting.[21] Feeling as though they have to hide or cover aspects of

themselves or their background exerts a psychological and physiological toll that puts students from stigmatized backgrounds at a clear disadvantage.[22] A student from a low-income neighborhood, for example, may feel the need to avoid discussing their background with peers, adding an undue psychological burden to everyday interactions. Certain situational cues suggest that others may treat them as a curiosity or an exemplar of their group, rather than as an individual. Often, the pressure to represent one's group in such settings, especially as it necessitates hiding or changing oneself, can cause a person to feel inauthentic and "fake."

Trust and Fairness

Policies and practices that provide assurance that all people are treated with fairness and respect are important to everyone, and they are particularly important to people from underrepresented backgrounds, as these individuals want to know that their identity will not restrict their opportunities in college. Cues such as ambiguous assignments and evaluation procedures that do not clearly identify behavioral expectations or grading criteria make it seem more likely that interpersonal biases might seep in to influence students' outcomes. For example, without clear standards about how assignments will be evaluated, a minority student may interpret a poor grade or negative feedback as an instance of racial bias, rather than as feedback aimed to help her see how she can meet those stated standards. Indeed, research shows that ambiguous standards are more likely to engender shifting criteria and biased judgments.[23] Faculty and supervisors would do well to clearly specify expectations and evaluation criteria—especially for assignments such as essays or narratives, which foster deep thinking, but may also be seen as relatively subjective in nature. Similarly, difficult-to-navigate bureaucracies create disparities in things such as on-time course registration, choosing a major, and advancing toward a degree. Students with college-educated parents have a built-in support network that can help them navigate campus bureaucracies that are otherwise experienced as closed, inaccessible, or unfair to first-generation students who lack such networks (and consequential access to information). Thus, stigmatized students often look for cues to interpersonal trust: "Can I trust people here to treat me fairly?"[24] They also look for cues about whether the setting at large—at an institutional level—is worthy of trust: "Will my college give my social group, and me, a fair chance? Do they have my back?"

Discrimination and Devaluation

Stigmatized individuals are sometimes sensitive to signs that they could be negatively treated, discriminated against, or harassed on the basis of their social identity.[25] Unfortunately, every year, most college campuses do experience incidents in which stigmatized groups are disparaged. If a campus experiences an incident of bias or hate crime targeting a Muslim American student, for example, other Muslim students and even students from other stigmatized groups are likely to experience increased concerns about their own place and safety on campus. How campuses respond is critical to dispelling the understandable worry or suspicion that discrimination and devaluation is tolerated.

Marginalization, "Ghettoization," and Social Exclusion

Students from underrepresented backgrounds may have concerns that one's beliefs, values, and cultural practices might be seen as strange, abnormal, or not compatible with mainstream practices. Stigmatized individuals are vigilant to cues about whether their group may be marginalized or pushed to the periphery of social environments—either physically or culturally segregated. Similarly, stigmatized individuals are vigilant to cues about whether their social identity is—or historically has been—excluded from particular academic and social environments as they strive to be seen as full and valued members of educational and social settings. For example, even as greater numbers of Asian American students enroll in college, an Asian American student may face social exclusion and stereotypes that lead him or her to feel uncomfortable within certain social settings, such joining a traditional Greek organization or participating in other campus activities.

Taken together, we see that individuals from stigmatized social groups look to the situational cues in the local environment to

assess whether they will be valued and respected or devalued and disrespected there. Therefore, one way that educational institutions, teachers, and administrators can support low-income, first-generation, and racial/ethnic minority students is to pay attention to how the local classroom and school environment is structured and what messages are conveyed by the cues in the local environment. For example, an audit of the situational cues present in classrooms and public spaces could lead to greater inclusivity. Identifying and removing cues that prompt identity threat and affirmatively adding cues that signal inclusion, value, and respect would go far in supporting low-income, first-generation, and racial/ethnic minority students—creating educational contexts in which everyone can achieve their potential.

How College Heightens Identity Threat

Many of the factors that lead low-income, first-generation, and racial/ethnic minority students to experience threats to their sense of belonging and achievement are "in the air" in academic contexts, making them difficult to pinpoint, quantify, and combat. However, several tangible aspects have been identified as especially detrimental for students who come from backgrounds that are underrepresented in colleges and universities.

Specifically, as described below, the institutional climate toward diversity, the cultural norms of administrators, competitive classrooms, and student body attitudes toward difference are all factors that influence academic outcomes for low-income, first-generation, and racial and ethnic minority students.

Climate toward Diversity

For students who perceive that the majority of their peers come from different backgrounds than their own, it becomes important to find signs that the educational institution, itself, values their presence and aims to support students from diverse backgrounds. For example, the cues regarding an institution's climate toward socioeconomic diversity include its level of commitment to financial aid and the availability of work-study opportunities. Even for institutions that have these underlying policies in place, students need to see visible reminders of their existence and to know that many other students take advantage of these opportunities. Without such reminders, students may come to question their ability to succeed in the academic context, even despite being previously high achievers.[26] When low-income students see evidence that their university aims to support them, they feel more motivated than when they see evidence that their university is an institution that seems to care only about wealthier students. Making individuals, offices, and policies that provide financial support for students more prominent on campus not only helps to connect students to important resources but also sends a message that the university is dedicated to fostering their success, conferring the psychological benefits of respect and value.

Cultural Norms of Administrators

At many colleges and universities, the administrative leadership tends to promote and reinforce values that reflect middle class and upper middle class priorities, such as independence, individual achievement, and self-exploration.[27] For students who come from middle-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds, this prioritization of independence is familiar to them. However, students who come from working-class backgrounds are likely to be more familiar with interdependent values and norms, such as being part of a community and learning with others. As a result, working-class students can experience a cultural mismatch that makes it difficult for them to successfully engage in academic tasks. The cultural norms of an institution and its administration are made salient in many ways, even in standard "welcome" letters and e-mails delivered to students as they are admitted to a university. Whether the messages in these letters focus exclusively on independent values (for example, leadership, achievement, exploration, "creating your own intellectual journey"), or also promote interdependent values (for example, collaboration, community, group work, and "working together and learning from others") can shape the experience of working-class students in negative or positive ways.[28]

Classroom Competition

In addition to the influence of factors at the institutional level, practices that occur in the classroom itself can impair the likelihood that first-generation students perform at their highest academic level. When class exercises and exams are presented in ways that emphasize selection and competition, students with college-educated parents outperform first-generation students. When the same exercises and exams are presented as opportunities for everyone to learn—without the threatening elements of selection and competition—first-generation students perform at the same level as students with college-educated parents.[29]

Student Body Attitude toward Difference

Fellow students also play a significant role in the success or struggles of low-income, first-generation, and racial/ethnic minority college students. In many ways, peers set the tone for students who worry that they may be different and may not belong in college. As new students arrive at a university, they watch for signs and listen for messages of their peers' attitudes about the meaning of coming from different backgrounds. During these critical moments, students might receive messages that being different is something to hide, conceal, or overcome. On the other hand, they might learn that students come from many different backgrounds, and that those different perspectives can help to contribute to their success. Exposure to the latter message that embraces differences is a crucial factor that leads first-generation college students, in particular, to engage more fully in the college experience, seek out help when necessary, and eventually earn higher grades.[30]

How Identity Threats Affect Student Performance

As the study of the educational experiences of first-generation, low-income, and racial/ethnic minority college students continues to expand, so too does the range of important outcomes to assess. How do we know whether these students are succeeding? What metrics are important to assess? Student retention and grade point average (GPA) remain the standard and prevailing "bottom line" measures of student success. Not surprisingly, a higher GPA is a strong predictor of completing college,[31] being admitted into graduate school,[32] and securing desirable employment options.33 At the same time, there are numerous intermediary factors that influence students' GPAs and there are many critical aspects of educational experiences that may be more independent of academic success. To the extent that these factors can be monitored, they serve as warning signs that students may be struggling in college. In general, these measures can be categorized as motivation, student identity, and the cyclical effects of both.

Motivation

Before students take action and engage in the behaviors that lead them to succeed in their classes, they must feel some call or drive to go to class and engage in schoolwork. Students who reach the college level are likely to have already tapped into some source of motivation that, if uninterrupted, could guide their continued success in college. However, college contexts are different from high school contexts, and students can find themselves distracted and demotivated for any number of reasons. Because of the link between motivation and performance, decreased motivation provides a useful early warning sign that students may be on the path to decreased performance.[34] First-generation, low-income, and racial/ethnic minority students are especially likely to face unexpected challenges to their school motivation in college if they experience the social psychological threats or institutional challenges described above. Instead of simply measuring students' longer term academic outcomes, in the form of GPA and course units completed, measurement of motivation outcomes can provide an early indicator of when intervention may be beneficial.

Students' goals are key indicators of motivation that lead to action and these goals are sensitive to context.[35] In the traditional sense, goals signify some desired objective, such as earning an "A" on a test or making the Dean's list. Additionally, goals are often divided into broad categories, including mastery goals and performance goals.[36] A student

may want to earn an "A" on a test in order to truly learn and understand the material (a mastery goal), or they may want earn an "A" simply to demonstrate their aptitude to those around them (a performance goal). Further, a student might eagerly seek out opportunities to reach success (an approach goal) or may vigilantly attend to and attempt to avoid potential avenues of failure (an avoidance goal). When students experience identity threat and unexpected institutional obstacles, it increases the likelihood that they become preoccupied with avoiding circumstances where they might perform poorly or exhibit a lack of ability. These performance and avoidance goals tend to take a negative toll on student well-being and success compared to goals that are focused on mastery and approach.[37]

Another framework for investigating and understanding student motivation comes from expectancy-value theory.[38] This perspective highlights students' expectations for success as a key aspect of motivation such that those who actually believe that they are able to reach a given objective are more likely to work toward that end. Additionally, students must maintain a sense of value and belief in education, and that the ultimate goal—earning high grades or being a successful college student—will precipitate some other tangible benefits, such as a higher income or increased happiness. All of these factors ultimately lead toward more successful behavioral plans and shape whether or not students choose to focus on school tasks, particularly during challenging or difficult times.

Student Identity

Another piece of the motivation-behavior chain includes how a student thinks about who they are or who they are likely to become—in other words, their identity. Although often thought of as a stable characteristic, an individual's identity is in constant flux and ideas about the self are continually reconstructed based on information in a person's immediate environment. For example, when a college student is in their childhood home, they are more likely to think of themselves as a member of their family or hometown. On the other hand, when on the college campus, a student is more likely to think of themselves as a member of their college class, fraternity or sorority, or in terms of their college major. In addition to these group memberships and social identities, identity includes a more basic sense of the current attributes and traits that are salient to a person in that moment. When a college student encounters unexpected identity threats and institutional challenges, it reduces the likelihood that they feel connected to their identity as a college student, exhibit the traits of a high-achieving college student, and become a successful college graduate.[39] These feelings of connection, or congruence, between the self and education determine how motivated students feel and how they will respond during challenges and setbacks.

Motivation-Identity Cycles

All of the aspects of identity and motivation described above continually feed into students' behaviors and their pathways through college in a cyclical pattern. The psychological concerns that students contend with and the behavior that they enact can initiate a cycle that leads to increasingly positive or increasingly negative academic outcomes. For example, a first-generation student's belonging concerns may lead them to withdraw from social interactions, which would reduce the likelihood that they seek help during academic difficulties, ultimately leading to poor academic performance. Poor academic performance on an assignment or exam may further exacerbate belonging concerns and social disengagement, leading to increasingly negative academic outcomes (a downward spiral). On the other hand, a low-income student might perceive that their institution has a warm climate toward socioeconomic diversity, leading them to feel more closely identified with high achievement and more motivated to productively devote time to schoolwork. This motivation is likely to lead to earning high grades, which in turn feeds into an increasingly warm perception of the academic climate (an upward spiral). Thus, over time, seemingly small factors can multiply their effects on academic outcomes for college students.

What Colleges Can Do

There are many ways that institutions, administrators, and faculty can create identity-safe educational settings that

support low-income, first-generation, and racial/ethnic minority students. These practices directly address the identity threat concerns that students may experience as they navigate their college years.

Institutional and Administrative Strategies for Creating Identity Safety

College administrators are the primary architects in shaping the initial student experience at their institutions, not only through determining how schools are marketed and students are admitted, but also through structures such as first-year orientation, housing assignments, student services, and especially, financial aid. Remaining cognizant of inclusion and support for all students during the decision-making process in these key areas can help administrators create campuses where the entire student body can thrive.

Psychological Concerns in the Transition to College. The transition to college is an especially vulnerable time for students as they adjust to being away from home, grapple with their new independence, figure out how to relate with and befriend new peers, and find a good balance between socializing and academics. Many colleges and universities offer first-year experience programs aimed to bring new students together to ease students' college transitions and engender a sense of community and friendship. These programs are opportunities for a school to express its multicultural values and promote positive intergroup relations by creating activities and events that are financially accessible to everyone and that promote sustained and meaningful connection across groups. Programs such as "common reads" (book clubs where the school provides students with the book selection) allow camaraderie to build over multiple meetings. Other kinds of first-year activities, such as free concerts, shows, or guest lectures, are wonderful "shared" experiences but may not provide the same sustained connection and opportunities for the growth and development of intergroup friendships. Intergroup contact theory and research suggests that when care is taken to construct diverse groups (racially, ethnically, and with regard to gender, sexuality, disability, and income), students are more likely to develop cross-group friendships and emerge from the contact experience with diminished out-group biases and prejudice.[40] Moreover, these groups can be facilitated by more senior students—providing access to role models who can share their own experiences with the transition to college—an asset shown to ease underrepresented students' transition to college.[41]

"Others Feel Like You Do." Another important action that institutions can take is to dispel the common misperception among first-year students that they are alone in experiencing struggle during the transition to college while everyone else's transition is smooth, effortless, and 100 percent positive. The truth is that most college students encounter academic, social, and/or financial challenges during their first-year, yet many students—especially those from underrepresented groups—can feel that they are the only ones contending with these hurdles. Dispelling this sense about others fitting in effortlessly—known as pluralistic ignorance—is one of the central messages of a successful social psychological intervention called the Social Belonging Intervention.[42] This intervention—now evaluated at several universities and colleges—normalizes the process of finding one's fit in college over time through the adoption of proactive strategies. Because these interventions engage students at just the right moment—during the vulnerable college transition—and target students' concerns about belonging, fit, marginalization, and isolation, they effectively alter students' academic and social trajectories and have been found to close the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students by as much as 52 percent at certain selective institutions.[43] Collaborations between academic researchers and higher education administrators such as The College Transition Collaborative are currently working in colleges and universities across the country to examine the efficaciousness of these relatively low-cost interventions in supporting student success at a wide range of institution types and diverse student bodies.[44]

Financial Resources and Work-Study Opportunities. Some of the practices with the greatest impact can come from increasing investment and emphasis on existing policies, practices, and resources that fall within the realm of financial aid. Without a combination of grants, loans, and

work-study opportunities, many students are simply unable to afford the cost of attending college. These resources can carry additional value as identity safety cues that signal to students from underrepresented groups that the university is a place where they belong and that it is committed to supporting the needs of students from many different backgrounds.

Work-study opportunities, in particular, not only provide resources and signal identity safety, but they also help to facilitate a greater connection to campus for students. Without work-study opportunities, many students would spend a greater amount of their time working off campus, weakening their ties to the campus community and college experience. Moreover, work-study opportunities are designed to be flexible to students' schedules rather than to haphazardly detract from their studies as do typical retail or service industry off-campus jobs. That said, some work-study positions may feel stigmatizing and exclusionary to students as they find themselves, for example, working in the dining hall while their peers are having fun. Universities would be wise to create work-study opportunities that enrich students intellectually—as well as financially.

In this vein, many research labs provide opportunities for work-study students to be employed as research assistants, gaining valuable educational experience and connecting with faculty members, graduate student role models, and intellectually engaged peers. By gaining these experiences and creating strong mentoring relationships that translate into access to academic networks and strong letters of recommendation, these work-study opportunities open pathways to graduate school. Other work-study jobs often provide an incidental benefit of exposing students to the inner workings of a university's administrative offices. For example, by gaining experience in alumni relations, admissions offices, and student centers, students who might otherwise feel bewildered by a university's complex organizational structure become intimately familiar with how to navigate the campus and locate valuable resources. Thus, redoubling the commitment to work-study opportunities and other financial aid resources confers several tangible benefits to students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds. Greater normalization and publicizing of financial aid opportunities may also benefit members of any underrepresented group on campus by signaling the university's openness to students from different backgrounds in general.

Signals and Cues of Inclusion. There are many other ways that universities can signal to students that their diverse cultural backgrounds are valued and can be leveraged as a resource, rather than considered a deficit or ignored altogether. An institutional preference for "colorblindness," where social, racial, and cultural differences are unacknowledged and ignored, may feel more comfortable for majority group members. However, colorblindness leads to greater racial bias on the part of majority group members and decreased engagement of minority group members.[45] Universities can signal that they value multiculturalism and difference by prioritizing a critical mass of visible diversity amongst the faculty, staff, and student body and by working to articulate how group differences contribute to an institution's success.

Universities can also signal that they acknowledge and value diversity through their missions and curricula. A mission that expands the boundaries of the university and engages with the greater community provides the opportunity for students from a wider range of backgrounds to feel more genuinely connected to the academic institution itself. Even course offerings should be regularly re-evaluated to determine whether they reflect an increasingly diverse society and reach a representative array of topics and issues relevant to students and the world that they inhabit.

In addition to a multicultural approach, in general, there are specific cultural themes that can be incorporated into the fabric of colleges and universities in order to promote success for a wider range of students. Most universities value and prioritize themes of independence and self-determination over interdependence and connection.[46] However, these two cultural frames are not mutually exclusive. A greater inclusion of interdependence experiences in classroom and extracurricular activities signals to disadvantaged students

that their preferred and familiar form of engaging with the world around them is valued and appreciated.

Remain Vigilant and Address Actions that Threaten an Inclusive Culture. Finally, institutions must maintain an ongoing commitment to valuing and protecting students who come from underrepresented groups. Students are vigilant for signals the university sends regarding the value they place on diversity and inclusion and notice when policies and mission statements do not line up with treatment and behavior. For example, it is not uncommon for students, colleges, and universities to contend with issues of harassment, bullying, and discrimination, either by students, faculty, or staff. Institutions should respond quickly, transparently, and seriously to behaviors that pose the risk of confirming to underrepresented groups their worst fears regarding their value and safety within the college community. Information suppression, delays, and minor punishments create ambiguity about the value of underrepresented groups and the norms for behavior within a university and college context. Institutions should engage in practices that make it clear that there are severe consequences for these types of behaviors and include underrepresented groups in designing policies and procedures that proactively anticipate and address these dangerous and demoralizing behaviors.

Faculty Strategies and Practices for Creating Identity Safety

Members of the faculty spend more time with students than any other college employees, and so they have numerous opportunities to shape student experiences through day-to-day interactions, both in the classroom and via coursework. Establishing a framework that works to promote inclusion and eliminate possible sources of identity threat can greatly improve students' in-class experiences.

Create Unambiguous and Transparent Standards and Procedures. Faculty members are on the front lines for fostering a sense of identity safety for low-income, first-generation, and racial/ethnic minority students. Perhaps the most explicit approach to establishing an identity safe climate in the college classroom is for faculty to communicate clear expectations and procedures for evaluation. Unambiguous expectations and procedures (such as simple and accessible rubrics for essays), reduce students' worries that their evaluation may be biased due to stereotypes and prejudice.[47] It also sets up a level playing field for knowledge regarding how to succeed in the class. To extend this philosophy of transparency even further, faculty can collect anonymous feedback on the course during the academic term rather than after its completion. Establishing a tone of concern for students' experiences and a desire to enhance opportunities for learning builds a greater sense of identity safety for everyone involved in the learning process.

Foster a Norm of Cooperation. Another way that faculty can create an identity safe climate in their classroom is through fostering norms of cooperation. Practices that encourage team learning and cooperative interdependence have been shown to enhance deep learning of concepts, improve student motivation, help students feel integral to the learning process, and foster positive relationships between students from different backgrounds. One example is known as the Jigsaw Classroom, a teaching technique developed by Eliot Aronson in which students are divided into diverse groups of about five to six students.[48] The day's lesson itself is then divided into five to six segments and each student becomes responsible for learning that segment. Then, each student—in the role of expert—takes a turn teaching their small group about the topic they learned. After learning from each group member, the group works together to integrate all the information. The instructor floats between groups, observing the process and intervening if any group has trouble. Then, the instructor gives a quiz on the material so that groups can assess their learning and identify places for improvement. This kind of teaching technique allows faculty to harness students' potential and ensures that all students have an opportunity to be central to the group's learning. This technique is particularly effective at breaking down stereotypes and reducing prejudice because it fosters a sense of interdependent cooperation where majority students work with and depend on students from underrepresented groups and vice versa.[49] Conversely, practices that place students in competition with each other are likely to exacerbate stereotyping and prejudice

as students compete for scarce class resources such as the teacher's favor and top grades.

Give "Wise Feedback." One place where faculty struggle to support low-income, first-generation, and racial/ethnic minority students is in the area of giving critical feedback. Often, faculty are concerned that critical feedback will be interpreted by underrepresented students as evidence that the faculty member has negatively stereotyped them as unintelligent or less able and, thus, may be biased against them. This concern that students may mistrust faculty feedback can reduce the likelihood that faculty provide detailed feedback to minority students and/or undermine how students receive feedback, preventing students from the opportunities to learn. Yet, critical feedback is crucial for students to receive so that they can assess their strengths and weaknesses and identify places where they can improve. How can faculty give critical feedback while also communicating respect, value, and identity safety? A technique called "Wise Feedback" effectively meets these goals.[50] When a faculty member provides wise feedback they (a) are clear about the purpose of the feedback—describing it as an opportunity for learning and development, (b) explicitly note their high standards for student performance, and (c) assure the student that the professor believes the student is capable of meeting those standards. These steps help students understand a faculty member's motivation for providing critical feedback and show them how to improve, while also making clear the faculty member's support. Thus students are less likely to interpret critical feedback delivered in this way to stereotyping and bias. This technique also facilitates clear communication and relationship building between students and teachers and reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings about faculty intentions and their beliefs about students' abilities.

Communicate a Growth Mindset About Students' Abilities. Finally, faculty can work to communicate a growth mindset of overall ability, intelligence, and talent in their classroom. Research has shown that faculty mindsets—the beliefs they have about the nature of ability, intelligence, and academic talent—have important implications for students' motivation and performance.[51] Faculty can communicate one of two mindsets, or beliefs, about ability and intelligence. A fixed mindset holds that students' abilities are stable and unchanging; students either "have" these good traits, or they don't. A growth mindset holds that students' abilities can be developed by identifying challenges, applying the right strategies, and persisting through difficulties. Faculty members communicate their beliefs about students' traits through the language they use in their syllabus, lectures, everyday teaching practices, and classroom policies.[52] Stigmatized groups can find a fixed faculty mindset particularly threatening because it implies that the professor believes ability and intelligence are traits that only "some" students have, while others do not. These messages can cause students who belong to groups that are negatively stereotyped along these intellectual dimensions to become concerned that their fixed-mindset professor may believe that their group is one that simply "doesn't have it." Indeed, students experience identity threat in classrooms taught by faculty members who espouse a fixed mindset in class;[53] and they expect to be negatively stereotyped in this way.[54] Faculty can communicate a growth mindset in the classroom by describing the ability required to perform well in the class as one that is to be developed over the course of the semester, providing opportunities for practice and constructive feedback, and providing incentives (such as extra credit or class points) for improvement over time.55 By communicating a growth mindset in the classroom, faculty members assure students that everyone is capable of learning the material, regardless of group membership, as long as students notice where they are having difficulties, seek help, apply adaptive strategies, and persist through difficulties.

Conclusion

Low-income, first-generation, and racial/ethnic minority students encounter unique challenges in higher education because they contend with fewer economic and social resources, and fewer familial role models who have successfully navigated college. Just as importantly, these students contend with negative cultural stereotypes and expectations about their group that undermine their motivation, sense of belonging, and performance.

We argue that to truly support low-income, first-generation, and racial/ethnic minority students, we must consider the college experience from students' perspectives—understanding the concerns that arise from being part of a stigmatized group in higher education. Only when we consider the student in context by examining how (and whether) the local context communicates respect, value, and inclusion, can we change these settings to create institutions of higher education that are identity safe—where students from all backgrounds can flourish.

College Completion Series

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Authors

Mary Murphy is an associate professor of psychological and brain sciences at Indiana University and a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) at Stanford University during the 2015–16 academic year. Her research focuses on understanding how people's social identities and group memberships, such as their gender, race, and socioeconomic status, interact with the contexts they encounter to affect people's thoughts, feelings, motivation, and performance. Her research has been profiled in the New York Times, Forbes, Harvard Business Review, Scientific American, and NPR, among other outlets.

Mesmin Destin is an assistant professor at Northwestern University in the Department of Psychology and in the School of Education and Social Policy. As a faculty member at Northwestern, he directs the Status, Cognition, and Motivation lab group and engages in research that investigates social psychological mechanisms underlying socioeconomic disparities in educational outcomes during adolescence and young adulthood. He uses laboratory and field experiments to identify factors that influence how young people come to see themselves and pursue their futures. At the university level, he examines how subtle social experiences and institutional messaging shape the motivation and educational trajectories of low socioeconomic status and first-generation college students.

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