



 **FACTS** HIGHER EDUCATION

9 Ways Colleges Should Support Underrepresented Students

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The United States has historically prided itself on its higher education system and has placed a strong emphasis on the value of a college degree. However, the benefits of a college education are reaped to lesser extents by low-income, racial minority, and/or first-generation college students. In their Century Foundation report entitled “Promoting Inclusion and Identity Safety to Support College Success” Northwestern University assistant professor Mesmin Destin and Indiana University associate professor Mary Murphy highlight the systemic challenges these students face during college, and offer a set of strategies college leaders and faculty can employ to ensure all students can thrive in college, regardless of their backgrounds. Here are their nine changes that colleges can make to foster students’ identity safety and success.

Institutional Strategies:

1. Psychologically Ease the Transition to College

When students are first transitioning into their colleges or universities, Destin and Murphy recommend institutions have first-year experience programs in place that are both financially accessible to all students and continue into the school year. Constructing diverse groups—in line with intergroup contact theory—promotes the development of cross-group friendships as well as reduces out-group biases and prejudice.

2. Remind Students They Are Not Alone

First-year students often find adjusting to college more difficult because of pluralistic ignorance, which is the sense that everyone else around them is fitting in effortlessly. Letting students know that they aren’t alone in their discomfort is a central tenet of “Social Belonging Intervention,” which aims to normalize the struggles of transitioning into college and adapting to life on campus. Colleges that publicize transition themes and pull students together to confront them have closed achievement gaps by as much as 52 percent.

3. Enhance the Visibility of Financial Aid and Work-Study Jobs

Students are sometimes not aware of work-study opportunities, loans, and grants that can help them meet unexpected costs. Publicizing these resources can help students feel comfortable capitalizing on them by taking work-study jobs, for example. At the same time, Destin and Murphy caution that institutions must be careful not to further stigmatize lower-income students, which work-study jobs such as working in the dining hall can do. Positions as research assistants or in offices such as alumni relations, admissions, or student centers provide students with valuable resources in addition to money, such as a network of connections and a knowledge of the inner workings of the college.

4. Ingrain Acknowledgement, Acceptance, and Celebration of Multiculturalism

Rather than operate with “colorblind” institutional preferences (which can actually lead to increased racial bias by majority-group members and decreased engagement of minority-group members), colleges must work to acknowledge, accept, and celebrate multiculturalism by diversifying faculty, staff, and the student body; ingraining the value of diversity within missions and curricula; and valuing interdependence in the classroom and extracurricular activities.

5. Treat Discriminatory Actions As Dangerous, Direct Threats to a Culture of Inclusivity

Students and institutions of higher education unfortunately often still deal with issues of harassment, bullying, and discrimination. It is how the colleges and universities respond to such actions that signal to students who are not part of the dominant culture how they are valued as a part of the college community. Destin and Murphy urge colleges to “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.”

Faculty Strategies:

6. Clarify Standards of Evaluation

Faculty members are “on the front lines” of identity safety for low-income, first-generation, and racial/ethnic minority students. To truly make classrooms safe spaces, professors must openly communicate their methods and expectations for evaluation so that poor grades are not perceived as prejudice and all students are equipped with the necessary tools to know how to succeed in a course. To go above and beyond, professors could collect course evaluations throughout a semester—rather than just at the end—to ensure the standards of evaluation are indeed being clarified and communicated in a transparent way.

7. Increase Cooperative Interdependence in the Classroom

As demonstrated by the Jigsaw Classroom, championing “team learning and cooperative interdependence” in classrooms has ultimately improved all students’ individual learning, motivation, and confidence; this approach has also fostered strong relationships between students of all different backgrounds. Projects in which students are forced to work with

and be dependent on students who may be from underrepresented groups breaks down perceived differences and barriers, and in turn, reduces discrimination (contrasted by competitive classrooms).

8. Communicate Constructive Feedback

Faculty members are often worried that giving constructive feedback to minority-group students can be perceived as the perpetuation of negatively stereotyping them as unintelligent or less able. These professors therefore shy away from providing feedback of substance—but in attempting to avoid conflict, they are doing a disservice to their students by failing to challenge them with feedback to conduct their best work. Destin and Murphy recommend the “Wise Feedback” method, which entails effectively communicating the meaning of constructive feedback as a learning opportunity, noting that they have the same high standards for all students, and telling the student that they are capable of meeting these high standards if they put in the work.

9. Teach with a Growth Mindset

It is important that faculty communicate a belief in all students’ ability to succeed—otherwise known as a growth mindset. As Destin and Murphy lay out for us, “A fixed mindset holds that students’ abilities are stable and unchanging; students either “have” these good traits or they don’t.” This is starkly contrasted by a growth mindset, which maintains “that students’ abilities can be developed by identifying challenges, applying the right strategies, and persisting through difficulties.” The tools that a professor has at his or her disposal to communicate a growth mindset to their students include syllabi, lectures, teaching methods, and classroom policies. Fixed mindsets are negative for all students but particularly dangerous for underrepresented students as they imply that professors believe only certain students (read: privileged) have the innate capability to succeed, consequently fueling other students’ senses of identity threat.



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