Developing Students’ Multiple Identities:
HOW CAREER SERVICES PRACTITIONERS CAN PUT THEORY INTO PRACTICE

By Scott C. Brown

The face of higher education is changing. Not only are colleges and universities seeing an influx of students from historically under-represented groups, but they also are beginning to regard even “typical students” in much more complex ways.

Who are these students? To understand the identity of any individual is a deceptively difficult task. In a nation accustomed to boiling down individuals to a small number of characteristics, Americans often are defined in hyphenated terms like African-American, Asian-American, and Italian-American. But identities are made up of many dimensions, not just one, and the words people use to describe themselves often extend beyond ancestry to include religion, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical abilities, and social roles.¹

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On today’s pluralistic campuses, career services practitioners must be equipped to facilitate the development of students’ multiple identities and how they come into play during their explorations in and out of class, on and off campus. Fortunately, many practitioners are positioned to help students in this process because they can have relationships with students that span the entire collegiate experience and also because their programs and services provide opportunities for ongoing reflection.

In this article, the author opens a broader discussion about the dynamic, multidimensional nature of identity and how practitioners might create more effective interventions to support their diverse students.

A Brief Exploration of Developmental Theory

Why is understanding identity so important to practitioners? All colleges and universities are transformative to some degree; students who enroll are seldom the same when they graduate. Higher education provides a time and space where students encounter people, experiences, and ideas that they may never have experienced before. In the process, students’ interests and beliefs often are challenged and, ultimately, reaffirmed, modified, or shed.

Of course, trying to capture students in their infinite complexity is like trying to frame a moving picture. How can practitioners have the greatest effect on the greatest number of students? In pursuit of this ideal, a practitioner’s best work often is a combo platter of instinct, experience, research, and, of course, developmental theory. Many practitioners have some background in developmental theory. It is one of the few ways that they can begin to make useful inferences beyond their own experience and find ways to understand a greater number of students in more meaningful ways. In general, theory allows practitioners to systematically design programs, services, and policies that will facilitate students’ personal development and enhance their formal education.

Historically, there have been many attempts to help practitioners understand the student population in terms of general psycho-social, moral, and cognitive development. The first wave was critical, but it was generalized on a population of white, upper middle-class, presumably heterosexual males. The second wave challenged the homogenous assumptions of these first-generation theorists. Later researchers studied students through a number of individual angles, including race, gender, and sexual orientation. However, each of these models fragments individuals into a given characteristic, with little contribution to understanding the total student.

Now the third wave has begun, setting the stage to examine students as more than the sum of their parts. However, practitioners are moving away from any universally agreed upon “magic” theory that will explain all students. Fundamental questions about how to even approach “theory” are being increasingly debated. Feminist theory, social construction, systems theory, critical theory, and deconstructionism have competing assumptions that can be in direct conflict with one another and bring issues like oppression and privilege much more emphatically into view. Thus, it may be impossible to secure a universal truth lurking beneath all dimensions of difference. So, how fully can practitioners understand the student population without increasing the risk of developing an over-confidence in such developmental theories?

One Institutional Example: Putting Theory Into Practice

At Mount Holyoke College, the Career Development Center (CDC) staff was charged with contributing to the overall education of undergraduate students, within a greater institutional context that was explicitly focused on affirming identity, building community, and cultivating leadership. The challenge to the staff was twofold—to design a department to better serve the needs of a pluralistic student population, and to do this in the context of ethnically and religiously diverse student communities, where one out of three students is either a student of color or an international student, and staff cannot assume shared cultural norms and values.

One of the first things the CDC staff did was adopt a model of wisdom development, formulated by the author, that details how students integrate the lessons they learn in and out of class, on and off campus. The staff operationalized the wisdom model, translating wisdom into three learning outcomes known as the 3 Cs:

- **Clarity**—the capacity to make decisions that reflect students’ guiding values, interests, and dimensions of their multiple identities;
- **Confidence**—the capacity to integrate the lessons students learn in and out of class and on and off campus, and apply them to their lives; and
- **Connection**—the capacity to achieve personally derived goals by creating a direct path to key resources, people, and opportunities.

As defined by the model, wisdom develops every time students go through “learning-from-life,” a process that encompasses reflection, integration, and application. There are four conditions that affect the learning-from-life process, including a student’s orientation to learning, experiences, and interactions with others, and the institutional environment.

The CDC staff has been using the wisdom development model as a guiding framework. Accordingly, the staff shifted its emphasis from what programs and services it offers to how these programs and services facilitate the 3 Cs. All of the CDC’s programs (e.g., recruiting, internships, fellowships and scholarships, and student employment) and services are designed for that purpose. Following is a review of how the staff uses the model to facilitate the development of students’ multiple identities.
Orientation to Learning

Orientation to learning refers to an individual’s expectation, preparedness, motivation, and attitude about gaining knowledge when interfacing with others and engaging in activities. It includes an individual’s orientation to life in general, the whole college experience, and specific situations encountered. Orientation to learning also includes a person’s past as it comes to bear in any new interactions.

To encourage students to explore the multiple dimensions of their identities, it is critical to orient them to the programs and services of the career center. The first challenge is to get students to the center. To that end, the CDC staff designs all of its outreach efforts to target students who otherwise might not ever step foot in the center. For example, staff members began attending student government and cultural group meetings on campus. The staff capitalized on these informal opportunities to alter students’ orientation to learning. From merely being present at these meetings, the staff was able to lessen students’ anxiety about career services. Consequently, students have been more likely to use career services or to refer their peers to the center.

Based on the staff’s data analysis, the percentage of international students and students of color who use the center is much higher than the overall average. Once students come to the career center, practitioners have to establish immediate perceived relevance, making it clear that they will help students tackle whatever issue or problem prompted their visit. At the same time, practitioners must be careful how they progress from superficial to more probing questions. The CDC staff communicates that “knowing thyself” is good business because nearly every evaluator (employer or grad school, for example) will be interested in why students are pursuing a particular career or educational path.

Because of their keen need to be the best candidates possible, students will explore deeper levels of satisfaction if they can see a clear connection to their job search. If they can’t talk about why a particular position or program is of interest to them, they are not only at a disadvantage in the marketplace, but they are impoverished personally. How do career practitioners get them to consider their choices in ways that more closely reflect their own values? Many students have focused primarily on their achievements, but have yet to develop their own voice that more closely reflects their interests, values, and multiple identities. Accordingly, the CDC staff tries to imbed questions of identity throughout its programs and services, e.g., “What have you learned about yourself from your experiences that you can draw upon later?”

Various dimensions of identity affect how students might approach a particular decision. For example, two students recently enrolled at Mount Holyoke with the explicit expectation that they would return to work in their respective family businesses. As one student gained personal clarity, she realized that going into the family business was something that she did not want to do, and she made a decision to pursue her own career path. Based on her values and identity, her primary concern was finding a way to tell her family about her decision. In contrast, the other student was not willing to compromise a very strong guiding value that prioritized the needs of her family above her own. Her clarity made her think about the other ways she could intentionally bring satisfaction into her life, inside and outside of work. In both instances, the staff helped the students to explore the different dimensions of their identities and arrive at satisfactory decisions.

Experiences

Experiences are any situation or activity—structured, unstructured, or incidental—such as courses, student activities, living situations, leadership opportunities, programs of study, and employment. They also can include all of the career center’s programs and services. How can career practitioners help students to become more savvy about the type of place they want to work, what they want to do, and what they are willing to accept based on their own values? What are the themes and patterns that seem to characterize the decisions students make? Most students have many interests but are not defined by any. How can practitioners help students find opportunities that are big enough to hold all of their values and interests and see how different dimensions of their backgrounds are reflected within their potential graduate programs or workplaces?

The CDC staff specifically helps students to identify what they are looking for and what an ideal job/school/internship might look like, so they are less likely to jump at the first available opportunity. Without some guide, the staggering array of choices is like taking a drink off of a fire hose. Even informational interviews are not useful if a student has nothing to compare them to. In terms of clarity, all of the CDC’s internships, fellowships and scholarships, recruiting and graduate/professional school programs, and print and electronic resources help students sharpen their focus. The CDC staff offers an extended “What Do You Want to Do?” workshop that allows students to examine personal values and assess their personality characteristics, identify skills and explore interests, brainstorm career choices, and plan their next steps.

Aside from services, the CDC staff offers programming that empowers students and supports identity development such as “Networking for ALANA (Asian-American, Latina, African-American, Native-American) Students” and “Into the Real World: From Campus Diversity to White Corporate World.” The staff also presents at programs sponsored by student organizations and leads workshops at student-run conferences, e.g., Latina Alumnae Conference and Asian-American Studies Teach-In. In addition, the staff makes service and program overview presentations to cultural groups and tailors career services to individual communities, e.g., science internships/grad school information for “Sistahs in Science.”
The CDC staff also has established office hours at various cultural houses on campus to increase its visibility and accessibility to students. Meeting students, especially those who historically have been marginalized, on their own time and turf affirms the staff’s commitment to distinct student communities, increases students’ comfort level, and attracts those who might not voluntarily seek out career resources. Also related to issues of class, the CDC’s internship scholarship monies are disbursed so that students of more limited means will be able to participate fully. The staff also has started a “suit” donation system, whereby the staff solicits individuals in the college community to donate business suits they no longer use, so that students who can’t afford a suit can borrow one for interviews.

Interactions with Others

Interactions with others refers to a student’s general experiences with people, and particular relationships with friends, family, campus agents, and other influential people. To guide students in their pursuit of clarity, all of the CDC’s human resources are engaged, with particular attention to personnel, professional development, and collaboration.

Personnel

Students are more likely to use the career center fully if they see themselves reflected in it in meaningful ways. A diverse staff is probably the most tangible way for that reflection to happen, yet finding such human resources can be a challenge. Previous CDC efforts to diversify what had historically been a predominantly white staff met with limited success. The opportunity to address this challenge came with vacancies in two counseling positions.

The staff’s solution was to fill one position immediately, and reconfigure the other as a “multicultural career adviser.” By casting a wider net, the staff identified exceptional candidates from under-represented groups who had the requisite knowledge, skills, and qualities to work well with college students, provide non-counseling-based advising, and coordinate the CDC’s outreach efforts. The multicultural career adviser has been critical to the CDC’s success in marketing to historically underserved populations and generating an increase in use of the center’s services by these students.

Professional Development Resources

There are many ways to help staff members deconstruct generalizations about student identities. Being more attuned and demonstrating sensitivity to such issues help inform the ways the CDC staff interacts with each individual student and allows the staff to better guide her through the process of achieving clarity. First, the staff needs to acknowledge the infinite permutations of identity of each student and the impossibility of ever hoping to know all there is to know about a student. Second, staff members must recognize how their own multiple identities come into play in their work. At retreats, CDC staff always spend a portion of the time exploring the question, “Who am I? What are my personal assumptions? How does this get expressed in my work?”

Lastly, it is critical for practitioners to keep abreast of any research that will help them to understand dimensions of identity as they pertain to students. This includes sharing journal articles and resources that discuss topics related to students’ various religious, ethnic, sexual, and gender identities. The staff also has invited speakers to staff meetings to discuss topics on various dimensions of identity, such as disability or recovery from drug dependency, and has participated in other division-sponsored activities, such as programs on mental-health issues related to Chinese and Indian students. Additionally, the staff has toured cultural houses on campus, with students leading the tours and relating the history and current happenings of the houses. Learning about different students and communities in this manner is instrumental in helping the staff to transcend stereotypes and attain a deeper understanding of the students it serves.

Collaboration

Another way to help students see themselves fully is through collaboration. On any campus, various departments all share the same students. One student can engage many offices. The CDC staff has connected with liaisons to ALANA and LBT (lesbian, bisexual, transgendered) students in other departments (Health Services, Residence Life, Student Programming) who are committed to understanding student identity. Together, the departments have been able to critically examine the concerns of specific student communities, e.g., What are the varied challenges of the LBT student community on a progressive liberal campus?

Recognizing the vast resources that alumnae have to offer, the CDC staff formed a partnership with the Alumnae Association and worked with specific alumnae networks, e.g. Lesbian Alum Network. The staff invited LBT and ALANA alumnae to serve as panel speakers and offer insight from their own experiences (coming out at work, the value of networking) and assist students in exploring their values, interests, and multiple identities. In conjunction with the Alumnae Association, the staff is launching a mentor program, creating a structure for alumnae and students with similar backgrounds, identities, and career interests to connect with one another and build supportive relationships. Alumnae can guide students to figure out what they want, how they can extract skills from their experiences, and whom they should talk to as they establish their career goals.

Environment

Environment refers to the general institutional setting and its many sub-environments (physical/virtual), where orientation to learning, variety of experiences, and interactions with others can come together in various combinations to produce the 3 Cs (wisdom). From a
career pursuits. While it is impossible to anticipate every issue with every student, some guiding questions have served as a compass for the CDC’s own efforts:
1. How do the activities of the career center relate to the 3 Cs?
2. Whose voices are or are not represented?
3. What assumptions are embedded in the staff’s interactions or policies?
4. In what ways are staff members encouraging students to reflect on their experiences in an integrative way and apply what they are learning to new situations?
5. How might the career center’s resources (time, energy, money) be used more efficiently toward the 3 Cs?

Additionally, savvy career practitioners know that the key to not just surviving but thriving on campus today is to connect their work to institutional priorities, e.g., creating a climate of inclusion on campus. Some questions to raise within the greater community include:

- What opportunities are there for people to connect with others like themselves who share their interests/concerns?
- What opportunities are there to work cooperatively across differences (broadly defined to include not just race/ethnicity but also gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, and ability)?
- How can those opportunities be created inside and outside the classroom?
- What connections might be made between out-of-class initiatives and the curriculum?
- How might faculty and staff involvement be enhanced?

In conclusion, there are many intersections of identity merging and colliding for students on college campuses and begging the question: “Who am I?” Career practitioners are in a unique position to help students answer this question, and also to question this answer.

Endnotes


Recommendations

Career centers come in many shapes and sizes, but they all share a commitment to better serve diverse students in their environments. The staff did an environmental audit: When a student walks in, what does she see? As a result, the staff set out to make the physical and virtual environment welcoming, comfortable, and affirming. The office web page, like the office space itself, also speaks to and validates students of heterogeneous identities. For example, the staff created web spaces for ALANA and LBT students not only to offer resources, but also to make a visit to the center more appealing. Because some students are in the process of coming out or perhaps are not comfortable with a public engagement of resources, the staff also has created many online resources, which they can take advantage of without compromising the level of privacy they desire.

Additionally, the staff tries to communicate important messages with signs, symbols, and inclusive language. For example, the author—a white heterosexual male working with a diverse female student population—recognizes that many students have certain assumptions about his way of looking at the world, which can be a barrier to how he is perceived. Fair or not, students with questions will pay attention to the subtle but key messages he is communicating that indicate his receptivity to them. When he frames questions and uses certain scenarios, he is careful to create spaces that encourage students to bring various dimensions of their identities, however they may define them, and use language that does not assume the nature of their personal relationships.

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