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Hello, My Race is : Supporting the Identity of Biracial College Students

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Abstract

An entire generation of biracial individuals is coming of age suggesting that colleges and universities will experience an increase in their multiracial student body. Student affairs professionals are faced with the challenge of addressing the needs of this emerging student group. This presentation will describe this diverse population and educate student affairs professionals on their unique developmental views.

Over the last decade there has been an increased interest in the identity development of biracial individuals due to their growing numbers, the common belief that biracial persons are marginalized and unstable and an increased understanding that biracial identity development is different from that of monoracial individuals (Wardle, 1992). The biracial population in the United States is not a new 'phenomena', but certain federal decisions and historical events (i.e. Brown vs. Board of Education, Loving vs. Virginia, Civil Right Movement) have produced an increase in interracial marriages and a greater acceptance of them. According to Wardle (1992), there has been an active movement for biracial people to become more assertive about their rights and responsibilities; their families are challenged to overcome societal myths, problems and barriers.

The fact that an entire generation of biracial individuals is coming of age and the number of biracial children is expected to increase suggests that colleges and universities will experience a similar increase in their multiracial student body. "The challenge to university officials will be to provide support and a forum for student development that will enhance their ability to be productive and valued members in a diverse society" (Nishimura, 1998, p. 49). Because there is a general lack of awareness concerning issues of biracial identity development, the purpose of this presentation is to introduce the audience to this diverse population and to encourage student affairs professionals to become aware of their unique development needs. This presentation will describe the Marginal Man theory that is embedded in multiracial identity development, discuss challenges facing identity development of biracial college students, and present the implications of this information for the student affairs professional.

Approach

The Marginal Man

There are several myths that surround the biracial population that still guide research and service providers today. These myths are widely accepted by the general public and continue to be perpetuated by many professions. A long held notion is that biracial individuals are destined to have far-reaching problems due to their racial heritage. They are stereotyped as people who will be rejected at face value by all ethnic/racial groups and considered to be marginal but not actual members of these groups. (Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995, p. 203)

"Multiethnic people have been portrayed as troubled and anxious outsiders who lack a clear

identity.. Researchers using measures of self-esteem have consistently found no significant differences between the self-esteem of multi ethnic groups and that of mono-ethnic comparison groups" (Alipuria & Phinney, 1996, p. 140). Alipuria and Phinney (1996) conducted their own study that was consistent with more recent studies on multiethnic young people. They found that these individuals were not at a psychological disadvantage due to their mixed heritage. "Thus contrary to popular views, and earlier clinical impressions multiethnic individuals are not troubled, marginal people" (Alipuria & Phinney, 1996, p. 147). The presentation will cover the impact of the Marginal Man theory on biracial identity development, as well as, current research that support and refute its implications.

Identity Development Challenges

Racial identity is the topic that is most disputed concerning biracial individuals (Wardle, 1992). Many insist that biracial individuals have a "dual" identity -one that is based on a collective heritage of both parents. Thus, one can see the challenge faced by biracial students when securing identity. Although individuals may perceive their identity as being whole, society and even family perceive their identity as being dual- in many situations forcing biracial individuals to choose.

"The additional challenge for multiracial individuals is that very little of their world is 'given', that is able to be accepted without conscious thought and decisions" (Nishimura, 1998, p. 46). Race, in our society, strongly influences how others perceive an individual, the community an individual identifies with, an individual's social relationship, and how the individual perceives him or herself.

This racial identities-social context configuration can create discomfort for multiracial individuals, who may feel that claiming one racial heritage over the other automatically negates the heritage of one of their parents. Multiracial persons often find themselves in a position of simultaneously trying to examine who they are while confronting the racial designation people want to impose on them. (Nishimura, 1998, p. 46)

Biracial college students face both similar and different identity challenges as monoracial minority members. As a result of these differences, existing racial identity models often make a poor fit for biracial students. Fortunately, within the last few decades racial identity models have been conceptualized that suit the challenges faced by biracial individuals (i.e. Poston, Kerwin-Ponterotto, Kich, Root). These theories take into account the diverse nature of the multiracial population, and recognize the differences of this group from other minority groups. This presentation will identify the racial identity challenges faced by biracial college students and will introduce contemporary identity development models reflecting this unique population.

Significance for College Student Personnel

The way in which multiracial adults view the world and respond to challenges regarding their identity will be influenced by sources and systems of support that reflect and validate their very being (Kenney, 2002). "Consequently, college counselors and other student affairs professionals will be confronted with both the opportunity and challenge of addressing the needs of this newly emerging student group" (Nishimura, 1998, p. 45). The presenters will provide recommendations for student affairs practice and will solicit thoughts and suggestions from the audience based on their experiences with the biracial student population at their institutions.

References available upon request

Presenters

Natasha Chapman completed her M.A. in Educational Administration with a specialization in Student Affairs at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in May of 2003. Currently she is working towards her Ph.D.

in Administration, Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Educational Leadership. Chapman has worked with University Foundation classes, career services, judicial affairs, student involvement/service learning; and minority retention and scholarship initiatives. Her list of presentations include: *How Can You Become Involved in Your Community?* (New Student Enrollment, 2003), *A Road Less Traveled: Campus Development Through LeaderShape* (ACUI -Region XI, 2002), *The Multi-*

Racial Student: The Myth of the Marginal Man and Issues of Identity (Women in Educational Leadership Conference, 2002), *The Culture of Poverty in the Black Community* (Black Hills Research Symposium, 2001), *Archie Bunker's Neighborhood: An Interactive Session on Attitudes towards Socioeconomic Differences* (NACA -Upper Midwest Region, 1999), *CAB for Sale: Improving the Recruitment and Retention of Volunteer Members* (NACA -Upper Midwest Region, 1998).

Minisa Chapman-Bois is an Academic Advisor at the Advising Center for Undeclared and Exploratory Students at the University of Nevada in Reno. She is a 2000 graduate of the University of Nebraska- Lincoln's, Master of Arts degree in Educational Administration. Chapman-Hul's experiences at the collegiate level are varied and include work in multicultural affairs, athletics, admissions, academic advising, and teaching. She has presented three times in the past three years at the Annual Women in Education Leadership Conference on issues concerning organizational change, access to higher education for African American women, and identity of multi-racial students; and will be presenting at the National Academic Advisors Association (NACADA) National Conference this year on issues related to students' unsatisfactory academic standing and collaborative efforts for student success.

