



## MultiRacial Knowledge Community

# SUPPORTING IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AMONG MULTIRACIAL STUDENTS TO INCREASE INSTITUTIONAL CONNECTEDNESS

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## Student Learning and Development



The face of higher education is changing with the increased number of multiracial students entering college. The 2010 U.S. Census reported that more than 9 million people identified as multiracial, a 32% increase over the past 10 years. Because this population trend affects college enrollment, understanding multiracial student development will contribute to student affairs professionals' ability to assist students with identity development and integration into the campus community. Currently, some multiracial students face internal identity conflicts and are not finding support to navigate these issues.

Using Renn's racial identity categories (monoracial identity, multiple monoracial identity, multiracial identity, extra-racial identity, and situational identity), research has indicated that multiracial student perceptions differ depending on the identity category with which the students identify (Banks, 2008; Renn, 2003). Students who fully embrace their multiracial identity experience higher levels of comfort in racially diverse contexts than those who do not (Garbarini-Philippe, 2010). How a student determines his or her identity depends on factors such as family background; physical appearance; cognitive-development-related issues of race, culture, and identity;

peer culture; belief systems; and social–historical context (Banks, 2008; Garbarini-Philippe, 2010; Renn, 2003). In a supportive environment, multiracial students will be more confident in exploring their racial identities. Thus, educational institutions should welcome the exploration of multiracial identity (Garbarini-Philippe, 2010). Multiracial students report having feelings of isolation when they try to join monoracial groups (Sands & Schuh, 2003). Some of these students may experience feelings of apathy, frustration, despair, and depression when their needs are not addressed on college campuses (Museus, Yee, & Lambe, 2011). When multiracial students face these challenges, it is hard for them to feel a sense of belonging. Multiracial students who believe that existing programming may not be beneficial for them still see a need for some type of programming (Sands & Schuh, 2003). Museus et al. (2011) note that educators should promote campus cultures that embrace racial dialogues as a norm. This could include professional development focused on multiracial student issues, conferences, seminars, a monthly lecture series, and other events that focus on multiracial student populations on campus.

### Shaping Resources to Foster Engagement

One of the key elements in establishing an effective support structure for multiracial students is to know what exists on your campus that can benefit this population. Many scholars suggest having inclusive spaces or groups on campus to ensure students' comfort and growth in identity development (Garbarini-Philippe, 2010; Renn, 2003). This could include having a multiracial student discussion group that focuses on localized campus concerns as well as the greater college experience. Such conversations could enhance institutional connectedness for multiracial students. Student affairs professionals could also improve connectedness by developing targeted student organizations relevant to both the individual and universal experiences of multiracial students. Including students in the development of these opportunities would have the most impact on their success and continuity.

### Intentionality of Support Services

Tinto (1993) noted, "The higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college system, the greater will be the commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion leading to persistence" (p. 28). Renn (2003) suggested that understanding the student and the outside influences that may be affecting the student's identity is the most beneficial way to understand the totality of that identity. Whereas some academic support systems focus on monoracial students, capturing and initiating contact with self-identified multiracial students as a target group for early intervention would meet individual needs and provide the type of integration that enhances institutional connectedness. Such a dialogue could lead to connections with student affairs professionals, faculty, academic advisors, and other members of the campus community that further understanding of individual

student concerns. It is also important to acknowledge that certain issues, such as social influence or micro-aggression, may have more of an impact on multiracial students.

### Capturing Data to Shape Quality Interactions

Another way to identify techniques to support this student population is to assess data from student withdrawal and attrition records. Insight about students who decided to transfer or stopped attending college can provide meaningful trend information and yield opportunities to meet the needs of current and future students. Using data to develop strategies that demonstrate institutional commitment by addressing specific individual needs and emphasizing student well-being may have a meaningful impact on the experience of multiracial students. The most effective strategies are engagement through individual interactions and referrals for multiracial students to take advantage of campus resources to deal with academic or nonacademic issues that hinder performance and affect retention.

### Conclusion

Adopting these recommendations can empower administrators to deal with challenges to connectedness in the multiracial student population. An all-inclusive approach that engages the entire campus community will stimulate dialogue and encourage interactions that will improve the college experience for multiracial students in ways that increase persistence and completion.

### References

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