

Multiracial Student Experience: What Faculty and Campus Leaders Need to Know

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It was the first day of a sociology graduate course on race and students were going around the table introducing themselves and their areas of interest. When it was my turn, I stated my name and described my interest in the racial identity development of multiracial people and how such identities might affect our current notions of race. The professor, who, during my introduction, repeated my last name in perfect Spanish commented, "Oh, so you're jumping on the multiracial bandwagon!" To which I replied, "Well actually I was born on it."

Since the 1960s, more and more people have been born onto this multiracial bandwagon. With the repeal of anti-miscegenation laws, such as the 1967 Supreme Court decision overturning any remaining laws prohibiting interracial marriage, came a biracial baby boom. While multiracial people have always been a part of American culture, the changing racial climate has created a new context in which children of interracial unions have been able to more openly define and affirm their multiracial heritage. As more of these students enter college they bring with them many questions, complexities, and challenges surrounding their identities.

Much recent scholarship examines race in terms of its multiplicity and fluidity. Students of multiracial background experience this multiplicity and fluidity on a very personal level on a daily basis. When students are asked how they self-identify, many will tell you that their answer depends on the circumstance--on who is asking the question and how it is being asked. Maria Root, editor of *Racially Mixed People in America*, describes this "situational ethnicity," this changing of foreground and background, as a natural response to social demands and stresses that does not necessarily represent confusion for the individual being asked.

Students experience the fluidity of race in academic and social environments, sliding in and out of worlds, feeling affiliation with one, several or none of the groups with whom their background might associate them. Amber, a second year student at the University of Michigan who defines herself as half white and half Black, explains that, in the classroom she identifies more with Black students because that is how her fellow classmates see her. But in student organizations, she feels most comfortable with multiracial students. "[There are] so many groups and you feel like you want to fit in one of those. But they are such extremes on the spectrum that I feel that I always fall somewhere in between."

As in Amber's case, physical appearance, and a student's early experiences and socialization in their own homes, neighborhoods, and high schools, are important factors in how students negotiate and explore their identities in college. Brent, who primarily identifies as African American and sometimes as mixed, describes how he initially wanted to join a fraternity until discovering that it was socially unacceptable to be in a fraternity if one wasn't white. When exploring other student organizations he felt

uncomfortable with clubs like the Black Student Union. "I just couldn't see how I could fit in. I guess it's the way I grew up. I was raised by my white mother only and I had no connection with my African American family, so I really have no connection to the culture." Through his major in African American studies and American Cultures and by attending multiracial social functions, Brent has been able to negotiate these conflictual feelings about his "place" on campus.

David, who is of Japanese and European heritage, primarily identifies with his Asian background because of his deep involvement with Japanese culture growing up. His family participated in their local Japanese community center. David, however, chooses not to involve himself in Pan-Asian student organizations. As David states, "I'm just more content exploring that side of me through my community because it's more specialized toward the Japanese side and I'm dealing with people straight from Japan and all the elders who immigrated here."

For some multiracial students, college can be the first time they explore their ethnic heritage. Tom, who graduated from Williams College in 1998, describes his participation in a prefreshman minority science program as the first event that sparked his thinking about race. His self-reflection began with guilt about neglecting a part of his background but expanded to an enthusiasm for learning more about his Phillipino heritage.

In exploring racial identity, the curriculum can be as important as the campus and classroom climate. A one-month, Winter study course at Williams titled "Americans of Mixed Race" provided an academic space where Tom and other students could examine race in direct relation to their own identities.

Given the wide range of experiences multiracial students have, it is important to avoid lumping the needs of all multiracial students together. Some students gain great support from being involved in a multiracial student organization, where they can share common experiences associated with their complicated and sometimes ambiguous identities and create a sense of solidarity, comfort, and affirmation.

A group of students at the University of Michigan, for example, created the Mixed Initiative after participating in an intragroup dialogue with other students of multiracial heritage. Maria, a second year student, describes this organization as a type of haven and foundation for many students who find themselves socially rejected from other groups.

Some multiracial students, on the other hand, may choose to find support in other non-racial campus organizations or locations. These students might find a supportive community in their major as did David, who is a music major and band member at California State University, Los Angeles. Other students might find support and community by taking on a leadership role. Kendra, a senior at Williams College, for instance, works at the multicultural center and leads community-building workshops. While these settings are not organized by racial affiliation, the racially diverse environments they provide are key to supporting students as they come to understand multiple features of their identities.

Most importantly, faculty and campus leaders must do more than acknowledge the presence of multiracial students on campus. They need to understand that these students' experiences exemplify the ambiguity and complexity of race in America today. While it is important to provide spaces, both inside and outside of the classroom, for students to explore their identities, their personal struggles need to be seen in the context of the larger struggle with the meaning of race in our society. If faculty members and campus leaders listen carefully, these students can provide important lessons for understanding how race works in America. They may even challenge others on campus to be more introspective about their own identities.

For information about multiracial student organizations, see

www.mavin.net/people.html

Selected Resources on Multiracial Identity

Funderberg, L. *Black, White, Other: Biracial Americans Talk About Race and Identity* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1994).

Root, M. P. P., ed. *Racially Mixed People in America* (Newbury Park: Sage Publ., 1992).

Wijeyesinghe, C.L., "Multiracial Identity in a Monoracial World," *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education* 6 (8): 16–17.

Zack, N. *Race and Mixed Race* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993).

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