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Scott C. Seider, Shelby Clark & Madora Soutter

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## A Critically Conscious Approach to Fostering the Success of College Students from Underrepresented Groups

Scott C. Seider, Boston University<sup>a</sup>

Shelby Clark, Boston University<sup>b</sup>

Madora Soutter, Boston University<sup>c</sup>

### Abstract

Over the past decade, many student affairs professionals have turned their attention to non-cognitive factors that can play a role in supporting students from underrepresented groups in making it to and through college. The work in this area that has gotten the most attention in recent years has focused on students' sense of belonging and efficacy. In this article, the authors begin by acknowledging the numerous strengths of belonging-centered and efficacy-centered approaches to fostering college student success but also argue that these approaches are incomplete. They posit that a more critically conscious approach to fostering college-going success can deepen participating college students' sense of purpose and, in so doing, increase their likelihood of successful college completion.

Earning a college degree is predictive not only of significantly higher lifetime earnings (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011) and greater economic mobility (Ridgeway & Fisk, 2012) but also of better health and greater life satisfaction (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Moreover, the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce predicted that by 2018, nearly two thirds of all jobs in the United States will require a postsecondary degree (Carnevale et al., 2011). Yet there remain persistent opportunity gaps along racial and socioeconomic lines in terms of who is entering and completing college. For example, a 2008 study found that 90% of Asian students and 71% of White students enrolled in college immediately after high school, in comparison to only 63% of African American and 62% of Latino students (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Other scholars have found that college completion rates have soared over the past two decades for high-income students but have stagnated for low-income students (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). Finally, being a first-generation college student (i.e. a student whose parents do not have postsecondary

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<sup>a</sup>Scott Seider ([seider@bu.edu](mailto:seider@bu.edu)) is associate professor of education at Boston University and the author of *Shelter: Where Harvard Meets the Homeless*.

<sup>b</sup>Shelby Clark ([sclark2@bu.edu](mailto:sclark2@bu.edu)) is an advanced doctoral student at Boston University, where her work focuses on the development of curiosity and other intellectual character strengths in adolescents and young adults.

<sup>c</sup>Madora Soutter ([soutter@bu.edu](mailto:soutter@bu.edu)) is an advanced doctoral student at Boston University, where her work focuses on civic character development in youth and adolescents.

degrees) is predictive of lower grades and a higher likelihood of dropping out than students with at least one parent who is a college graduate (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004).

Over the past several decades, many student affairs professionals and research psychologists have turned their attention to the question of how best to support students from these underrepresented groups in making it to and through college. Certainly appropriate advising and academic supports play a leading role in these efforts, but educators have also begun to consider and account for non-cognitive factors<sup>1</sup> that foster (or inhibit) students' success in college. Perhaps the work in this area that has gotten the most attention in recent years has focused on students' sense of *belonging* and *efficacy*. In this article, we begin by acknowledging the numerous strengths of belonging-centered and efficacy-centered approaches to fostering college student success but also argue that these approaches are incomplete. We posit that a more critically conscious approach to fostering college-going success can deepen participating college students' sense of purpose and, in so doing, increase their likelihood of successful college completion.

### Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging can be defined as the extent to which students feel both personally connected to their college community and perceive the community to be one where "people like me" are accepted, welcomed, and regarded as important contributors and stakeholders (Strayhorn, 2008a, 2008b). Strayhorn (2012) wrote that he considers sense of belonging to be a "basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior" (p. 3). For college students, a sense of belonging manifests itself as a feeling of connectedness, perceived campus social support, and a feeling of being cared about, valued, and respected by others (Strayhorn, 2012). Additionally, Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, and Covarrubias (2012) argued that sense of belonging extends to feeling a cultural match between one's own values and those of one's institution.

A weak sense of belonging is one of the primary reasons why students from underrepresented groups leave college before completion (Strayhorn, 2008a). Two factors that have been found to contribute to these students' weak sense of belonging are stereotype threat and micro-aggressions. Steele (1999) described stereotype threat as the "threat of being viewed through a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype" (para 10). In particular, Steele (2010) argued that the increased anxiety caused by a fear of confirming stereotypes limits a college students' feelings of connectedness to his or her university campus. Likewise, micro-aggressions have been described as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). Research suggests that at least 50% of College Students of Color report experiencing micro-aggressions and other forms of subtle racial bias in their university classes (Boysen, 2012; McCabe, 2009). These micro-aggressions contribute to Students of Color at predominantly White universities characterizing themselves as outsiders (Minikel-Lacocque, 2012) and reporting a weaker sense of belonging than their same-race peers attending historically Black colleges and universities (Strayhorn, 2012).

Much of the work to foster college-going success has focused on *belonging* because researchers have found a sense of belonging to serve as an important buffer against the negative effects of threats such as those

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<sup>1</sup>The term *non-cognitive factors*, used here to describe non-academic factors that can play a role in supporting students from underrepresented groups, has become popular among scholars and educators. However, this term is a misnomer because these factors certainly involve cognitive processes.

described above (Walton & Cohen, 2007, 2011). Accordingly, over the past two decades, a number of scholars and student affairs professionals have teamed up to pilot a variety of interventions aimed at fostering belonging in students from underrepresented groups. At the University of Michigan, for example, Steele (1999) piloted an intervention in which first-year students participated in weekly rap sessions that engaged students from different races in informal conversation over pizza about their adjustment to college. Steele found that these rap sessions had a positive effect, in particular, upon the sense of belonging and academic achievement of participating African American students. Along similar lines, several studies by Strayhorn (2008a, 2008b) at predominantly White universities have revealed that interacting socially with cross-race peers was a predictor of sense of belonging for African American and Latino males. As for why such cross-race dialogue had positive effects on these students' sense of belonging, Steele (2003) speculated that such dialogue makes evident to Students of Color that many of their concerns about belonging and succeeding in this new university community are not unique to their identity group. In other words, Steele observed: "When members of one racial group hear members of another racial group express the same concerns they have, the concerns seem less racial. . .and can, thus, build trust in the larger campus community" (p. 129).

Another set of scholars—Yeager, Walton, and Cohen (2013)—reported recently on an intervention at an elite northeastern university in which incoming first-year students read short essays by upperclassmen about how they had initially felt as if they did not belong at the university but then ultimately realized that everyone feels that way and gradually gets over it. Students were then asked to do some writing of their own on this same topic of belonging for future incoming students. While this intervention had no effect on participating White first-year students, African American first-year students earned higher grade point averages, became more involved in campus activities, and asserted greater certainty about their fit within their college than their peers who made up the study's control group. A similar intervention at the University of Texas likewise had no effect upon students from privileged identity groups, but incoming first-generation college students, African American students, and Latino students were all significantly more likely to succeed academically in their freshman year than their peers in a control group (Yeager, Paunesku, Walton, & Dweck, 2013).

The key idea underlying each of these interventions is that an effective way of fostering the belonging of students from underrepresented groups is by emphasizing their similarities to peers from privileged identity groups and, in so doing, downplaying the idea that these two sets of students might have different experiences within the same institution. Steele (2010) argued that this approach helps re-shape the narratives that students from under-represented groups hold about their experiences into more trusting accounts, so that these new narratives "require less vigilance [and leave] more mental energy and motivation available for academic work" (p. 167). In short, Steele argued that increasing the sense of trust and belonging of college students from underrepresented groups will free them up to direct greater energy and attention to their academic, extracurricular, and social pursuits. These studies reveal there to be great value in strengthening the feelings of trust and belonging of college students from underrepresented groups. However, as we explain in greater detail below, we believe focusing too narrowly on trust and belonging misses out on an important opportunity to engage college students in considering the social forces that can threaten their feelings of trust and belonging.

### **Trust vs. Vigilance**

The results of each of the research studies described in the preceding paragraphs suggest that there are clear benefits to strengthening the sense of belonging of college students from underrepresented identity

groups by emphasizing their similarities with, rather than their differences from, classmates from privileged identity groups. An important question, however, is how to balance these efforts to minimize students' sense of otherness with simultaneously preparing them for the genuine adversity they are likely to experience on their respective campuses. For College Students of Color, this adversity may manifest itself in the form of biases, discrimination, and micro-aggressions, while first-generation college students and students from low-SES backgrounds are likely to contend with inequities in both material resources and social capital in comparison to their more economically privileged classmates.

*New York Times* columnist Charles Blow, for example, recently wrote about his son—an undergraduate at Yale University—being held at gunpoint by campus police as he exited the university library because he “matched the description” of a reported burglary by a young African American man. In reflecting on this incident, Blow (2015) wrote

I was exceedingly happy I had talked to him about how to conduct himself if a situation like this ever occurred. Yet I was brewing with sadness and anger that he had to use that advice. I am reminded of what I have always known, but what some would choose to deny: that there is no way to work your way out—earn your way out—of this sort of crisis. In these moments, what you've done matters less than how you look. (A21)

Experiences such as this one represent a genuine difference between the experiences of College Students of Color and their White classmates. Recognition of such differences—and concern for their children's wellbeing—is what leads parents from many racial minority groups to pro-actively prepare their children for the discrimination they are likely to experience (e.g., Bowman & Howard, 1985; Caughy, O'Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002; Hughes, Witherspoon, Rivas-Drake, & West-Bey, 2009; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Wang & Huguley, 2012; Ward, 1996). In *Overcoming the Odds: Raising Academically Successful African American Young Women*, Hrawbowski (2002) reported that the parents of African American college students actively prepare their children for the types of racism they are likely to experience on campus. Likewise Graham (2014)—an African American attorney and author—recounted an ugly racist encounter recently experienced by his teenage son at his elite independent school and then articulated “just a few of the humbling rules my wife and I have enforced to keep our children safer while living integrated lives” (p. 1). Along similar lines, in the wake of the recent tragic events in Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland, National Public Radio (Memmot, 2012), the *New York Times* (Canedy, 2014), and other media outlets have published numerous articles on “the talk” that Parents of Color have with their children as they enter adolescence about how to contend with unjust treatment at the hands of police officers and in predominantly White settings.

A reasonable question, then, is why the universities and parents described in the preceding paragraphs seem to be taking such different approaches to fostering the success of young adults from underrepresented groups? The university interventions seek to emphasize ways in which such students are similar to their classmates from overrepresented groups while the parental interventions emphasize the unique challenges that their children may experience as well as strategies for navigating these challenges. Speaking of this disjunction, Steele (2010) critiqued such parental preparation for adversity with the explanation that, “If one has to err, in light of our research over the years, I would thus err in the direction of urging greater trust, rather than greater vigilance” (p. 164).

The risk, of course, in Steele's prescription of emphasizing trust over vigilance is that students may then be poorly equipped to contend with the various forms of systemic racism and classism

embedded in the practices of the colleges and universities they are attending or even to recognize that these adverse experiences are due to their membership in a particular identity group rather than a personal failing. Spelman College President Beverly Daniel Tatum (2003) noted that, “We are better able to resist the negative impact of oppressive messages when we see them coming than when they are invisible to us” (p. 47). Likewise, Ginwright (2010) argued that learning to recognize forms of systemic racism and classism can replace feelings of isolation and self-blame for one’s struggles with a sense of engagement in a broader *collective* struggle for justice and liberation. In short, both of these scholars argued that preparing college students from underrepresented groups for the adversity they are likely to experience represents a protective factor as well against the negative effects of such adversity.

### Acknowledging Difference

While much of the scholarship on fostering college-going success focuses on emphasizing belonging and similarities between college students from overrepresented and underrepresented groups, Stephens and colleagues (2014) recently reported on an intervention that, instead, seeks to foster college students’ self-efficacy by acknowledging *differences* between these two groups of college students. *Self-efficacy* can be defined as an individual’s confidence in his or her ability to carry out a particular task or achieve a particular goal (Bandura, 1997). In their difference-education intervention, Stephens and colleagues (2014) sought to foster the self-efficacy of incoming first-generation college students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW) by explicitly introducing the unique challenges they might encounter in comparison to their continuing-generation peers.

More specifically, UW first-year students participating in the intervention attended an hour-long panel where they heard from UW upperclassmen about how their different social-class backgrounds mattered in college. Through this panel featuring both first-generation and continuing-generation students, Stephens and colleagues (2014) engaged incoming first-year students in learning, discussion of, and reflection upon the different backgrounds with which young adults enter college, the strengths and challenges presented by those backgrounds, and the fact that students need to utilize different strategies for success depending on their backgrounds.

By the end of these students’ first year at college, first generation students who had participated in this difference-education intervention demonstrated higher grade point averages and a greater use of college resources than their first-generation peers in a comparison group. Additionally, *both* first generation and continuing generation students who had participated in the intervention reported less stress and anxiety, greater perspective-taking, better college adjustment, and higher academic and social engagement than their peers in the control group. Stephens and colleagues (2014) posited that these types of experiences allow students to make sense of their college experiences and help them to identify strategies to overcome obstacles they may face based on their backgrounds. In other words, these scholars report that the University of Wisconsin effectively fostered the self-efficacy and academic success of its incoming first-generation college students, not by emphasizing similarities between these students and their continuing-generation peers but by acknowledging the *differences* between these two groups of students and equipping the first-generation students to contend effectively with these differences. An intervention such as this one offers an important complement to the focus on belonging described above. However, we hypothesize the effects of such efforts could be further amplified by fostering not only students’ sense of efficacy but their critical consciousness as well.

## Critical Consciousness

The educators leading the difference-education intervention at the University of Wisconsin clearly took pains to avoid a deficit-based approach to preparing first-generation college students for the unique challenges they might encounter in their first year of college. Yet, it still seems possible that focusing on the challenges experienced by students from underrepresented groups—without explicitly investigating the *sources* of those challenges—risks framing these challenges as the result of shortcomings on the part of the students rather than inequities caused by unjust and oppressive social forces. What we propose in this final section of the article, then, is a critical consciousness intervention for fostering the success of college students from underrepresented groups that combines introducing these students to the unique challenges they are likely to experience as first-year college students, highlighting strategies for navigating these challenges, *and* providing a space for discussion and reflection upon the societal forces that underlie these challenges.

The term *critical consciousness* was popularized by Brazilian philosopher-educator Paulo Freire (1970, 1973, Freire & Macedo, 1987), who discovered that the illiterate adult laborers with whom he worked were motivated to learn to read by their desire to better understand and resist the oppressive social forces shaping their lives. Freire characterized these adult laborers as motivated to “read the word” in order to “read the world,” and he came to see such critical consciousness as the ultimate goal of education. Contemporary scholars have more recently defined *critical consciousness* as the ability to analyze and resist the oppressive social forces shaping one’s life (Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008; Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). A small but growing body of research has found that critical consciousness predicts in adolescents and young adults from underrepresented groups a range of positive outcomes including academic achievement, resilience, political engagement, and career success. As noted above, scholars such as Watts et al. (2011) and Ginwright (2010) argued that young adults with high levels of critical consciousness (a) recognize obstacles impeding their success to be the result of systemic inequities rather than their own personal shortcomings, (b) possess strategies for resisting the negative effects of these obstacles, and (c) conceptualize themselves as part of a collective effort to challenge such inequities. We hypothesize that entering into one’s college experience with such a mindset may be more productive than, on one hand, an under-appreciation of differences in the college experiences of students from privileged and oppressed identity groups or, on the other hand, the misconception that existing differences between these groups are due to personal or familial deficits.

In terms of what a critical consciousness intervention might look like, we imagine that such an intervention would draw upon elements of both the rap sessions described by Steele (2010) and the difference-education panels described by Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin (2014). First, recall that Steele deliberately brought together students from different races to talk informally in weekly rap sessions about the similarities in their adjustment to college. The critically conscious version of such rap sessions would provide an opportunity and space for incoming college students coming from the same underrepresented group (whether racial, socioeconomic, linguistic, etc.) to discuss together the unique challenges they are experiencing—or are apprehensive about experiencing—in their college environment. These groups might also consider together a short reading, such as a chapter from West’s (1994) *Race Matters* entitled “The Pitfalls of Racial Reasoning” that investigates the systemic nature of race, class, and linguistic inequality in the United States. Spelman College President Beverly Daniel Tatum (2003) argued that college students from underrepresented racial groups “need safe spaces to retreat to and regroup in the process of dealing with the daily stress of campus racism” (p. 77). We would argue that such safe spaces

are equally important for first-generation college students, students from low-income backgrounds, students who are non-native English speakers, and other underrepresented identity groups as well.

Also included in these critically conscious rap sessions would be an element adapted from Stephens's difference-education intervention at the University of Wisconsin. Recall that Stephens's intervention featured a panel of UW upperclassmen who shared how their social class backgrounds had impacted their college experience. Similarly, these critically conscious rap sessions would include upperclassmen from the same identity groups as the participating first-year students, who are able to offer specific strategies they have taken up to navigate, resist, and challenge the various forms of systemic and interpersonal oppression they have encountered during their own college experiences. Perhaps such a forum might also provide an opportunity for social action groups from both on campus and the surrounding community to make short presentations about opportunities to get involved in work focused on challenging inequity and inequality. We hypothesize that such a critically conscious approach could replace participating college students' feelings of isolation and self-blame for the adversity they may experience during their college years with a sense of engagement in a broader collective struggle for equity and justice and, in so doing, foster what scholar Oakes (2003) referred to as students' multi-cultural college-going identities.

Oakes wrote that the success in college of young adults from underrepresented groups can be hampered by a belief that attending college represents a compromise of their cultural identity or a form of turning their backs upon their home community or values. Such beliefs can be nurtured by well-meaning mentors who frame a college education as a "ticket" out of one's home community. In contrast, Oakes calls for educators to foster students' multi-cultural college-going identity by explicitly engaging young adults in discussion and reflection upon the ways in which their college education would equip them to strengthen and support the communities from which they come and to challenge the systemic inequities that can impede the success of individuals from these communities (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). A critically conscious intervention can support the development of such a multi-cultural college-going identity and, in so doing, shift the lens through which students understand their college-going experience from one of individual advancement to one imbued with a more collective, other-oriented sense of purpose.

There are, of course, risks and challenges associated with a more critically conscious approach to fostering the success of college students from underrepresented groups. Poet Maya Angelou (1969) once wrote: "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat" (p. 4). As Angelou alluded to here, critical consciousness work done poorly runs the risk of leaving college students from underrepresented groups feeling demoralized by the systemic obstacles with which they must contend en route to earning a college degree. For this reason, an effective critical consciousness intervention must *not* limit itself to engaging college students in analyzing the oppressive social forces with which they are contending but, rather, be accompanied—similar to Stephens's difference-education intervention—by explicit strategies for both resisting and challenging these forces.

## Conclusion

All three of the approaches described in this article seek to foster the college-going success of students from underrepresented groups. The goal of this article, then, is not to critique college-success initiatives focused on belonging or efficacy but, rather, to suggest that these approaches may overlook a powerful lever for fostering the success of college students from under-represented groups: students' sense of purpose.

Specifically, we posit that a more critically conscious intervention that provides students with opportunities to analyze, resist, and challenge the oppressive social forces with which they are contending can strengthen these students multi-cultural college-going identity and, in so doing, their sense of their college-going experience as possessing meaning beyond their own personal or even familial advancement.

In making the case for a more critically conscious approach to supporting college students from underrepresented groups, we do not intend to undermine the value of these students recognizing the ways in which they share similarities with their peers from different racial and socioeconomic groups, nor the need for teaching students concrete strategies for navigating an unfamiliar college setting. Martin Luther King Jr. (1958) famously noted of the fight for civil rights: “There must be a rhythmic alternation between attacking the causes and healing the effects” (p. 653). It is likely that supporting the positive academic and social-emotional development of college students from underrepresented groups likewise requires both consciousness-raising and community building around the ways in which these students share much in common with their peers from more privileged groups *as well as* acknowledgement of the unique challenges faced by these students and the historical and societal forces underlying these challenges.

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