

University of Minnesota - Twin Cities

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Summer 2020

Merging cultural diversity and academic quality to (re)envision 21st century college campuses

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CHAPTER 1

MERGING CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND ACADEMIC QUALITY TO (RE)ENVISION 21st CENTURY COLLEGE CAMPUSES

**The Promise and Power
of Culturally Relevant High-Impact
Practices in Promoting Racial Equity
in Higher Education**

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, authors discuss how critically examining key concepts that drive dominant discourses around college success can help (re)envision a more equitable higher education system and move higher education toward such systemic vision. Specifically, they argue for the need to (re)imagine High-Impact Practices (HIPS) in education in more culturally relevant and responsive ways. Discourses around HIPS have typically taken a one-size-fits-all approach, perpetuating assumptions that offering these opportunities serves everyone equally well. However, the authors utilize a combination of existing research and concrete existing practices to demonstrate the need for more emphasis on culturally relevant HIPS in an effort to address racial inequities in higher education.

For several decades, the United States (U.S.) has invested substantial amounts of resources and energy in addressing the opportunity gaps that permeate its education systems. Economic resources have been channeled into research and programs aimed at supporting more racially minoritized students as they navigate the pathway to and through college. Many educators across the nation have assumed a personal responsibility and espoused a commitment to helping foster greater levels of success among these populations—with important, but limited, impact.

Despite the realities mentioned above, racial inequities continue to plague higher education in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Although national educational attainment rates have increased across racial groups over the last three decades, racially minoritized populations continue to exhibit attainment rates that are lower than their White counterparts. For example, in 1988, approximately 21% of Whites over 24 years-old held a bachelor's degree, compared to 11% of their Black and 10% of their Latinx peers. In 2016, 35% of Whites over 24 years-old held a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to only 21% of Black and 15% of Latinx persons in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). As these statistics demonstrate, not only have inequalities persisted, but racial gaps in college degree attainment have widened between White and racially minoritized students.

With all of the effort that has been made to address the racial disparities in this nation, why has so little progress been achieved? It could be argued that the education systems that contributed to the racial disparities in 1988 have remained relatively unchanged in the present day. Many of the efforts at fostering success among students of color have focused on figuring out how to increase their access to higher education systems that have never served them well (Museus, Ledesma, & Parker, 2015). And, the initiatives that *have* focused on systemically changing colleges and universities to better serve these populations, once they enter higher education, have commonly focused on creating boutique or isolated support and enrichment

programs that serve limited numbers of students of color and often disappear with reductions in funding, leaving the larger culture and structure of higher education unchanged (Museus & Smith, 2015; Museus & Yi, 2015).

One reason that postsecondary education systems have remained relatively unchanged and inequitable is that higher education leaders have failed to meaningfully incorporate inclusion and equity into dominant discourses around college success (Museus, 2014; Museus & Smith, 2015). If higher education researchers, policymakers, and practitioners are serious about reducing racial inequities, they must invest energy in rethinking notions of success and how to foster it in higher education. Doing so can help generate a better understanding of how existing efforts might be better serving majority populations than racially minoritized communities, and advance knowledge on how research, policy, and practice can be rethought and reshaped to cultivate more equitable systems in postsecondary education.

In this chapter, we discuss how critically examining the key concepts that drive dominant discourses around college success can help (re)envision a more equitable higher education system and move us toward systemic change. Specifically, we argue for the need to (re)imagine High-Impact Practices (HIPs) in education in more culturally relevant and responsive ways. As we discuss, discourses around HIPs have typically taken a one-size-fits-all approach, perpetuating assumptions that these opportunities serve everyone equally well. However, we utilize a combination of existing research and existing practices to demonstrate the need for more emphasis on culturally relevant HIPs in effort to address racial inequities in higher education.

In the following section, we provide an overview of the nature and impact of HIPs. Then, we discuss the role of HIPs in the experiences of racially minoritized students in college, and highlight the limitations of research and discourse on HIPs when applied to these populations. Next, we discuss how HIPs can and should be (re)envisioned in more culturally relevant ways. We conclude with a discussion of the nature of culturally relevant HIPs and how they can help advance knowledge of maximizing positive outcomes among racially minoritized populations.

HIPS THAT PROMOTE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND SUCCESS

HIPs are active-learning educational practices that facilitate student engagement and presumably more positive college outcomes. Recently, HIPs have garnered increasing attention from higher education policymakers, national advocacy organizations, and postsecondary campuses. For example, educators in the California State University system are implementing undergraduate research opportunities, which is one type of HIPs, across

the state in the hopes of increasing the college graduation rates of racially minoritized students (O'Donnell, Botelho, Brown, González, & Head, 2015). In addition, many postsecondary campuses across the nation have intentionally and explicitly encouraged the implementation of these practices as a mechanism to improve college students' experiences and outcomes on their campuses.

While there is no one typology of HIPs, higher education researchers have identified at least 10 types of HIPs commonly offered on postsecondary campuses (Kuh, 2008; Kuh, O'Donnell, & Reed, 2013):

1. **First-year seminars** are courses that are offered during the first year of college and are delivered in multiple formats, including orientation, academic, and professional seminars (Brownell & Sawner, 2009).
2. **Common intellectual experiences** often refer to a set of required common courses or general education programs that institutions require students to complete (Kuh, 2008). These experiences can include participation in learning communities or courses that are interconnected and revolve around broad themes (e.g., technology, diversity and culture, global interdependence).
3. **Learning communities** entail a cohort of students taking two or more interconnected classes together, with the goal of integrating learning across multiple courses (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2010). Through this structure, learning communities have the potential to increase the likelihood that students who participate in them will see each other often, develop stronger connections with each other and sense of community, and engage in common intellectual experiences.
4. **Writing-intensive courses** emphasize writing throughout the curriculum, and can include final-year writing projects. Some writing-intensive courses encourage students to produce and revise their writing for different audiences (Kuh, 2008).
5. **Collaborative assignments and projects** are experiences for students to work and solve problems collaboratively. These educational activities also improve one's understanding of issues by learning the insights of others who come from different backgrounds and have different life experiences (Kuh, 2008). Some examples include study groups for a course, team-based assignments, and cooperative research projects.
6. **Undergraduate research** provides research experiences for undergraduate students (Kuh, 2008). Such experiences are more prevalent in science than in other fields. Scientists are connecting their courses to students' involvement in systematic research and inquiry.

These efforts are aimed at involving students in asking difficult questions and fostering curiosity and the stimulation that comes from trying to answer important questions.

7. **Diversity and global experiences** involve students taking courses and programs that help students explore different cultures, personal experiences, and worldviews (Kuh, 2008). Such experiences might focus on diversity in U.S. society, cultures around the world, or both. These educational activities often aim to engage students in thinking and dialogue about complicated and difficult social issues, such as social inequality or struggles for human rights, freedom, and power. These opportunities can come in the form of experiential learning in local diverse communities or study abroad opportunities that allow students to learn about global cultures and communities.
8. **Service-learning** is “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (Miller, Rycek, & Fritson, 2011, p. 56). Thus, service-learning programs incorporate field-based “experiential learning” with partners in the community into the course. These opportunities allow students to serve the community by applying what they learn in the classroom and work with community partners to solve real-world problems (Kuh, 2008).
9. **Internships** are experiential learning opportunities that provide students with practical experiences in work settings and direct coaching from professionals in the fields of their career interests (Kuh, 2008). Internships that are taken for course credit often require students to complete a paper or project that is evaluated by a faculty member.
10. **Senior capstone courses and projects** require students nearing the end of their college careers to pursue a project that integrates and applies the knowledge and skills that they have learned during their time in higher education (Kuh, 2008). Capstone projects can take the form of a field experience, a research paper or presentation, an artistic performance or an exhibit of artwork, or a portfolio of the students’ work during college.

INFLUENCE OF HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES AND RACIALLY MINORITIZED STUDENTS

Overall, research on HIPs demonstrates that student participation in these experiences is associated with increased engagement, learning, academic performance, and graduation rates among college students (Brownell &

Sawner, 2009; Kuh, 2008). For example, the findings of several studies reveal that participating in first-year seminars is associated with positive outcomes, such as increased levels of development, satisfaction, and persistence in college (Brownell & Sawner, 2009; Padgett, Keup, & Pascarella, 2013). In addition, research has linked learning communities to more positive transition to college (Brownell & Sawner, 2009), enhanced academic performance (Zhao & Kuh, 2004), critical and higher-order thinking (Inkelas et al., 2006; Pike et al., 2010), and openness to difference and appreciation of diversity (Inkelas et al., 2006, Pike, 2002; Pike et al., 2010). Moreover, numerous studies have related participation in undergraduate research with more positive student outcomes, such as increased academic achievement, greater likelihood of persistence, and more positive lifelong career goals (Hu, Scheuch, Schwartz, Gayles, & Li, 2008). Similarly, college students who participate in service-learning and community-based learning show increased community awareness, critical thinking, development and satisfaction, and interest in and success in graduate school (Franser Riehle & Weiner, 2013), as well as greater openness to and competence in diversity (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Engberg & Fox, 2011; Jones & Abes, 2004; Kilgo, 2012; Simons & Cleary, 2006) and increased awareness and engagement in social issues and justice (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Engberg & Fox, 2011; Jones & Abes, 2004; Simons & Cleary, 2006).

There is a small body of empirical research focused on how HIPs impact racially minoritized students in particular. This scholarship provides some indication that HIPs might be one mechanism to foster success among this population, but much of this research focuses on undergraduate research opportunities. For example, undergraduate research opportunities have been linked to higher grades and persistence within majors (Jones, Barlow, & Villarejo, 2010), persistence in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields specifically (Espinosa, 2011), aspirations to attend graduate school (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Schultz, Hernandez, Woodcock, Estrada, Chance, Aguilar, & Serpe, 2011; Strayhorn, 2010; Sweeney & Villarejo, 2013), better preparation for graduate school experiences (Sweeney & Villarejo, 2013), and actual enrollment in doctoral programs in STEM (Carter, Mandell, & Maton, 2009) among racially minoritized students.

However, if HIPs increase rates of success among all populations, they might still perpetuate racial inequities. In fact, existing research indicates that racially minoritized students face racial disparities in access to HIPs (e.g., research with a faculty member, study abroad programs, internships, and culminating senior experiences) compared to White students (Brownell & Sawner, 2009; Kuh, 2008, 2013; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Seifert, Gillig, Hanson, Pascarella, & Blauch, 2014). Seifert et al. (2014) conducted a multi-institution longitudinal study of participation in HIPs and

found that White students were more likely to participate in HIPs compared to students of color. Additionally, several other studies reveal racial inequities in participation in specific HIPs (Comp, 2007; Kuh, 2013; Picard, Bernardino, & Ehigiator, 2009; Sweeney, 2013; Salisbury, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2011). Recognition of these realities has led researchers to call for more attention to the factors that lead to these disparities in accessing HIPs, as well as institutional responsibility to design and implement HIPs that are specifically tailored to serve racially diverse students (Harper, 2009; Seifert et al., 2014; Sweeney, 2013).

Scholars have begun to critique the applicability and relevance of HIPs and student engagement opportunities to the experiences of racially minoritized student populations as well (Museus & Yi, 2015; Patton, Harper, & Harris, 2015). They recognize that dominant discourses around HIPs and student engagement fail to adequately take diversity, inclusion, and equity into account. Relatedly, many HIPs on college campuses are constructed in ways that exclude, marginalize, or are irrelevant to the lives of racially minoritized college students. As a result, these students might not see the aforementioned HIPs as viable or desirable opportunities for their engagement. If racially minoritized students do engage in HIPs that treat their communities as invisible or irrelevant, they might not realize the same benefits as students who *do* perceive these experiences to be relevant to their identities. One useful framework that can be utilized to understand the nature of culturally relevant HIPs, their key elements, and the reasons why they are important is the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model, which we discuss in greater detail in the following section.

POWER OF CULTURAL RELEVANCE AND RESPONSIVENESS IN THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

Several higher education scholars have underscored the reality that the predominantly White campus cultures at most colleges and universities pose challenges for racially minoritized students (e.g., Museus & Quaye, 2009; Tierney, 1999). They note that such cultures can pressure racially minoritized students to sever ties with their cultural communities and go through a process of assimilation, which subsequently creates adjustment difficulties for these students and diminish their sense of belonging on campus. In light of this knowledge, it is reasonable to suspect that a campus rife with HIPs and other engagement opportunities can potentially be places where White students can thrive, while simultaneously forcing racially minoritized students to engage in the harmful practices of cultural suicide and assimilation.

In contrast, campus environments, programs, and practices that meaningfully engage and reflect racially minoritized students' cultural backgrounds, communities, and identities are more likely to attract, engage, and empower these students (Kiang, 2009; Museus, Lam, Huang, Kem, & Tan, 2012; Tierney, 1999). The CECE Model of college success offers one useful lens into understanding the role of cultural engagement on the experiences and outcomes of racially diverse populations in higher education and how HIPs can be re-imagined. Museus (2014) created the CECE Model using a decade of his own qualitative research and 20 years of existing scholarship on racially diverse populations (Asian American, Black, Latino, Pacific Islander, White, and Multiracial populations) in college. The focal point of the CECE Model outlines nine elements of campus environments that reflect and respond to the cultural communities, backgrounds, and identities of racially diverse populations, and provide conditions for them to thrive regardless of their backgrounds. The nine CECE Indicators include the following:

Cultural Relevance

Five indicators of cultural relevance focus on the ways that campus environments are relevant to the cultural backgrounds and communities of diverse college students (Museus, 2014; Museus & Smith, 2015):

1. **Cultural familiarity** refers to the extent to which students have opportunities to connect with faculty, staff, and peers who share and understand their cultural backgrounds and experiences.
2. **Culturally relevant knowledge** has to do with the degree to which students have opportunities to learn about their own cultural communities via culturally relevant curricular and co-curricular activities.
3. **Cultural community service** includes opportunities for students to give back to and positively transform their home communities (e.g., via problem-based research or service-learning).
4. **Meaningful cross-cultural engagement** manifests in programs and practices that facilitate educationally meaningful cross-cultural interactions that focus on solving real-life social and political problems.
5. **Culturally validating environments** are reflected in campus cultures that validate the cultural backgrounds, knowledge, and identities of diverse students.

Cultural Responsiveness

The remaining four indicators of cultural responsiveness focus on the ways in which campus environments respond to the cultural norms and needs of diverse students (Museus, 2014; Museus & Smith, 2015):

6. **Collectivist cultural orientations** refer to campus cultures that emphasize a collectivist, rather than individualistic, cultural orientation that is characterized by teamwork and pursuit of mutual success.
7. **Humanized educational environments** are reflected in the availability of opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with faculty and staff who care about and are committed to every students' success.
8. **Proactive philosophies** lead faculty, administrators, and staff to proactively bring important information, opportunities, and support services to students, rather than waiting for students to seek them out or hunt them down.
9. **Holistic support** refers to whether college students have access to at least one faculty or staff member to whom they are confident will provide the information they need, offer the help they seek, or connect them with the information or support they require regardless of the issue they face.

Before moving forward, two important caveats are warranted. First, it is important to note that the nine CECE indicators were constructed intentionally so that administrators, faculty, and staff can integrate them into curricula, spaces, policies, programs, and practices across their campuses (Museus & Smith, 2015). Thus, all nine of these elements can be embedded in HIPs. In the current discussion, we primarily focus on the indicators of cultural relevance.

Second, although culturally relevant experiences are often framed in ways that are empowering for the racially minoritized students whom they serve, it is important to keep in mind that it is possible for college curricula, policies, programs, and practices to be simultaneously constructed as related to students' cultural communities and deficit-oriented. For example, a service-learning opportunity, framing college students as saviors who need to help communities of color that are incapable of thriving on their own, can send negative messages to students from these populations and further alienate them from campuses that they perceive as further devaluing their cultural communities (Swaminathan, 2007; Tharp, 2012). Thus, it is critical that educators, who design and deliver culturally relevant HIPs, do so from anti-deficit perspectives, and view communities of color as having valuable

assets that can be engaged to transform the oppressive conditions that have been forced upon them.

Focusing on More Culturally Relevant High-Impact Practices

Applying the CECE framework, and more specifically the concept of cultural relevance, to HIPs can aid in (re)envisioning how these practices can be constructed in more empowering ways. In doing so, application of the CECE Model can also help (re)design HIPs so that they are more likely to maximize racially minoritized students' engagement in, passion for, and satisfaction with such experiences and enhance the outcomes that these undergraduates witness as a result of participation in such activities. Culturally relevant HIPs do the following:

1. Meaningfully construct culturally familiar spaces in which students are able to interact with people who understand their backgrounds and experiences;
2. Consistently provide students with opportunities to learn about their own community's histories, struggles, and issues;
3. Purposefully embed opportunities for students to give back to their cultural communities by collaborating with them to address critical problems that they face;
4. Intentionally create spaces for students from different cultural backgrounds to work together to understand problems faced by diverse communities and pursue efforts to solve them; and
5. Thoughtfully validate student communities by employing anti-deficit perspectives that acknowledge problems faced by communities but recognize the sources of strength that allows these communities to survive despite these challenges.

Although it might not be feasible to integrate *all* five of these elements throughout all components of a given HIP, it could be argued that the more HIPs reflect these five features, the more they are intentionally constructed to allow diverse populations to thrive in higher education. Useful examples of culturally relevant HIPs already exist on campuses across the nation and range from ethnic studies-focused first-year seminars to anti-deficit and social justice-driven service-learning programs. Following are a few examples that help solidify our discussion of culturally relevant HIPs and offer readers ideas regarding how postsecondary institutions can and do create such experiences.

1. **Culturally Relevant First-Year Seminars.** Pitzer College's first-year seminars—*Fast Cars and Giant Robots: Introduction to Asian American Popular Culture* and *Model Minority and Perpetual Foreigner: Asians in America*—are designed to provide Asian American students with the opportunity to learn about their communities' histories and how dominant narratives have shaped the current racial representation and experiences of Asian Americans in U.S. society. Similarly, Lafayette College's first-year seminar—*The Life We Write: An Introduction to Chicano Literature and Culture*—is another example of culturally relevant curriculum designed for students to learn about Chicano culture and identity through the study of Chicano writers, filmmakers, or artists.
2. **Culturally Relevant Learning Communities.** Syracuse University offers an indigenous living learning community, which has both curricular (e.g., Introduction to Native American Studies) and extra-curricular requirements (e.g., an Indigeneity Identity Series) that allow students to learn about Native American or American Indian communities and identities, especially those of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) people and culture in the local community in Syracuse. In addition, Syracuse University learning communities that promote meaningful cross-cultural engagement, such as the international living-learning community and multicultural living-learning community, both of which encourage critical reflection and meaningful dialogues in social or political issues among culturally diverse students.
3. **Culturally Relevant Service-Learning.** Chaminade University of Honolulu offers a service-learning project called, *Students Helping in Naturalization of Elders* (SHINE), through which students help elder immigrants in the local community learn English and the knowledge required to complete the naturalization process. This service-learning opportunity allows students to acquire knowledge about the legal, political, and social issues faced by immigrants, while learning to give back and helping empower marginalized immigrant communities in Hawaii. In addition, Benedict College, a historically Black liberal arts college, requires service-learning for all undergraduates that is aimed at learning about and giving back to the local African-American community.
4. **Culturally Relevant Undergraduate Research.** Oklahoma State University offers an American Indians Into Psychology (AIIP) Summer Enrichment Program, which aims to provide access to research and clinical opportunities for American Indian students to develop knowledge in American Indian psychology. Through AIIP, students also get to work with faculty, graduate students, psychologists, social

workers, and other professionals who work in psychology fields for American Indian communities. Similarly, the University of Minnesota's Chicano and Latino Studies offers quantitative and qualitative undergraduate research opportunities designed to enhance student learning through faculty-student collaboration and partnership with local Latino community leaders and organizations.

5. **Culturally Relevant Internships:** George Washington University's Native American Political Leadership Program (NAPLP) offers internships for American Indian, Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian students to work in fields related to indigenous policy and politics. American University also offers the Washington Internship for Native Students (WINS) for students of American Indian, Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian origins, and these internships focus on understanding and addressing critical issues related to students' cultural communities.
6. **Culturally Relevant Capstone Courses and Projects:** Tufts University requires a senior capstone project for students enrolled in their Latino Studies minor program. This capstone project is designed as an independent study, and students may do research or work in one of Boston's Latino communities. In another example, Northern Michigan University requires that senior nursing students conduct an interview and complete a cultural diversity paper to examine and reflect on their experiences working with clients from diverse identity backgrounds. This project encourages students to learn and reflect on the role of cultural diversity in providing nursing care with patients from different backgrounds than their own.
7. **Culturally Relevant Study Abroad:** The University of California, Santa Cruz's International Education Office and Davison College's Study Abroad both provide information and introduce heritage seekers, a program for participants to study abroad at a specific region or country linked to their family backgrounds, religion, culture, or ethnicity. Through such programs, students enhance knowledge of the language of their family's ancestry and cultural origins, while learning and reflecting upon the differences between themselves and the local community.

Given the failure of previous efforts to address the stubborn racial inequities that plague higher education, it is critical that researchers, policymakers, and practitioners radically rethink central concepts in student success discourse, such as high-impact practices and student engagement. To address these problematic disparities, college educators must shift the focus from getting more racially minoritized students involved in the same practices that have failed to address the aforementioned inequities and turn

their attention to new ways of understanding how to foster success among their increasingly diverse populations. This chapter is aimed at sparking more meaningful discussion regarding how college educators might start (re)imagining what constitutes a high-impact educational practice and how to serve today's students most effectively.

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