

[INTERSECTIONALITY AND WELL-BEING]

Lessons in Resistance and Resilience

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Kim is a black, second-generation college student majoring in prelaw.¹ Although navigating college has been easy for her, she explains, “There are only a handful of us in most of my classes, so I’m still called on to represent the black perspective. They assume all black students are the same. Come on, people! My parents are from West Africa, not West Philadelphia!” Annoyed, Kim usually keeps silent in the face of these misconceptions. She struggles not to let them detract from her college experience, although she admits they are bringing her down.

Zara identifies as African American as well as queer. But when she joined the campus LBGTQ+ affinity group, she found herself marginalized and misunderstood. “They can handle my lesbian identity but they can’t seem to deal with my race,” she says. She left the group vowing never to return. Now lonely and increasingly depressed, she wonders if there is anywhere on campus where she can feel she belongs.

Carmen is an Afro-Latina, first-generation student. Offended and embarrassed after her white roommate made yet another subtle snub about Carmen’s hair products, she left the room cursing loudly, slamming and breaking the dorm room door. As she ran down the stairs, she could hear the RA calling campus police. She now wonders if she’ll make it through the semester.

Over the past fifty years, US colleges and universities have labored to recruit a more diverse student population and integrate meaningful interactions among people from different backgrounds into

educational practices. Despite these efforts, research on the experiences of undergraduate and graduate students from historically marginalized groups—particularly students of color—suggests that many of these students feel they must navigate a hostile climate on college campuses (Harper and Hurtado 2007; Winkle-Wagner and Locks 2014). These students cite gendered racial bias, microaggressions, and other cultural insensitivities among students, faculty, and staff. Additionally, they list the low numbers of faculty and administrators of color and curricular ethnocentrism as factors fueling their discontent.

I have been teaching in higher education for over thirty years and have spent nearly all that time in predominantly white institutions. My academic positions have afforded me certain disadvantages but also certain privileges. For a while I was the only woman of African descent teaching full time in my undergraduate college, a role that was isolating and lonely. On the other hand, I’ve had the privilege to prepare a generation of young students of color to be “the first” and “the only one.” By listening to students sharing their psychological difficulties and social missteps, while also reflecting off my own lived experiences navigating difference in the academy, I have been able to co-construct with my students the knowledge necessary to resist and stay whole in environments that have not always been welcoming or culturally affirming. In our case, these lessons of resistance have yielded essential life skills. I’ve learned that while many students enter our classrooms

armed with this knowledge, far too many do not.

My students—including Kim, Zara, and Carmen—have shown me that the modern systems of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia are particularly difficult to predict or guard against. These “isms” are often subtle and deeply embedded in our day-to-day interactions. Some students, like Kim, have learned to resist by staying silent and trying to shrug things off. Others who long to belong, like Zara, often fly under our radar until it’s too late. Still others, like Carmen, push back against microaggressions they believe are directed toward them. Unfortunately, though it may have been satisfying in the moment, Carmen’s loud and physical resistance did little more than put her stay in college at risk.

College students who face multiple intersectional adversities need faculty, advisors, counselors, and other staff who purposefully help them develop the competencies they need to identify and overcome the devastating effects of structural inequities, social biases, and discrimination. To support students in this way, educators need to acquire a thorough understanding of the issues that emerge from the social, political, and moral contexts of our students’ lives. Educators have a critical role to play in helping to shift resistance from a psychological survival strategy like Carmen’s to a more liberatory exercise in resilience, self-affirmation, and cultural pride.

Defining Resistance and Resilience

Resistance as a developmental competency refers to the ability to recognize and resist negative social influences and risk behaviors, including learning to stand up against those who dare to limit who or what you choose to be, and to stand up for what defines the best you can be (Ward 2000). To overcome the negative impact of the “isms” in our

1. Students’ names have been changed.

lives, we need to be able to apply lessons of resistance alongside the tools of critical consciousness (Freire 1974). Both are informed by our understanding of how issues of power and injustice influence socialization processes.

Resilience, on the other hand, is a process in which people dynamically and positively adapt within the context of adversity (Luthar and Cicchetti 2000). According to Anita Jones Thomas and Caryn R. R. Rodgers, “Models of resilience often include the notion of protective or promotive factors, characteristics, traits, or processes that help individuals to adapt to, become immune to, or overcome risks” (2009, 119). Resistance is a core component of resilience for some and is crucial to survival for many (Toshalis 2015). Together, resistance and resilience compose the elements of “moral competence,” which Richard F. Catalano, John W. Toumbourou, and J. David Hawkins define as the “ability to assess and respond to the ethical, affective, or social justice dimensions of a situation” (2014, 425). These elements are essential to social and emotional health, given the persistence and intensity of the structural inequities that frame the lives of students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and students with other historically marginalized identities.

Considering Intersectionality

Each of our students embodies multiple social identities that combine and intersect with one another. Students of color, of course, are not a monolithic group—they represent the innumerable dimensions of human diversity that exist on our campuses, including differences in geographic origin, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, age, and physical ability. Intersectional theory posits that the combination of these identity statuses shapes how we see ourselves and how others view and treat

us (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Collins 2000; Settles 2006).

When we pay attention to the interconnected social categories of individual and group differences that we all inhabit, we deepen our understanding of the strengths students bring into the classroom and gain greater insight into the struggles they face outside the classroom door. Acknowledging intersectionality allows us to identify and respond to the interdependent systems of discrimination and privilege that play out in students’ personal and collective lives.

Knowing what our students at times are compelled to struggle against, and at other times must stand up for, allows us to see how elements of effective resistance fit together. These social and psychological struggles shape the construction of our students’ racial, ethnic, and gender identities. As students learn how to navigate their own personal worlds in a diverse college setting, they not only engage in self-creation and (often) self-defense, but also acquire the skills they need to optimize the college experience—critical thinking, problem solving, and the ability to make well-informed life choices.

Where We Have Fallen Short

Higher education faculty and administrators talk endlessly about the life skills that we believe are important to instill in college students before they leave us. We want them to develop intellectually, master the professional skills necessary for their future careers, and acquire the relational, communication, and motivational skills they need for problem solving, team building, and working effectively in an increasingly multicultural and global world. But seldom do we approach this work intersectionally, nor do we acknowledge that as we draw up those lists of essential life skills, we may be meeting the needs of some students while ignoring the challenges that students with historically marginalized

identities face. Indeed, we give little intentional thought to how students learn to identify and navigate the systems of privilege and domains of power—including structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal (Collins 2009)—that provide advantages to certain people while penalizing others.

The goal of breaking down social and racial divisions is fundamental to how we design and support diversity-related academic, residential, and extracurricular activities—at least that’s what we tell ourselves. Yet, despite our efforts, recent research on intergroup interactions suggests that these social divisions pose an intractable problem that we have yet to overcome (Shaiko 2013; Milem, Chang, and Antonio 2005; Byrd 2017). On many campuses, our students live socially separate lives. Interpersonal and intergroup resentment, fear, distrust, and cultural discomfort too often motivate students to seek comfort in the familiar. They avoid the work of confronting individual differences, steering clear of the difficult conversations that might increase their understanding of how structural barriers and advantages shape our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, and how social inequalities help form their own and their classmates’ individual identities.

I maintain that we educators have dropped the ball. We fail to provide students with the relational knowledge and skills to develop and sustain meaningful connections across differences. Perhaps it is time we ask what it takes to build the developmental capacities in students (particularly those with historically marginalized identities) that will help them to resist the negative forces originating from the “isms” in their lives and those of their classmates, and to be resilient in the face of these adversities.

Educators need to become more adept at understanding the overlapping vulnerabilities that emerge in the unequal social contexts in which our students

reside. Such knowledge is the first step to understanding how best to identify and encourage the appropriate resistance strategies.

What We Can Do

From academic programs and course offerings to extracurricular activities and organized campus events, educators have multiple opportunities to offer students the knowledge and tools they need to develop optimal resistance skills. Three areas of foci can guide this work.

First, we can be more thoughtful about what our students may **internalize**. This includes both the negative forces of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, which they must resist, as well as the strong, positive, and integrated identities (ethnic, racial, gender, etc.) that can emerge from the cultural wealth that they bring to our classrooms. We can stop defining students by their oppression. (After all, there is more to being black than slavery or more to being queer than violence against LGBTQ+ people.) Educators can do more to represent historically marginalized people in their full humanity, and we can expose our students to narratives that *counter* the assumptions of their inferiority or unworthiness. Such actions will go a long way toward promoting students' emotional self-efficacy—that is, the capacity to handle positive and negative emotional experiences in ways that are healthy and self-affirming (Saarni 1999).

Second, educators might pay more attention to the **interpersonal**. Students need opportunities to develop and maintain honest, authentic interactions and relationships across differences. We bring diverse groups of students to campus, but seldom do we teach them the skills they need to negotiate fundamental identity and cultural dissimilarities. Students often self-segregate and retreat to their communities of comfort—other young people who look like, think like, and act like themselves.

Some staff members in my college's student affairs department call this “just like me diversity,” and it is hardly what was intended by educators who have expended considerable time and resources on institutional diversity projects. Young Americans need more than representational diversity; they need the tools to break down the racial and social divisions they have inherited growing up in this nation.

Last, we must always think of our work in ways that are **intersectional**. We must never forget that we all live within systems of oppression and that the forces of these systems live within us all. Taking intersectionality seriously means acknowledging our obligation to address the academic and psychosocial needs of all our students, ensuring that they leave us fully equipped with the tools to be self-reflective, critically conscious, socially curious, interpersonally courageous, and self-assured despite where they have been positioned in our society.

Our work doesn't end with giving students the academic and professional skills they need to build their professional lives. We must also help them acquire what they need to negotiate their multiple identities, effectively resist against and stay resilient in the face of barriers caused by societal and institutional “isms,” and connect across differences in ways that are authentic, honest, fair, caring, and compassionate. These are the elements of a liberatory education that all our students deserve and that will serve them well in their adult lives and professional careers. ☐

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