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Breaking Barriers for Multiracial Students

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ABSTRACT

The number of multiracial college students has increased and will continue to increase rapidly over the years thus it is important for Student Affairs educators and administrators, and mental health providers to understand this population. This essay will provide an overview of barriers often faced by multiracial students and will discuss strategies that can be used to help break these barriers for this population.

Introduction

The multiracial population is one of the most rapidly growing populations in the United States (Wehrly, 2003). Multiracial individuals are defined as having parents from more than one federally defined racial or ethnic background (Renn & Shang, 2008). Multiracial individuals are also labeled as mixed-race, biracial, or mixed-heritage individuals.

The US Census Bureau predicts for a steady increase in multiracial individuals over time thus the development and services needed by this population is essential to all educational institution (Renn & Shang, 2008) and mental health providers. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the number of multiracial individuals in America has increased throughout the years. It was reported that 2.4% of the population (6.8 million people) identified with more than one race (Brown, Elder, & Hitlin, 2006). It was for the first time that this population was able to mark two or more racial categories to classify their race (Qian, 2004). The attention to this population comes from the many requests for information on topics related to multiracial students in professional conference sessions and interest from multiracial students themselves.

The number of multiracial college students has increased and will continue to increase rapidly over the years thus it is important for Student Affairs educators and

administrators, and mental health providers to understand this population. This article will provide an overview of barriers often faced by multiracial students and will discuss strategies that can be used to help break these barriers for this population. We will also discuss past studies and examples of programs and services currently used by higher education institutions to service multiracial students.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to inform the reader the importance of recognition, appreciation and understating of diverse backgrounds and the acknowledgement of multiracial students' experiences in higher education, identify the barriers this population faces during their college years, and point out strategies that can help higher education institutions and mental health providers provide a welcome and healthy environment to multiracial students. Professional counseling literature has been slow to attend to the needs of the mixed-race population (Wehrly, 2003), and "student affair professionals have few resources on which to draw in understanding the experiences and identities of multiracial students" (Renn & Shang, 2008, p.1). Thus, it is our goal for this article to bring awareness about a rapidly growing population in our nation today.

Literature Review

The articles read for this research illustrated valuable information on the growth of the multiracial population and what studies have been done in relation to this population. According to Wehrly (2003), a multiracial person is an individual whose parents are of different racial heritages. A biracial person identifies coming from two difference races.

The reviewed literature indicated that a multiracial baby boom was produced after The *Loving vs. Virginia* decision in 1967 which allowed interracial couples to be married. The number of multiracial children has increased rapidly in America such that in the 1970's approximately 1 percent of children were products of an interracial union and by 2000 the number increased to 5 percent (Brunsma, 2005).

In today's society more mixed-race public figures are distinguished. For example Tiger Woods, Vin Diesel, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, Halle Berry, Soledad O'Brien, Derek Jeter, and President Barack Obama to name a few. Yet mixed-race individuals, and the families from which they came, were not welcome in many parts of the United States just a few generations ago (Shang, 2008).

The reviewed literature indicated that research has been conducted and multiracial individuals' identify development. Racial identity development among college students with parents from different heritage was unexplored until the 1990s (Renn, 2008). The research was led by demographic and theoretical forces that enthused interest to understand the experiences and identities of biracial and multiracial youth (Renn, 2008).

The first scholars to publish models for the development of healthy biracial identity were psychologists Poston and Root in 1990. They both proposed from their research four potentially positive resolutions of the tensions of biracial identity. They are (1) acceptance of the identity society assigns, (2) identification with both racial groups, (3) identification with a single racial group, and (4) identification as a new racial group. The new identity group is biracial or multiracial (Renn, 2008). The study led Root (1990) to propose that an individual might self-identify in more than one way at the same time or move fluidly among identities thus this opened the door to the emergence of empirically derived, nonlinear models of identity development in mixed-race students (Renn & Shang, 2008). In 2004, author Renn conducted a study of students from three postsecondary institutions and found five patterns of identity in multiracial college students from Root's (1990) original resolution study. These five patterns are (1) student holds a monoracial identity, (2) student holds multiple monoracial identities shifting according to the situation, (3) student holds a multiracial identity, (4) student holds an extraracial identity by deconstructing race or opting out of identification with U.S. racial categories, (5) and student holds a situational identity and identifying differently in different contexts (Renn, 2008).

Throughout the literature review, we discovered several meaningful challenges and barriers which will be discussed further in the essay. After evaluating the research, we found that the support of higher education institutions and mental health providers is crucial in breaking the barriers multiracial students face on college campuses.

Discussion

After extensive research, we found that multiracial students face several barriers during their college experience. One of these barriers is others' perception of multiracial students' racial identity based on their physical appearance. Physical appearance such as nose shape, skin tone, hair texture, and eye color bring uncertainty thus they are expected to explain their identity and choose one. Due to their physical appearance, many multiracial students are repeatedly asked the question "what are you?" which they do not find pleasant to answer. A biracial student stated in a past study "I get asked what I am a lot. I usually just answer that I am mixed. But then that isn't enough of an answer for most people" (King, 2008, p.34). Some mixed-race students choose to identify themselves as mixed yet people are reluctant to accept this answer thus cause frustration to the multiracial student. When people in the college community are not willing to accept multiracial students as mixed race individuals, the learning environment become a challenge and is difficult for multiracial students to feel accepted and comfortable by the college. Wehrly (2003) indicated that this nonacceptance can lead to loneliness and a blaming of self for being different.

Multiracial students also face the challenge of feeling pulled between various student-of-color organizations which indicate lack of cultural knowledge on campus. The lack of culture knowledge affects multiracial students' ability to be accepted by other students in social spaces. In a past study, a multiracial student stated "I never really felt like I completely belong[ed]" (Renn & Shang, 2008, p. 37) when describing their

experience as a member of a monoracial group. Multiracial students feel different but never feel “completely accepted by either group” (King, 2008, p. 37). These comments indicate that multiracial students have difficulties fitting in racial and ethnic groups on college campuses. They feel invisible and excluded from monoracial groups on campus.

Overall, multiracial students in higher education institutions can face challenges related to but not limited to racial exclusion, marginality, and disconnection.

Breaking the Barriers

It was refreshing to discover during this research that there are several strategies to help break the barriers multiracial students face during their college years. One strategy is for Student Affairs educators and administrators to support the development of mixed-race students by allowing them to connect in process free from predetermined racial identity and developmental labels (Talbot, 2008). One way to implement this strategy is by offering race-based groups or activities that do not require members to choose one particular race such as a student organization for multiracial students and a multicultural learning community (King, 2008). Multiracial students will then have the opportunity to share their experience with other multiracial students and make a connection with others on campus. In addition, invite public speakers to the campus who can facilitate dialogue and programs to promote complex conversations on differences among mixed-race students. Keep in mind that this is to validate the depth and complex nature of racial experiences on a college campus (Talbot, 2008).

Additionally, an optimistic strategy suggested from a study conducted by Renn in 2004 is for higher education administrators to recruit and hire faculty who identify as multiracial to assist multiracial students in relating with the college community and mounting the visibility of mixed people in higher education (King, 2008).

Other recommendations for higher education administrators are to support mixed-race faculty and staff in any efforts they might make to ‘come out’ as multiracial and help increase the visibility of mixed people in higher education campuses and encourage these staff members to become mentors and role models to the mixed-race students (King, 2008), and assign skilled professional staff to deliver services to multiracial students to help lead student leadership in the community (Buckner & Wong, 2008).

According to Wehrly (2003), it is important for mental health providers to attend to the barriers mixed-race individuals face thus we suggest training counseling students to work with mixed-race clients and families to make sure there is no confusion between multicultural counseling and multiracial counseling. The words multicultural and multiracial are not synonymous. Multiculturalism refers to racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity within the demographics of a specific place. A multiracial person refers to an individual who is from different racial heritages.

Moreover, training is essential on developing awareness among mental health providers on the dangers of stereotyping specifically in relation to cultural characteristics not being ascribed based on physical appearance (Wehrly, 2003). One strategy found is the Jacobs’s stages. The stages imply that parents should assist in an accurate label for the mixed-race child. Counselors can assist interracial families in understanding self labeling so that the parents can prepare the child to answer the question “what are you?”

when is asked (Wehrly, 2003). Self labeling is used by multiracial individuals who choose to create their own racial label. For instance, when the famous golfer, Tiger Woods, was asked by the media “what are you” he responded by choosing a self labeling term “Cablinasian” (Talbot, 2008). Tiger Woods created this term to describe his heritage: Caucasian, Black, American-Indian, and Asian.

Our reactions to the findings in our research are influenced by our personal life. We are both in an interracial marriage thus will possibly bare mixed-race children. The strategy we both like is self labeling to assist the mixed-race child in acquiring a multiracial label at an early age. This strategy supports interracial families and encourages them to celebrate their multiracial identity. Furthermore, we strongly recommend further research on the multiracial population in given that few resources are currently offered in training student affairs administrators (Renn & Shang, 2008) and mental health providers (Wehrly, 2003).

Concluding Remarks

Due to the significant increase of the multiracial population in America since 1967, there is an interest in multiracial individuals. This interest is because of the shifting boundaries of racial categories where the assumption was to be fixed and the “political interest for the size and composition of minority groups in America” (Roth, 2005, p. 35). In addition, the interest perhaps began when, for the first time, the 2000 census allowed Americans to mark two or more racial categories to classify their race.

The findings in this research led to the conclusion that multiracial students face several barriers during their college years yet, there are interventions higher education institutions and mental health providers can follow to break these barriers. Student affairs educators, faculty, and counselors can assist in spreading the awareness of multiracial issues in their college community and professional environment. It is necessary for multiracial students to embrace diversity in their social development.

We recommend further research on the relationship between multiracial students’ college completion rates and visibility of multiracial faculty and staff on college campuses. We would like to know if visibility of multiracial faculty and staff effects multiracial student college completion. It was a pleasure to conduct research on the barriers multiracial students face and how we as higher education educators and future mental health providers can break these barriers. We plan to continue researching and developing models for multiracial issues in the community we serve.

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