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A Call to Community: Some Thoughts for Student Affairs about Identity and Diversity

BY JASON LAKER

I believe we live in a time when people generally are socialized to be jaded, suspicious, fearful, and fading in their ability to engage with each other in meaningful ways to grapple with societal challenges and honest differences of opinion or worldview. Young people are particularly affected by this problem, because of their limited life experience and also because they do not recall a time when things were different. I also believe that this generation has been let down by adult leaders in unprecedented ways—and accountability is fleeting in this regard.

Yet, my experience has been that our students are fundamentally hopeful and their innate talents provide incredible capacity to envisage and pursue a better way to form diverse meaningful relationships and to practice deliberative democratic principles.

As Student Affairs practitioners, we should do all we can to provide support and encouragement for our students to discuss and explore difficult issues of identity.

I like to read material about community, democracy, identity, and the like—which I find helpful both personally and professionally. One such magazine, Utne Reader, has a passage in its most recent issue that caught my attention:

> "Contemporary fear throws wedges between us. This isolation, in turn, renders the public ever more fearful. What's more, media outlets, politicians, and businesses have all learned to capitalize on this distinctly modern sense of dread, and thus profit from finding ways to cultivate it. Until we find a way to resist fear, we'll live at the mercy of these emotional entrepreneurs—and in doing so, be party to the personal, cultural, and political consequences."
> (Jan-Feb, 2009, p. 37).

This passage resonates with me, because it frames the problem and the current situation so eloquently. With regard to social identity issues on our campuses, I have found discourses to be variously antagonistic, divisive, accusatory, tentative, reductionist, and/or avoidant. I have observed that people are at least as likely to develop an "anti-someone" Facebook group; file an official complaint; or send a heated email or letter to an editor to denounce a person or group than they are to seek out the person or group for a civil discussion toward resolution. There are all too many examples of this dynamic on our campuses.

It is difficult to cite one reason why things are as they are. One factor may be the difficulty people often have with overt expressions of identity, as if it somehow inherently interferes with a sense of shared community. I have certainly observed differences in identity expression and experiences between majority and minority groups. These differences involve the majority not being consciously aware of a salient identity (for instance, Caucasian people don't often think about their race; or men don't often think about themselves in terms of gender) and the minority being viscerally aware of one—and both groups seeing each other as different, and problematic. In my view and experience, honest and respectful dialogue about these matters often begins nervously but can become interesting, fun, educational, restorative, and liberating.

I also think the phrase, "campus climate," is very much about the standing permission in a place for people to express their identities, and see their identities represented, without being marginalized or diminished, and without being essentially told they are incorrect, intruding, or irrelevant. This does not happen by accident. It happens when there is a critical mass of efforts to stimulate and support such engagement and representation within and beyond the classrooms.

One of the complexities of working on subjects of diversity and inclusion is that one's efforts sometimes elicit accusations that we are stifling freedom of speech and/or expression. There have been some provocative incidents on several campuses, such as barring "Pro-Life" student groups from being chartered (something with which I personally disagree). The public is concerned about the state of free expression and whether post-secondary institutions are acting to stifle free speech, and/or whether students are trying to do so with each other. For instance, I recall a student leader asking me to intervene when a particular religio-cultural group was driving around campus on opening day with loud cultural music playing from their vehicle and banners representing their organization/identity. While there was no disputing that their purpose was to express welcome to new students—especially those of their particular identity, the student leader was concerned that this would inherently make another particular group feel uncomfortable. I found this to be a curious assumption, and said so.

A second example, also pertaining to expression, happened when I was stopped on a campus where I worked, by some students who objected to the use of a particular term (one which they believed belonged to their culture) by another group on a poster. In this case, they wanted me to require the other group to remove the term or take down the poster. In both of these examples, I puzzled aloud why they felt I should or could interfere with the free speech of the other party. I have had several such experiences over the years with different people and groups; and have observed very profound struggle among individuals and groups in this regard—even to the point of people screaming at, pushing, and/or threatening to sue one another—and more "anti" Facebook groups than I care to know about. I have also observed an implicit expectation that one should be free of discomfort—something that I see as nuanced from Human Rights questions and certainly more dangerous to freedom of speech and expression and to education.

University campuses can be dynamic and highly intellectual places. This is worthy of celebration, and I certainly enjoy it—but the "shadow side" to significant intellect is difficulty with handling and expression of emotion. Indeed, our Counselling Centres are challenged by the volume of depression and anxiety related concerns among student clients—especially with regard to issues of identity; and associated symptoms of alcohol abuse, disordered eating, and other self-destructive behaviours are of great concern. The point of raising this is that identity is socially constructed and deeply personal, which by definition involves and requires interactions between people and

groups. To the extent that the interactions are confined by fear-based avoidance/tentativeness; or limited solely to intellectual explanations, analysis, and especially critique without concomitant emotional and authentic presence and engagement between people, we will be unable to fully grow and develop our identities or to learn to effectively work and live with difference. For many students, support and encouragement to step outside the comfort (e.g. "known") zone is necessary—and good teachers, whether inside or outside the classroom, know and do this in their work. My experience has been that most students will run with, and model it once they get started.

It is thus distressing, though not surprising, to me that in the wake of various conflicts people routinely call for people other than themselves to act, such as for elected leaders or administrators to intervene or develop new regulatory or prosecutorial policies. I do not believe we are in short supply of such things—but I do believe we are in short supply of alternatives. Indeed, this particular subject matter has become more complex, divisive, threatening to individual and institutional reputations, and even litigious—especially since the advent of immediate communications technologies and their threats to subvert real-time, in-person discussions. People over 35 years of age, such as myself and most faculty and staff, have not experienced university in the same way the current generation experiences it. Personally, I didn't have email, the Web, Facebook, cell phones, IPods, or text messaging during my undergraduate years. If I had something to say to another person, I had to pick up the phone, write a letter, or go find them. Such methods allow for the possibility of at least some critical reflection and a "cooling off period" before dialing, mailing, or speaking—and this sort of engagement, especially face-to-face, is more personal and thus stimulates some human consideration before saying something out of anger.

Today, we objectify each other in new ways, sending or posting terse and accusatory messages in haste. The stakes are profound, since there are records of these communications that cannot generally be deleted or modified (even if the parties involved have settled their dispute). Employers readily admit that they conduct web searches about their job candidates, as does the media when covering political candidates, and so forth. Given the developmental journey of a young person, we are in great need for places and times when people can explore their tentative questions and ideas about deeply personal social issues without a paralyzing fear of being "wrong" (a particularly visceral pressure in the competitive environment of a university) or "on the record" that prevents even trying to speak. We also need opportunities for people to recapture the art of conversation and negotiation. These are critical skills for sustaining relationships, raising children, leadership, team effectiveness, and even democracy itself. We should invite and support conversations that allow people to learn about themselves and others and to develop such skills, in person, with goodwill and fundamental respect. People always have the choice to take it or leave it, but I believe they do need it. And the literature suggests they will get more from their education if they partake.

It is my belief that Student Affairs practitioners are in a unique position to support students in their development of the skills discussed here—skills that foster community, and deep commitments to democratic principles enacted civilly and inclusively. This is the key to questions of campus climate…but it is not easy or without risk. I am reminded of a quote by Mahatma Gandhi: "Whatever you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it."

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