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Winter January 1, 2015

**Rethinking student involvement and engagement:  
Cultivating culturally relevant and responsive  
contexts for campus participation**

Samuel D Museus

Varaxy Yi



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# Rethinking Student Involvement AND Engagement

## Cultivating Culturally Relevant and Responsive Contexts for Campus Participation

SAMUEL D. MUSEUS AND VARAXY YI

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*A Chinese American college student named Maya, at a large rural predominantly White research university, was enrolled in an introductory American literature course during her first semester in college. During the first class session of the semester, she noticed that almost all of the authors of assigned readings were White and most of them were men. After class, she scheduled a meeting with the White female faculty member who was teaching the course. When Maya asked the instructor if they could read some Asian American authors in class, the faculty member responded by saying, "That's what Asian Studies is for." The faculty member was apparently unaware that Asian Studies on this campus was actually East Asian Studies and did not include curricula focused on Asian American experiences. The interaction left Maya invalidated and frustrated, and led to her contemplating dropping the course.*

*A Chicano undergraduate named Mason, who was majoring in biology at a mid-sized public urban research university, took an ethnic studies course that focused on race and racism in American society during his first year. Over the course of the semester, he scheduled a couple of meetings with the instructor, during which they engaged in conversations about the student's experiences growing up Chicano and navigating racist environments, how those experiences shaped his aspirations, and his potential involvement in an undergraduate research project focused on health disparities in Latino/a communities. These experiences, combined with Mason's growing recognition that his biology courses were not as engaging as he had hoped, led him to develop a growing interest in ethnic studies and begin considering a major change.*

These two scenarios are grounded in actual undergraduate experiences. We share these two real-life stories because their juxtaposition can stimulate valuable

thought and discourse around student involvement and engagement. Together they illuminate how a single type of student involvement or engagement in college—interactions with a faculty member—can be experienced within different types of environments, vary significantly in the extent to which it is relevant to students' identities, and generate very different outcomes.

In the first vignette, Maya encounters a situation in which she is excluded from the curriculum of a liberal arts course. This exclusion sent a message to Maya that she is not relevant to the course, while the curriculum is not relevant to Maya's ethnic community, identity, or life. Equally important, because the course was focused on "American" literature and did not include Asian American voices, it sent a message that Maya and her community were irrelevant to the evolution of American thought. In addition, Maya's interactions with the faculty member who was teaching the course confirmed these messages and evoked feelings of invalidation. Furthermore, through her remarks, the faculty member essentialized Asians and Asian Americans into one homogenous group, diminishing the significance of Maya's identity as an American and otherizing Asian Americans as foreigners.

The second scenario paints a very different picture: Mason was enrolled in a course focused on how the voices of people of color are marginalized. Through the course, Mason connected with an instructor who engaged him in conversations that validated his experiences, connected the curriculum of the course to those experiences, and linked those experiences to opportunities to engage in educationally meaningful activities that are aimed at improving lives within his own community. These encounters made Mason realize that he can be involved in environments that are relevant, validate his experiences, and serve his communities.

While an analysis of the stories above underscores the importance of intentionally constructing involvement and engagement opportunities in culturally relevant and responsive ways, research and discourse on involvement and engagement are often constructed in de-racialized and acultural ways. In this chapter, we explore how postsecondary educators can more meaningfully construct culturally relevant and responsive involvement and engagement activities that increase diverse students' interest in the curriculum and enhance students' satisfaction with courses, as well as the benefits that accrue from them. We utilize the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model as a framework to reexamine how the environment may shape involvement activities (Museus, 2014). Then, we take a closer look at how the CECE model can be employed to assist educators in understanding how to cultivate specific involvement and engagement opportunities that are characterized by the culturally relevant and culturally responsive elements of the model. Finally, we conclude with some recommendations for educators who seek to engage in campus-wide transformation to cultivate culturally engaging environments across their respective institutions.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF COLLEGE STUDENT INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

Over the last three decades, higher education research and discourse on student success has generated valuable insights regarding how educators can facilitate behaviors that contribute to student learning, persistence, and degree completion. The concepts of student integration, involvement, and engagement have largely driven this research and discourse (Astin, 1984, 1999; Kuh, 2001, 2003, 2009; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). We focus on the concepts of student involvement and engagement herein, because they are currently two of the most widely utilized concepts in efforts to assess and increase student success.

Astin (1984) first introduced the theory of student involvement, which emphasized both the "quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" (p. 528). Involvement theory hypothesizes that students' levels of involvement in college are associated with greater levels of success. Activities in which students invest physical and psychological energy may include, but are not limited to, academic work, extracurricular participation, and interactions with faculty and staff. Thus, involved students are those who spend time studying, participate in student organizations, spend time on campus, and participate in frequent interactions with faculty and students on campus. On the other hand, uninvolved students neglect their studies, do not participate in student organizations, and do not interact with faculty and other students. Finally, involvement theory acknowledges that student time and energy are finite resources, which is a reality that can inform the creation of activities that increase student involvement and, thus, college success.

Kuh (2001, 2003, 2009) spearheaded the development of the concept of student engagement, which focuses on the time and energy students spend engaging in specific educationally purposeful activities and what institutions do to induce such participation. The original five engagement benchmarks outlined by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2014) from 2000 to 2012 include the following:

1. *Level of academic challenge* measures how institutions challenge the intellectual and creative work of students considered central to student learning and collegiate quality. Academic challenge is measured as the time spent preparing for class, the quantity of assigned books and written papers for class, and whether there is an emphasis on the depth of learning.
2. *Active and collaborative learning* considers that students learn more when intensely involved in their education. Active and collaborative learning is measured by questions related to the extent of students' class participation,

- asking questions or contributing to class discussions, tutoring, and involvement with community-based projects.
3. *Student-faculty interaction* focuses on the opportunities that encourage students to make connections with faculty. Student-faculty interactions are measured by how often students discuss grades or assignments with instructors, discuss career plans, work with faculty on activities outside of coursework, and receive prompt feedback.
  4. *Enriching educational experiences* considers the complementary learning opportunities inside and outside of the classroom. Enriching educational experiences are measured by questions that ask students about the extent of interactions they have had with students from different backgrounds; the extent to which they have had discussions with others who have differing religious, political opinions, and values; and their participation in activities such as study abroad, internships, and community service, among others.
  5. *Supportive campus environment* refers to the extent to which the campus encourages students to perform better, experience increased satisfaction with their campus, and to engage in social relations among different groups. The supportive campus environment is measured through perceptions of students that the campus assists in helping them succeed academically and socially as well as the quality of relationships students have with student faculty members, and administrative personnel.

In 2013, NSSE (2014) revised the aforementioned benchmarks to delineate ten engagement indicators grouped under four themes:

1. *Academic challenge* consists of four indicators: higher-order learning, reflective and integrative learning, learning strategies, and quantitative reasoning.
2. *Learning with peers* consists of two indicators: collaborative learning and discussions with diverse others.
3. *Experiences with faculty* consists of two indicators: student-faculty interactions and effective teaching practices.
4. *Campus environment* consists of two indicators: quality of interactions and supportive environment.

Moreover, the NSSE outlines six types of high-impact practices that increase engagement and success in college. These high-impact practices include the following:

- Learning communities
- Courses with community-based projects (e.g., service learning)
- Research project work with faculty members

- Internships, co-ops, field experiences, student teaching, and clinical placements
- Study abroad
- Culminating senior projects (e.g., capstone courses, senior projects, theses, comprehensive exams, and portfolios)

Like the theory of student involvement, the concept of student engagement acknowledges that the activities in which students participate consist of both quantitative and qualitative elements. Regarding quantity, both frameworks underscore the importance of the *extent* to which students participate in campus activities. With regard to quality, both concepts highlight the value of student participating in specific *types* of activities on campus. In addition, both the original *supportive environments* engagement benchmark and new *campus environments* engagement indicator explicitly focus on measuring the quality of students' interactions with agents on campus and their perceptions of the level of support in the campus environment.

The concepts of student involvement and engagement have made significant contributions to current levels of understanding regarding how to improve students' experiences and outcomes. However, while these frameworks have advanced knowledge of how to serve students, they have also been critiqued for their limitations in understanding and explaining the experiences and outcomes of racially diverse college students. It has been noted, for example, that the concept of student involvement is *self-deterministic*, in that it underscores the role of students in determining their own college success while insufficiently acknowledging the role of institutions in facilitating that success (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). And scholars have critiqued research utilizing the concept of student engagement for not giving adequate attention to the role that culture plays in shaping racial and ethnic minority students' connections to their institutions (Dowd, Sawatsky, & Korn, 2011). They have underscored the need for new, more culturally relevant and responsive frameworks to assess, understand, and maximize students' connections to their institutions and success. We focus on one such model in the following section.

## THE CULTURALLY ENGAGING CAMPUS ENVIRONMENTS (CECE) MODEL OF COLLEGE SUCCESS

Over the last few decades, higher education researchers have shed considerable light on the types of environments that hinder or facilitate success among diverse populations (Guiffrida, 2003, 2005; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Jun & Tierney, 1999; Museus, 2011; Museus & Neville, 2012; Museus & Quayle, 2009; Rendón, 1994; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). One

strand of this research suggests that campus environments characterized by hostility, prejudice, and discrimination are negatively associated with student outcomes (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus, Nichols, & Lamert, 2008). Another body of scholarship illuminates how campus environments that are characterized by cultural relevance and responsiveness contribute to the conditions for diverse populations to thrive (Guiffrida, 2003, 2005; Jun & Tierney, 1999; Museus, 2011; Museus & Neville, 2012; Museus & Quayle, 2009; Rendón, 1994; Rendón et al., 2000). Museus (2014) used this research in conjunction with more than 100 qualitative interviews to construct the CECE model of college success, which synthesizes the types of campus environments that allow diverse populations to thrive and can be used to consider the ways in which campuses can construct involvement opportunities that are more likely to maximize success among diverse undergraduate student bodies.

The CECE model suggests that external influences (e.g., financial factors, employment, and family influences) and precollege characteristics (e.g., demographics and precollege academic preparation) partially shape individual influences (e.g., sense of belonging, academic predispositions, and academic performance) and college success outcomes (e.g., learning, satisfaction, persistence, and degree completion; Museus, 2014). The focal point of the CECE framework emphasizes that culturally engaging campus environments are associated with more positive individual factors (e.g., greater sense of belonging, more positive academic dispositions, and better academic performance). Finally, the model posits that both the existence of culturally engaging campus environments and individual factors are related to greater likelihood of success (e.g., learning, satisfaction, persistence, and degree completion).

The CECE model hypothesizes that there are nine indicators of culturally engaging campus environments, which can be separated into two subgroups of *cultural relevance* and *cultural responsiveness*. The first five indicators focus on the ways that campus environments are relevant to the cultural backgrounds and communities of diverse college students:

1. *Cultural familiarity* is the extent to which college students have opportunities to physically connect with faculty, staff, and peers who share and understand their backgrounds and experiences.
2. *Culturally relevant knowledge* refers to opportunities for students to learn and exchange knowledge about their own cultures and communities of origin.
3. *Cultural community service* refers to the extent to which students have opportunities to give back to and positively transform their communities.
4. *Meaningful cross-cultural engagement* involves students in positive and purposeful interactions with peers from diverse backgrounds.

5. *Culturally validating environments* refer to environments that validate students' cultural knowledge, backgrounds, and identities.

The remaining four indicators focus on the ways in which campus environments respond to the cultural norms and needs of diverse students:

6. *Collectivist cultural orientations* are cultural values that encourage collaboration and mutual success, rather than individualism and competition, on campus.
7. *Humanized educational environments* are characterized by institutional agents who care about, are committed to, and who develop meaningful relationships with students.
8. *Proactive philosophies* drive the practice of institutional agents who go above and beyond providing information, opportunities, and support to ensure that students have access to that information, opportunities, and support.
9. *Holistic support* is characterized by the extent to which postsecondary institutions provide students with access to at least one faculty and staff member who those students trust to provide the information and offer the assistance that they need, or connect them with a source of support who will provide that information or assistance.

The CECE indicators outlined above can be used to rethink the way academic and student affairs units are structured on college campuses, how curricula and educational programs and practices are delivered across institutions, and the ways in which individual faculty and staff cultivate relationships and interactions with students on their respective campuses. Therefore, the CECE indicators can also be utilized in conjunction with involvement and engagement frameworks to better understand how college educators can structure environments that are conducive to the types of involvement and engagement opportunities that will lead to positive experiences for diverse students, increase those students' interest in becoming more engaged, and generate positive outcomes among those undergraduates.

Evidence suggests that students' access to culturally engaging environments is associated with stronger connections to their respective campuses, greater sense of belonging, more positive academic self-efficacy, and higher levels of academic motivation in higher education (Museus, 2014; Museus & Smith, in press). Consequently, we believe that postsecondary educators who utilize the CECE indicators to (re)think and (re)construct involvement and engagement opportunities on their campuses will witness increased levels of student involvement and engagement, more positive educational experiences among students, and improvements in diverse students' academic outcomes. In the next section, we discuss how educators can begin to engage in such (re)thinking and (re)structuring toward more culturally relevant and responsive involvement and engagement opportunities.

## RETHINKING COLLEGE STUDENT INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

The first five CECE indicators outlined above—the indicators of cultural relevance—encourage the consideration and integration of the cultural backgrounds and identities of the student in the development of spaces, programs, practices, and activities that are designed to foster involvement or engagement on college campuses. For example, engaging students in activities that encourage them to give back to their communities via community service or problem-based research opportunities can simultaneously strengthen both students' connections to their respective campuses and cultural communities. Therefore, college educators should intentionally cultivate spaces, programs, practices, and activities that provide students with opportunities to connect with people from similar cultural backgrounds, engage the experiential knowledge of the communities from which participating students come in meaningful ways, provide mechanisms for students to give back to their respective cultural communities, facilitate positive and meaningful cross-cultural interactions, and send positive messages to participating students that the experience and knowledge of their communities are valued. Educators interested in creating an involvement or engagement opportunity and who want to do so in a culturally relevant way should consider the following questions:

- Which cultural groups will be involved in this space or program (and the activities that will transpire within them)? Is an appreciation for the different cultural groups that will be represented in this space or program made explicit?
- Will participants be able to connect with peers from similar cultural backgrounds via this space or program?
- Are the voices and knowledge of members of their respective cultural communities incorporated into this space or program? Will students from each of these groups be able to learn about their own cultural communities or share their own experiences as members of their respective communities?
- Will this involvement or engagement opportunity provide tools for participating students to positively impact their own cultural communities? Is this made explicit to participants?
- Does this opportunity provide participating students with the space to engage in meaningful interactions that are aimed at solving real-world problems with students who are different from them?

The last four CECE indicators can stimulate consideration of how college educators can create involvement and engagement opportunities in ways that are responsive to the cultural norms and needs of diverse populations. For example,

many students of color come from collectivist-oriented families and communities and face increased challenges in individualistic and competitive campus environments. Therefore, rather than encouraging competition, educators should emphasize collaboration and mutual success in the cultivation of campus spaces, programs, practices, and activities. Many students of color also come from communities that place heavy emphasis on relationships, proactively engage and welcome outsiders, and do not possess high levels of knowledge about how to navigate the higher education system; thus, educators should seek to structure involvement opportunities around the pursuit of mutual goals and provide proactive and holistic support to ensure that students are aware of the wide array of involvement and engagement opportunities on their campuses and are likely to encounter spaces where they will develop meaningful connections with agents across their campuses. College educators seeking to cultivate more culturally responsive involvement opportunities should consider the following questions:

- Does this space or program encourage collaboration toward a common goal?
- Is the space or program structured so that participants will spend prolonged engagement with specific faculty, staff, or peers?
- Have sufficient efforts been made to ensure that all potential participants have acquired information about the space or program? Have they been given sufficient information for forming their own perspectives about what the experience in this program will be like and how they will benefit from it?
- Have program planners sent more than an email to potential participants?
- Have potential participants been encouraged or pressured to engage by someone they know?

These types of questions can help college educators begin the process of rethinking how they can make their programming and practices more culturally relevant and responsive. Equally important to integration of cultural relevance and responsiveness into specific involvement and engagement activities, however, is engaging in transformation efforts that can lead to more culturally engaging campus environments across institutions.

## PURSuing SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATION AND CREATING MORE INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR STUDENT INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

As previously mentioned, conversations around college student involvement and engagement often focus on facilitating particular types of behaviors, but often do not adequately consider how opportunities to become involved or engaged in those

behaviors can be structured in culturally relevant or responsive ways to maximize the positive outcomes experienced by participants. In the section above, we offered some recommendations for postsecondary educators who seek to create more culturally relevant and responsive involvement or engagement opportunities to advance such goals. Yet, college educators should also construct long-term visions to cultivate cultures that drive the type of thinking illuminated above across the academic and student affairs units on their campuses, so that faculty and staff are compelled to more automatically integrate cultural relevance and responsiveness into their work. To begin bending the cultures of their respective colleges, departments, programs, and offices toward greater cultural relevance and responsiveness, postsecondary educators should consider engaging in holistic transformation efforts that include the following elements.

### Focus on Cultural and Structural Transformation

First, colleges and universities should focus their energies on transforming the cultures and structures of their campuses to create more culturally relevant and responsive environments across their institutions. Oftentimes, targeted diversity, retention, and support initiatives that are designed to support marginalized populations are created as isolated efforts. The CECE model is intended to prompt institutional leaders and college educators to think more deeply about how they can (re)shape the cultures of their academic departments, student affairs units, and other support programs and practices so that they reflect the cultural communities of their students. The framework stimulates educators to (re)envision how their campus systems might be redesigned to create more collectivist, humanized, proactive, and holistic structures. This (re)envisioning is necessary for educators to pursue deep and pervasive institutional transformation to create more culturally engaging campus environments.

### Coalition Building and Creating Networks

Second, those who seek to (re)shape the cultures and structures on their campuses must engage the voices and perspectives of all stakeholders internal and external to their organization—including executive administrators, faculty and staff members, college students, and community organizations and members. Engaging these voices can help facilitate the development of coalitions and networks that can drive the reculturing and restructuring mentioned above. The CECE model is one framework that can provide a centerpiece for conversations among these various constituents because it provides a common vision toward which transformation efforts can be aimed. As such, the model has the potential to

not only transform practices and environments for students but also to positively change relationships among institutional members who can coalesce around a common vision.

Moreover, while individual departments or programs might easily integrate some CECE indicators into their work and find it challenging to adopt others, developing networks across the institution can help these units leverage other resources in their broader campus networks to address their own limitations and advance an agenda aimed at cultivating more culturally engaging campus environments. For example, some academic advising units might be more equipped to provide humanized and proactive support while not having sufficient time and resources to provide holistic support. However, they can serve as conduits to other departments and programs on campus by (1) ensuring that they have strong relationships and partnerships with counseling services, academic departments, financial aid offices, and the like; and (2) making concerted efforts to meaningfully connect students who need support that they cannot provide with the agents who work within the appropriate support offices. Such efforts require that units break down silos and construct more collaborative and integrated support systems.

### Creating Space for Collective Analysis and Strategic Planning

As mentioned, some of the CECE indicators might be more easily integrated into the work of some units than others. Identifying how some CECE indicators might be more effectively incorporated into the practice of a unit through short-term goals and how others might be integrated through long-term transformation initiatives can inform more effective and efficient transformation planning and efforts. For this strategic planning to occur, however, campuses must provide space for educators to engage in deeper analysis and reflection to understand how to effectively cultivate culturally engaging campus environments in seemingly incompatible spaces via long-term efforts. In such spaces, educators can work collectively to figure out how to ensure that all incoming students on large campuses are able to find spaces of cultural familiarity, make an engineering curriculum more culturally relevant, or restructure entire advising systems to ensure that all students have access to holistic support.

It is important to clarify that, while it might be easy for educators to prematurely conclude that the integration of some CECE indicators into their work is too difficult, such assumptions can be misleading, self-defeating, and hinder positive transformation efforts; for example, while it might be easy to imagine how cultural familiarity, culturally relevant knowledge, and cultural community service can be integrated into social science courses, many would not intuitively conclude

that such indicators could be easily incorporated into math or science curricula. Nevertheless, while educators might teach courses in which the curricular content is not centered on issues of culture and diversity, such as math and science, it is certainly possible for them to construct more culturally relevant and culturally responsive environments in the classroom (Armstrong, 2011). Indeed, educators around the nation are already making such courses more culturally relevant through the integration of culturally diverse problems, examples, and test questions that provide support for this notion.

### Nurturing and Scaling Up Models of Success

There are salient examples of spaces or programs that perpetuate culturally engaging campus environments on many college and university campuses. At institutions in which such programs do exist, campus leaders should make an effort to nurture, leverage, and make more visible those units so that other departments and programs can learn from them. Kezar (2012) notes that many leaders across campus who have been engaged in work to better serve diverse populations for many years have often gone unrecognized. Kezar also asserts that the work of leaders is often to scale up the advances made in particular units by grassroots efforts across campuses in order to advance institutional transformation and equity efforts. Identifying units that have been particularly effective at cultivating culturally engaging campus environments, nurturing them to maximize their impact, and scaling their efforts up across campuses can be invaluable in efforts to create more systemic change.

### Conducting Assessment and Continuous Learning

Finally, using assessment tools to analyze and better understand both larger campuses and specific units across institutions can reveal where environments that allow diverse populations to thrive exist, as well as opportunities for the implementation of the CECE model to generate more culturally engaging environments. Indeed, a clear understanding of the current environment and how it shapes the experiences of all students should inform the strategic planning and pursuit of long-term transformation efforts. The National CECE survey, which will be launched in 2015, provides one instrument that can be effectively used to measure, assess, and understand how well institutions are cultivating culturally relevant and responsive campus environments. Such tools can be used to conduct continuous assessments, which are critical to ensuring that campuses are utilizing evidence-based decision making as they advance their efforts to create more culturally engaging campus environments across their institutions.

## CONCLUSION

The intent of this chapter is to begin shifting the discourse around student involvement and engagement in a more culturally conscious direction. While the concepts of involvement and engagement are invaluable and serve as the foundation for critical efforts to create conditions for students to thrive across the nation, we argue herein that educators who wish to foster environments that induce the participation of diverse populations and allow those students to thrive must begin thinking intentionally about how to make those environments more culturally relevant and responsive. If college educators can rethink college student involvement and engagement in these ways, higher education can re-envision the ways in which institutions are structured, rethink how postsecondary education is delivered, and advance the transformation toward more inclusive college campuses in the twenty-first century.

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## CHAPTER TWO

# Multiracial

## Exploring

### Validation

### Epistemology

AMANDA SUNI

The multiracial population is one of the fastest growing in the United States. In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 2.9% of the population (approximately 9 million) self-identified as multiracial. From the 2000 U.S. Census data (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009), 7.5% of those multiracial individuals who were aged 18 and over marked identification with two or more races (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). The growth within the multiracial population is also likely to increase as more students pursue higher education because many in this population are developing multiracial identity development, which is a process of becoming racially and ethnically self-identified. Additionally, the accentuation of multiracial students' opportunities to engage in higher education is also likely to increase.

Although the scholarship around multiracial identity development in the last 10 years (e.g., see Kellogg & Museus, 2012), there is still a need for expansion, particularly in the area of student involvement and academic achievement. The goal of this chapter is to push the conceptual model. Throughout the chapter, we will explore the experiences of individuals who have two or more