

Chapter 4

Diversity in Social and Academic Relationships

ABSTRACT

College buffers the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Students are thrust into a world of academic and social demands that can seem far removed from their earlier lives. First impressions are important as they set the tone for the next two or four years on campus. In this chapter, the university experiences of the interviewees are chronicled with a focus on diversity narratives and how they formed and changed over time. Research is introduced that emphasizes areas such as ethnic stereotypes and marginalization, the model minority myth, gender awareness, and personal sense of belonging. As such, the opinions, struggles, and hopes of these five students may be indicative of greater norms within broader college settings.

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INTRODUCTION

I was the first in my family to go to a four-year university. Once I came here, I started to realize that college is a little bit more than just getting an education but making social connections, growing spiritually, being willing to take internships and opportunities to go abroad. And so once I got a small taste of that, I realized “Wow,” I really didn’t know there was so much opportunity out there as opposed to what I’ve always known. Given that, at times, it’s difficult to translate this experience over to my family. They’re very excited for me but when I go back home, that’s my real life reality there. And they are supportive of me, but as a first generation student, it’s been learning how to balance the two different lifestyles that I have been embedded into. ~Denise

The college experience is unlike any other. It is a rite of passage in which students enter as adolescents and leave as adults. Moving away from home – often for the first time – is both frightening and exhilarating as new opportunities abound at every turn. Denise, whose video narrative opens this chapter, tells of her journey as a first generation student and the friction that occurs when an old tradition collides with a new one. Her family was pressured to buy into the value of higher education, and the price tag alone surely made it a difficult process. This created a distinct dichotomy; a narrative split into two camps in which part of Denise’s life was spent taking in the newness of college while knowing that at home, her past was vital and loomed largely. Family members braced for unknown changes in the four years ahead, asking questions like “Will she continue to honor our cultural heritage? Will she still have time for us after it’s all over?” Yet the unique nature of university life can make all students – even those with a lineage of parents and grandparents who attended before them – think of themselves as first to take this plunge.

The interplay of academia and social interactions breeds stories that shape the identities of those who attend two- and four-year institutions. In terms of Erikson’s psychosocial framework, individuals enter the Intimacy vs. Isolation stage at around twenty years old, bringing social connections into renewed focus (Erikson, 1980). Even prior to this stage, it’s important to point out that students endured the challenge of developing their *Identity vs. Role Confusion* in their formative high school years, and those challenges can continue to impact their new task of pursuing relationships in college. Surrounded by persons of similar age and appearance, some students struggle

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