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Validating Students' Diverse Identities

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CHAPTER 7.

VALIDATING STUDENTS' DIVERSE IDENTITIES

ERIN HUGHES

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Recognizing and appreciating students' identities is important for learning and feelings of academic empowerment.
- The ways in which we can amplify students feeling validated is by being responsive to their needs and respecting who they are both inside and outside the classroom.
- The ways students may feel invalidated are by perpetuating the power dynamics between student and teacher, disregarding students' mental health, and engaging in inflexible standards.
- Students may feel more able to take on the difficulties of academia when we help them take a strengths-based approach to who they are.

Oftentimes, when we think about a course, the first things that come to mind are the syllabi, the specific projects, what topics to cover, and what format to teach in. While the topics and course names may change, what most drives the class is the make-up of the students. With each class and each cohort of students, how we should approach topics, what discussions take place, and so much more is dependent on the students in our classes. Students bring to class their diverse identities, experiences, beliefs, and backgrounds. These different aspects to their identity often influence the way they interpret material, just how our own identities influence the way we understand and choose the material as well. Importantly, as graduate student instructors (GSIs), we should be mindful to appreciate and validate the diverse identities students are bringing to the classroom to create an inclusive environment for our students. While that last statement applies to everyone, we know

academia has not always been, and continues to not always be, a safe space for all students (Dupree & Boykin, 2021; Llorens et al., 2021). Having their identity invalidated can have deleterious effects on students. Therefore, it is important as GSIs to learn what identities make our students who they are and how we can validate those identities.

This chapter discusses the ways in which students have felt validated and invalidated at the university by their GSIs, professors, and the university at large. Further, we dive into students' identities and the ways in which they believe those identities influence their current and future academic endeavors. Through the course of a quarter at Northwestern University, I engaged in a teaching-as-research project through Northwestern's Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching. The goal of my research was to understand how students understood their varying identities relating to their academics, how students can feel empowered academically, and in what ways we, as graduate students, as well as others in the university, have helped or hindered students.

BACKGROUND

Students come into college with a varying array of identities. Part of what makes up a person's identity is the self-concept, anything they would consider "me" or "mine" (James, 1890; McConnell, 2011). One's self-concept could include their characteristics (e.g., hard-working), roles (e.g., parent), physical attributes (e.g., red hair), and/or identities (e.g., woman). Ultimately, the self-concept is a stable overview of who one believes themselves to be. The self-concept is not only one's conceptualization of who they are, but it is influenced by one's environment as well as influences the way one interprets the world (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018). Thus, the self-concept has an important role in how one moves through the world, including how our students experience academia (e.g., Williams, 2019).

The self-concept can be thought of as being made up of different self-aspects or roles that each have associated attributes (McConnell, 2011). Deemed the multiple self-aspects framework, the idea is that based on one's current situation/environment, different aspects of the self may become "activated" and thus influence one's current perceptions, goals, and attributes. For undergraduates, the role of being a student is often a more salient self-aspect. According to the multiple self-aspects framework, when a role is activated (e.g., student), then attributes associated with that role (e.g., hard-working) as well as goals (e.g., to do well) will also be activated. This may suggest then that during students' time in class or at the university, when their student identity is salient, the students will be thinking about their goals and how who they are can help achieve those goals. To this end, the current study asked students to contemplate how aspects of their identity could be advantageous to their academic endeavors. While certain characteristics/roles have been traditionally valued in the academic space, it has also been quite clear that not all aspects of students have been treated the same (Dupree & Boykin, 2021). Thus, it is imperative for us as GSIs to know how best to help students feel those aspects of their self are validated. One of the ways we can do this is by learning about their identities and empowering them to consider how those aspects are a strength within academia.

THE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

While there has been progress within academia, we still encounter large disparities in the treatment of students with minoritized backgrounds (e.g., Williams, 2019). Thus far, the data on college students imply that discrimination and prejudice within the rest of society manifests within academia as well

(Monroe et al., 2008). This discrimination can be observed in a number of communities, including students of color, gender minorities, students with disabilities, and those in the LGBTQ+ community, to name a few. The prejudice and discrimination enacted within academia have deleterious effects on students' outcomes both academically and emotionally (Williams, 2019).

Research examines what students with minoritized identities mention as certain prejudices and discriminatory practices that they contend with. A too common experience students mention are microaggressions—daily exchanges that seem like subtle or indirect statements or actions but are demeaning towards students with minoritized identities (Williams, 2019). An example of a microaggression would be assuming a student is not American and asking to know where they are from *originally*, signaling the student does not belong in America. College students of color report that microaggressions are the most common form of daily racism they experience (Williams, 2019). These microaggressions contribute to feelings of anxiety, stress, and trauma. Further, students who are part of the LGBTQ+ community also report experiencing microaggressions within their departments, leading to feelings of discomfort and a sense that they must act counter to how they would like (Boustani & Taylor, 2020). These are just a few examples of how students with minoritized identities feel devalued and have aspects of who they are invalidated while at the university.

Ultimately, students with minoritized identities may experience detrimental outcomes due to being invalidated at their university, as invalidation is a form of discrimination. Students who face prejudice and discrimination often feel a sense of anxiety, distress, and lower quality of life at their university in response to repeated experiences of discrimination (Williams, 2019). Further, we observe higher attrition rates for students with minoritized identities both at the undergraduate level and graduate level (Brunsma et al., 2017; Monroe et al., 2008). Some important factors that play into these higher attrition rates of underrepresented students are the systemic biases they face at the university level as well as less mentoring support on a more individual level (Brunsma et al., 2017). While it is difficult as GSIs to make changes at the university level, it is possible to do our part by engaging in interpersonal interactions that validate students and their different identities within our classes.

It is important to recognize and accept students' diverse identities, especially in relation to helping foster positive outcomes (Townsend et al., 2019), which is something we, as GSIs, can engender. One such positive outcome can be feelings of academic empowerment, or students' feelings of being prepared and able to control their academic experiences and outcomes. Being motivated to do well and have control over one's experiences within academia can be due to feeling like one is capable, despite challenges (Lane et al., 2004). According to identity-based motivation theory, one's self-concept includes varying self-aspects that are constructed within one's current environment and result in being motivated to act in accordance with the salient identity (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). This theory specifically notes that people will perceive not only situations but also difficulties based on whichever identity is most salient. Thus, it is imperative to understand how students feel academia considers their identities within the context of their class, as feeling positive about their identity within academia could positively impact their motivations and possibly feelings of empowerment. Further, research suggests that when people do not feel their identity is being validated, it often leads to poorer outcomes, such as reduced psychological well-being (Garr-Schultz & Gardner, 2019). By understanding what behaviors validate versus invalidate students' identities within the context of

academia, we can not only better interact with our students but also prevent doing any emotional or academic harm as well. This drive led to my project on validating students' diverse identities.

TEACHING AS RESEARCH PROJECT

Northwestern University's Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching has a program called the teaching-as-research project, otherwise known as TAR. A TAR project involves utilizing the classroom to engage in research that improves both learning and teaching. Graduate students who conduct a TAR project will develop a research question, implement the study within the class, and analyze and report on the results. As we move to engage in evidence-based research practices, it is helpful to remember that your teaching is a place that can enable you to do research on what works best for your students. This program allowed for me to examine the following questions:

- How does feeling like one's self-aspects aren't traditionally valued in academia relate to academic empowerment?
- How does feeling like one belongs in the university's community relate to feelings of academic empowerment?
- What relates to feeling validated versus invalidated within the university?

The goal of this research was to understand how students' varying aspects relate to their academics, how students can feel academically empowered, and in what ways have we, within the university, helped or hindered students. Overall, the hope was to gain an understanding of how students think about their identities within the context of academia, including the different prejudices that mar our universities.

METHOD

Participants

The students who took part in the study were enrolled in an upper-level psychology course during the winter quarter of 2020, in which I was one of the graduate teaching assistants. There were 136 participants altogether across all the surveys. Students who took part had the following demographics, gender: 78.7% women, 18.4% men, 1.5% nonbinary/third gender, 1.5% not reported; ethnicity¹: 11.0% African-American, Black, African, or Caribbean, 21.3% Asian-American, Asian, or Pacific-Islander, 70.6% European-American, White, Anglo, or Caucasian, 8.8% Hispanic-American, Latino(a), or Chicano(a); year in school: 11.0% first year, 18.4% second year, 35.3% third year, 30.9% fourth year, 1.5% fifth year, 1.5% other, 1.5% not reported, and with an average age of 20.53 years (SD = 1.53, 18 – 28).

Materials

Survey 1

Self-aspect prompt. This prompt asked students to think about their self-aspects and to write in three. This was the prompt, "There are multiple aspects of ourselves that make up who we are. Some

1. Students could select as many ethnicities; thus the percentages add up to over 100%.

of these aspects are core/central to who you are. These aspects would be what you feel truly defines you. We are interested in the aspects of your self-concept that you believe truly make up who you are. These self-aspects can include anything you consider a part of yourself such as an identity (e.g., race, gender, religion), roles (e.g., student), relationships (e.g., daughter), characteristics (e.g., empathetic). Please, in the space below, write in 3 aspects of your self-concept that you consider part of who you are.”

Surveys 2 – 4

Self-concept aspect asset. Participants responded to the following prompt about one of their self-aspects each week. The prompt was, “Please write about how [insert self-aspect] could be an asset in your current academic endeavors or could be an asset in your future plans.”

Self-aspect’s core level. This was a 1-item measure that students responded to for each of their three aspects. The item was, “Please rate how much [insert self-aspect] reflects your core characteristics (aspects that are central to who you are)” on a 1 to 7 scale.

Traditionally valued in academia. This was a 1-item measure that students responded to for each of their three aspects. The item was, “In academia, there are specific self-aspects (identities, characteristics) that have been traditionally valued to the detriment of other aspects. Please rate how much you believe [insert self-aspect] has been traditionally valued by academia” on a 1 to 7 scale.

Survey 5

Academic empowerment (adapted from Townsend et al., 2019). This was a 6-item measure that asked students to report how much they felt they could control how well they did in school (e.g., “I’m certain I can master the skills taught in my classes this year”; $M = 5.64$, $SD = .83$, $\alpha = .81$).

Social and academic fit (adapted from Walton & Cohen, 2007). This was an 8-item measure that asked students to report how much they felt they fit in with both the academic and social community at their university (e.g., “I feel like I fit in with the academic community at Northwestern University”; $M = 5.03$, $SD = .92$, $\alpha = .85$).

Validation prompt. The prompt students responded to asked what has helped them feel validated since starting at Northwestern University and what has made them feel invalidated. The prompt was, “Since starting at Northwestern, what do you feel has positively influenced your ability as a student? What has made you feel seen/heard/included at the university? What has made you feel disregarded by the university? What have your teaching assistants/professors done that has been helpful or harmful? Please give as much detail as you feel comfortable sharing.”

Procedure

Students were approached in the first week of class and were told this was a volunteer opportunity to take part in a study examining how students think about their identities within the context of academia. All students received a link to Qualtrics every other week for 10 weeks resulting in 5 surveys. Each time, students encountered an informed consent noting what they would be asked, that they could choose to not respond, and that their responses would remain anonymous, confidential, and would not be examined until after the quarter concluded. Students could take part in all 5 surveys

or just participate in the final survey, even if they not done the previous surveys. The first survey entailed responding to demographics, a series of questionnaires², and a prompt about their self-concept aspects. Surveys 2 through 4 were identical. For each survey, one of the three self-aspects students listed in the first survey were piped in. Students responded to a prompt asking how that specific self-aspect could be an asset in their academic endeavors. Students also responded how core that self-aspect was to who they are and how traditionally valued in academia that self-aspect was. Finally, for the last survey, both students who had been responding throughout the quarter and students who just wanted to take part in the final survey responded to the following: demographics (if this was the first survey they took), academic empowerment, fit to the university's community, and an open-ended prompt asking about their experience at the university. I tried to get a more holistic view of the research questions by examining students' responses both qualitatively and quantitatively.

RESULTS

The first research question was how does feeling like one's self-aspects are not traditionally valued in academia relate to academic empowerment? This question is centered on the idea that feeling one's aspects are not valued could have negative consequences for students' motivation and well-being. To examine this question, I regressed students' scores of how traditionally valued their self-aspects are in academia on feelings of academic empowerment. Here, there was a significant positive association, $B = .18$, $p = .017$, 95% CI .03, .32. This means feeling one's aspects were valued in academia related to having greater academic empowerment. This may suggest that when students' identities are invalidated or when students experience discrimination such as microaggressions, this could have deleterious effects on their feelings of doing well and having control in their classes.

For the second research question, how does feeling like one is part of the university community relate to feelings of academic empowerment, I regressed one's feelings of fit to the university community on feelings of academic empowerment. This question also centers on the idea that feeling like one belongs at the university would relate to feeling like one can do well in their classes. Here, there was another significant positive association, $B = .15$, $p = .035$, 95% CI .01, .29. This means that when one feels like they belong at the university, they also feel a greater sense of academic empowerment. Stated another way, this could mean when one does not feel like a part of their university's community, they feel less capable in their classes. This is important because previous research has shown that universities can often cause students with minoritized identities to not feel the same level of fit (Castellanos et al., 2016). This lends another reason to why ensuring that we create inclusive environments in our classrooms and beyond is important to help engender students to feel able to do well at the university.

The last research question in my project was to understand when students have felt validated versus invalidated at the university. This question was answered in part by reading through and looking for themes within students' responses to the prompt of how their aspects have been an asset to their goals/endeavors, as well as the prompt that specifically targeted the experiences of validation and invalidation by various members of the campus community.

Students had varied self-aspects that I coded into three different themes: characteristics, roles, and

2. As this was part of a larger study; not all of the measures taken are reported in this chapter.

group identities. For characteristics, some examples are empathetic, independent, insecure, perfectionistic, intelligent, and community-oriented. Out of the 270 self-aspects, 125—or approximately 46%—fell into the characteristic category. For roles, some examples are student, sibling, artist, athlete, woman, partner, and daughter. Out of the 270 self-aspects, 95—or approximately 35%—fell into the role category. Lastly, for group identity, some examples are Mexican-American, queer, Lutheran, Jewish, first generation student, and feminist. Out of the 270 self-aspects, 50—or approximately 19%—fell into the group identity category.

Next, students considered how their different aspects were an asset to their current and future academic endeavors. The hope for this exercise was that by asking students to interpret their own self-aspects as strengths, it would remove the focus from what academia has valued and instead focus on what they value about themselves. Students' responses largely did consider the positives, even when they mentioned that an aspect would not be thought of within the context of a university. For example, one student wrote,

I don't think being queer is a direct asset in my current academic endeavors. However, I will say that being queer has opened my eyes and really has helped me engage meaningfully with issues regarding marginalized communities. This time spent thinking about marginalized communities and other's emotions has made me more empathetic and in turn, a more compassionate and enjoyable person to be around. All academic endeavors and future careers depend on my ability to get along and work well with others...

When we asked how their self-concept aspects were an asset, a majority of students' responses connected their aspects to their academic endeavors in unique and positive ways, like how compassion or empathy means they have better connections with their professors or peers, how holding a minoritized identity has given them a unique perspective both in the classroom and in their organizations, and how characteristics like ambition or intelligence have been traditionally valued and aids in their doing well in class. However, some students did note the barriers that academia can hold onto based on their self-aspects. For example, one student wrote,

Being a woman has been helpful in shaping my world view, and can potentially also be an asset in getting a job. But obviously there is gender discrimination that has probably influenced me – I dropped mathematical methods in the social sciences for a variety of reasons, but partially due to a lack of community.

This quote showcases students' awareness of how their self-aspects can relate to their academics and be influenced by people within the university due to their beliefs. While some of the responses did have negative experiences within them, a majority of the time, students still found a way to connect their self-aspects back to a strength. This may be one avenue for reminding students and ourselves as instructors to think of our students with a strengths-based approach rather than a deficit one. One of the ways to do this is to incorporate pedagogies that center how there are multiple ways to learn, multiple ways to know, and multiple experiences to value (Destin et al., 2021).

Finally, students responded to the ways in which they have felt both validated and invalidated at the university, including by administration, professors, and GSIs. For times students felt validated by their professors and GSIs, they noted certain themes like being reached out to individually, instructors thanking students for sharing in class, instructors showing that not only are they available to help but that they *want* to help, instructors prioritizing discussion over lecture when possible, instructors

making it a priority to connect with students and learn their names, and instructors acknowledging the difficulties students are facing. Largely, the themes seemed to breakdown into what could be done in class (e.g., receiving and implementing feedback, exams that accurately reflect course content), making an effort to connect (e.g., learning students' names, smaller explanations for those who feel uncomfortable speaking in class), feelings of gratitude (e.g., thanking students for their hard work), and showing a desire to help students (e.g., meeting individually to discuss students' goals/aspirations). One response included, "I definitely think my ability as a student has been positively influenced by professors and [teaching assistants] who make it a priority to get to know the students and who act in a very approachable and understanding manner."

Further, there was a general sense that instructors who strived to create an inclusive space in their classroom and office hours were especially helpful. In this vein, students specifically noted when GSIs have checked in on them emotionally because they forgot to turn in an assignment or their grade had dropped, had mandatory office hours in the first week to get to know them, and offered flexibility and believed them when they said they needed more time. Students also appreciated instructors who knew and recommended resources for students' well-being, both emotionally and academically. Beyond just GSIs, students noted that having a community is what has helped them feel seen and heard. In particular, students mentioned older peers who demonstrated how to succeed, finding student groups where they could be their authentic selves, spending time with a core group of friends, and spaces that offered a general sense of being included. Ultimately, validation seemed to come by being treated as "human first, student second," as one respondent put it.

Certain themes emerged for invalidating experiences. These themes include instructors creating and emphasizing a divide between themselves and the students, instructors disregarding feedback on the class from students, fostering a competitive environment, engaging in microaggressions, and disregarding mental health. Here, the different responses seemed to breakdown again into what is happening within the classroom (e.g., when there's a disregard if the class is too difficult, competitive atmosphere), disrespect (e.g., microaggressions, not learning how to pronounce a student's name), and a disregard for one's personhood (e.g., ignoring mental health issues, not trying to understand marginalized identities). One student response noted, "I've experienced microaggressions... [instructors] not taking the time or effort to remember how to pronounce my name, despite me telling them continuously, casual mentions of racism within a class without any sort of critical analysis or critique."

In general, the interpersonal interactions that seemed to create the most invalidation were those in which instructors tried to maintain a power structure by separating themselves from the students, creating inflexible standards, disregarding students' mental and physical well-being, and engaging in behaviors that highlight how prejudice and discriminatory practices are still very much a part of academia. These themes also transpired in the larger university community with students noting how the administration largely thinks of students as numbers rather than thinking of them as individuals.

Overall, my teaching-as-research project offered insight into what experiences relate to students feeling academically empowered, part of the community, and accepted within the university. Students who feel like they are being valued also seem to feel that they can and will do well in their classes. Further, those who felt like a part of the community also felt like they could succeed. By diving into their responses, we can recognize that students wrote about themselves in a way that highlights how

all the different aspects of who they are can be a strength. By validating and respecting students in a way that is empathetic, we can help engender an inclusive environment for them.

APPLICATION

Next steps include thinking about how we, as GSIs, can support undergraduate students in a way that highlights their strengths and validates their identity. Firstly, it seems that feeling valued relates to feeling like one will do well academically. An initial step could be thinking about how we can show our students that we value who they are. Perhaps, this may include having students tell us about who they are on the first day of class or engaging in a short exercise whereby students write about who they are and how their aspects will be an asset to their learning in the class. Right off the bat, centering students' identities in a way that is valued within the class could help aid them with feeling like they can succeed.

Secondly, we observe that feeling like one is part of the community at the university also relates to feeling like one can do well academically. Part of creating a community can start with us in our classes. This could be done by having students create their own ground rules for the class, having students do getting-to-know-you activities (e.g., fast friends task), and creating an inclusive space where students can sense that their thoughts are valued and respected. Inclusive spaces may be engendered by focusing on getting to know students, focusing on collaboration rather than hierarchy between instructors and students, and reminding students that their backgrounds and experiences lends themselves to have unique perspectives when looking at different topics.

Lastly, students wrote about a wide range of experiences that helped them feel validated at the university and experiences that caused them to feel invalidated. Largely, feeling validated centered around instructors making an effort for students to feel heard and respected. Some concrete ways to do so is having each student come to office hours to meet, asking why students are taking the course, learning their names, and prioritizing the feedback students give to mold the class to the current set of students. Students reported feeling invalidated in situations when it seemed like research mattered more than the students, when there was a disregard and a disbelief in students' mental health struggles, and when power dynamics between instructors and students were perpetuated. Here, it seems that again showing students we care by supporting them and creating an environment of collaboration, we can alleviate some of the negative experiences students have. See Table 1 for possible examples and solutions.

CONCLUSION

Overall, students come into class with a diverse range of self-aspects that include characteristics, roles, identities—all of which are important to who they are and how they understand the world. We, as GSIs, can do our part to help students feel validated, listened to, and cared for while at the university. By being intentional with creating inclusive environments for students, we can also hopefully engender feelings of community, belief in their ability to succeed academically, and feelings of support. Ways to potentially accomplish this are by being flexible, listening to students, showing signs of gratitude, and creating a collaborative atmosphere.

Table 1. *Themes and examples of invalidation incidences and possible solutions.*

Theme	Examples	Possible Reason for Feeling Invalidated	Possible Fix	Hopeful Outcome
Mental well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disregard for students who were struggling with their mental health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Felt like the instructor lacked in care and disregarded the students as people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work with student one-on-one or with the university's mental health services to come up with a plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student can feel cared for while also getting the services they need
Inflexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disregarding feedback from students in class - Having a student take an exam on the day of a relative's funeral 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Felt like there was no opportunity for discussion - Felt ignored and disrespected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Incorporating students' feedback through use of a mid-class survey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students feel like class is more of a collaboration
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fostering a competitive environment - Telling students this is a class to weed unqualified students out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Felt like instructors were trying to brew animosity amongst students rather than comradery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acknowledge the difficulty level of a class but work with students to build confidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students feel hopeful entering the class while being aware of the challenges
Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reminding students that there's a hierarchy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students find it hard to reach out when an instructor is trying to uphold the power differentials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Having expectations for the students but also letting the students have expectations for instructors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduces the power differential rather than enhances it so students feel more open to talking
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not providing feedback on assignments or solid instructions for students to follow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students felt like they may be set up for failure by not having directions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Give as much feedback when possible and tell students communication is open to discuss assignments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Helps students feel as if they can approach an instructor with questions both before and after assignments
Discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engaging in microaggressions such as mispronouncing students' names even after being corrected - Not acknowledging the institutional barriers that affect some students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can make students feel othered or that their instructor did not care to learn their identity - Can also feel stagnant that instructors aren't updating their beliefs by examining different paths to academia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Take time to really get to know students' names and backgrounds - Taking the time to learn about what institutional barriers may impact academia for students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students feel equally valued and that their identity is one that is appreciated in that space
Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Administrators ignoring students' concerns and focusing more on the fiscal aspects of the university 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students feel like they're just being used for money and aren't being listened to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advocating for students and talking to administration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students can see you're on their side and you're using your power to help them

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