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Why Are Campuses So Tense?

Identity, stereotypes, and the fraying of the college experience.

Harry Campbell for The Chronicle

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By CLAUDE M. STEELE

When I entered the social-psychology graduate program at Ohio State University in the late 1960s, I was its only African American. There were no African American faculty members. This was also the time when the educational psychologist Arthur Jensen toured college campuses arguing that African Americans' lower IQ scores were rooted in their genes as much as their history and experience in the United States. The interest around me in Jensen's views gave me a headache's worth of questions: I wanted to be a behavioral scientist, but how open-minded was I supposed to be? Was Jensen's argument — the genetic inferiority of my race, myself, my family — to be taken as normal science, something I had to accept as an open question? Could I trust such an enterprise?

Many years later, a white student named Ted told me a different story. There were 45 students in his African American history class: a smattering of Asian students, another white student, and the rest were African American. The class began on a tough topic: racial violence in the post-Civil War South. Black students started using the term "we." The term "white people" became common. Ted felt pressure to prove himself an ally, a nonracist white person — on the right side of history. But could he trust that he wouldn't be seen as racist in the class, and more broadly, on campus?

This is how identity can affect the experience of college. The desks, the pictures on the wall, the professor were the same for every student in Ted's class. But it was a different place for him than for his black classmates. My graduate program was a different place for me than it was for the other students. We both knew that society's stereotypes could frame how we were seen — he as a racist, me as not up to the academic demands of my program. We knew we were in situations where those stereotypes could apply. And we'd seen signs they might be applied. We felt the threat. And that was enough to keep us vigilant, and less than fully trusting of our circumstances.

Before the last 60 years, higher education focused on a more homogeneous sector of society — white males of a certain class. In that world, identity predicaments like Ted's or mine didn't much exist. As an African American, I wouldn't have been in a graduate program at the largely segregated Ohio State University. There would have been no course on African American history and politics. In that world, it wouldn't be obvious that identity had anything to do with learning and trust.

But today's campuses bring together people from groups that have had, and continue to have, profoundly different experiences in society. The diversity of the American population has been an inexhaustible source of knowledge and creativity since the Old World met the New World. Few things in higher education are as important as diversifying our campuses, but we need broadened approaches to doing that, approaches rooted in a sharper understanding of diversity's challenges.

> *Identity predicaments like mine, now increasing in frequency, destabilize trust in universities.*

Predicaments like mine and Ted's arise from diversity. These predicaments affect us as individuals, but they also challenge our institutions. Think of recent campus incidents: football teams threatening strikes, the posting of racist flyers, raging free-speech versus safe-spaces debates, professors shunned and fired over problematic comments, students calling out other students for "appropriations of culture," administrators stepping down, and so on. The list is long and growing.

This situation can be seen through two lenses. One focuses on critiques of the students. They are "snowflakes" — so "helicoptered" by their "bulldozing" parents and oversensitized to identity and personal threats that the normal rigors of debate are seen as "microaggressions" too stressful to tolerate. The other focuses on identity politics gone wild — making group differences "idolatrous," as the theologian William Sloan Coffin Jr. put it. And both conditions can be exacerbated by our "call out" culture — you make one "misstatement" and get pilloried on social media. Important truths lie in all of these arguments.

Yet I see another source of this turmoil: identity predicaments like mine and Ted's that, increasing in frequency, destabilize trust in universities — trust in their fairness, their true conviction about the potential of all students, and their support for the development of all.

It isn't just diversity that can put trust on thin ice. It's also how we manage it. Since the 1960s — when we first integrated institutions of higher education — we've had a guiding principle: identity-blind assimilationism. We try to see each other as individuals and ask disenfranchised groups to assimilate to the norms and standards of mainstream society. That's the offer — even as it has critics. Perhaps assimilationism privileges the dominance of European Americans. Perhaps it obscures the contributions minority groups have long made to society. Yet identity-blindness is also a standard of fairness; in law enforcement, in health care, in access to investment capital, and to educational opportunity. And we've found no workable alternative. So it's still the offer on the table.

Over the past 50-plus years, however, its costs have become clearer. Assimilationism can blind us to the significance of identity, marginalizing the very idea of it. Why bring it up? Haven't we agreed, in the effort not to discriminate, to ignore group identities? Shouldn't we stress our common needs?

But imagine you are an African American student. You know that many disadvantages are tied to your racial identity: being channeled, via your housing, into poorly supported K-12 schools; racially targeted sentencing for drug crimes; dramatic growth in the incarceration of disproportionately minority populations (you may have an imprisoned relative); long resistance to policies aimed at your inclusion, like affirmative action and the Voting Rights Act; glacial progress at diversifying institutions and their leadership; and the springing up of perhaps the most polarized political climate in decades — not to speak of widely circulated videos showing the police shooting unarmed African Americans like yourself.

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You might also feel that identity-blindness misses certain stressors at the center of your academic life — ones like mine in graduate school. Racial achievement gaps are a media staple. You know the suspicions — the stereotypes — about your group's preparation and intelligence. Now think of the ordinary activities that are part of being a student: meeting with professors and teaching assistants for advice and counsel; trying to join a STEM study group of largely white and Asian students; writing a difficult term paper; taking a difficult test; or even just raising your hand in class. The threat of being judged by this stereotype is present in all situations where the stereotype is relevant.

Nor would you be the only person experiencing identity threat. Think of Ted. He too lives with the threat of being stereotyped in any discussion of race, identity, inequality, social ills, and many aspects of American history, as being on the "privileged" side of a morally flawed nation.

These "stereotype threats" are situational threats. They're not traits of a person like, say, low self-esteem or neuroticism. They arise in specific settings that signal a possibility of being stereotyped. A woman in advanced chemistry sees the photographs of only male "geniuses" in the hallway on her way to class. The white student hears others refer to him as "white" in a classroom discussion of inequality. Questions — conscious and semi-conscious — follow. Do people have a negative view of my group? What do the pictures on the wall tell me? Am I in the right field? Will people believe in my potential? Such questions tend to destabilize trust, and destabilized trust spreads like spilled milk to many corners of campus life.

Many groups of students — Muslim, politically conservative, first-generation-college, wealthy, DACA, and so on — will have their own forms of identity threat that can erode campus trust. There is in many of these groups a general tension between "remembering" and "forgetting"; between remembering how one's group is discriminated against and being vigilant to whether that is happening to them on campus, and "forgetting" that discrimination, in hopes of a life that is more trusting.

Yet when we decide not to see identity, we miss these realities. And missing them, we risk being even less trustworthy in the eyes of those who experience them.

But here's the good news. As a situational pressure, identity threat can be reduced by situational changes, or changes in how people see their situations. There is no silver bullet that works everywhere all the time. But dozens of studies show that even modest interventions can improve the performance, persistence, general welfare, and institutional trust of students.

In our increasingly diverse society, something more is required of higher education: a deeper capacity to build trust as a foundation for learning and institutional functioning. But how do we do that when trust is so fragile? What would it even look like?

In the late 1990s, Geoffrey Cohen, Lee Ross, and I invited black and white Stanford students to write essays about their favorite teacher, ostensibly for possible publication in a new campus magazine. We invited them back two days later to get feedback on their essays. We wanted to see if the way we gave feedback affected how much students trusted it, and were motivated by it.

We found it didn't work (https://ed.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/the_mentors_dilemma.pdf) to just give the feedback straightforwardly, or to precede it with ad hominem praise. Black students didn't trust this kind of feedback as much as white students did. Why? For black students, such feedback is inherently ambiguous. Is it based on their essay, or on a stereotype-driven view of their abilities? They can't know for sure. So it's hard — right in the middle of their remembering-versus-forgetting struggle — to trust and be motivated by such feedback. Over time, this dilemma could isolate them from feedback essential to their development.

White students, on the other hand, had no such ambiguity. They could take the feedback at face value, and did.

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But when we explained to the black students that we used high standards in evaluating their essays and believed that they could meet those standards, they trusted the feedback as much as the white students did. Seventy-five percent of them took their essay home to improve. (The highest such percentage in any other condition of the experiment was closer to 30 percent.) Building black students' trust didn't require that the feedback giver be black, or praise of their abilities, or anti-bias training, or an effort to build black students' self-esteem. It took a sign that they *weren't being judged stereotypically*. Trust ensued, and then motivation.

Ted too faced an identity predicament brought on by diversity. Is there something he could do that would inspire others in his African American history class to trust him more? Yes. He could see it as a growth opportunity; be more a seeker of understanding and less a defendant against an implicit charge of racism. When in doubt, he could ask questions — sensitively. When the psychologists Phil Goff, Paul Davies, and I gave this advice to white male college students, they were able to move their chairs in close for a difficult conversation with two black students about racial profiling — something they wouldn't otherwise do.

Research is accumulating tactics that universities and their faculty can use to build trust across identity differences. For example, inviting students in a class to tell you and others a little about themselves — their values, goals, ambitions — helps assure them that they are seen as more than a stereotype. Testimonies from other students who face similar identity pressures (thus helping to normalize the experience) but found gratifying, life-shaping experiences in college, have been shown to lastingly improve minority-student achievement. When stereotypes imply certain identities don't belong — as for women in advanced STEM coursework — evidence that professors see them as belonging, and are invested in their potential, can substantially improve their performance.

Can this sort of trust-building be taken to scale? Can it be a new focus for successfully diversifying universities?

A group of faculty and administrators at the University of California at Berkeley led by the psychologist Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton wanted to identify what graduate-level science programs can do to help women and minorities publish more. They focused on the physical sciences, and surveyed student progress toward publication.

They found what they feared: Women and minority students progressed slower and published less than white and Asian male students in all of these graduate programs, except one: The College of Chemistry. What about the chemistry program was different?

Two features stand out. First, in Mendoza-Denton's words, "students experience a highly structured environment in which they are introduced to research (via lab rotations) at the outset of their studies, their advisers are regularly queried as to their students' progress, and expectations surrounding publication of research results are both implicitly and explicitly clear even in the first two years of study." Second, compared with faculty in the other physical sciences, chemistry faculty members encouraged students to publish more, and their encouragement was more equally distributed among women, minority, and majority students.

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Why do these elements work? Consider being in a program like this under the pressure of a negative stereotype. Uncertainty about your progress could make you worry that you're fulfilling the stereotype, and will be seen in terms of it. The structure and support in the College of Chemistry reduces this ambiguity. It tells you what to prioritize, gives you clear markers of progress, and optimistically supports you in meeting them. Students have a trustworthy path forward. They can come to feel less susceptible to being seen stereotypically.

Will this approach immediately eliminate group achievement gaps and increase institutional trust? Probably not immediately. Such gaps have multiple causes. But the chemistry school illustrates an at-scale strategy for putting universities on a better path — with the eventual elimination of such differences as a distinct possibility.

There's a pattern here. Trust-building is a game played largely on the ground. It's who shows up, listens, shows interest and optimism about one's potential, and helps out with a clear path forward that matters, that gets trusted. Anti-bias and diversity training can build understanding. A shared identity can help. But "ground up" seems foundational to building sustainable trust — especially across identity divides.

What happened to me after confronting Arthur Jensen's ideas about race and IQ in graduate school? Initially I was in full-on remembering mode. But in my second year, things shifted. My research got more focused. I liked the daily grind. A trust emerged: in the mundane, in the research enterprise itself. It began with my adviser's seriousness — "this is science, not a student project" — and his seeing me as worthy partner. He was optimistic, but with no aversion to giving critical feedback. The shared work, the high standards, the optimism, the clarity of the path forward, and his investment in supporting me on that path — not our shared identity — was our road to trust.

Long after I'd gained that trust, Arthur Jensen's research was still around — soon to be picked up by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray in *The Bell Curve*. I didn't like these things. I'm not sure I felt full-fledged social belonging. But something had changed. I knew what to do. I had relationships I trusted. So, while I detested the affronts, they didn't derail me. Such is the power and necessity of trust as a pedagogical foundation, especially in a society as diverse as ours.

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