Influences of the Campus Experience on the Ethnic Identity Development of Students of Color

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Abstract
This qualitative research study examined ethnic identity development among underrepresented students of color at a selective, research intensive, predominantly White university. The objective focused on influences of the campus experience on students’ ethnic identity development when they entered and as they prepared to graduate from college. Students were asked to reflect on how development of their ethnic identity intersected with outcomes as critical thinking, communication skills, and sense of competence. Findings include an increased learning about one’s ethnic group has cognitive and noncognitive benefits. Students felt further development of their ethnic identity had a considerable, positive impact on their sense of competence, sense of belonging, interpersonal relationships, and commitments. Institutional and policy implications are discussed.

Keywords
students, social justice, educational leaders, multicultural education

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As society changes, so must its institutions. Despite decades of structural barriers that impeded the educational achievement of many students of color (Darder, 1991; Feagin, 2002; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000), most colleges and universities have become more ethnically diverse (Rendon et al., 2000). Although the trends differ across many states, regions, and types of institutions, the increasing diversity of postsecondary students has many critical implications for policy. Students from varying cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, and immigration profiles raise critical questions about how today’s college students are taught, what they are taught, and who teaches them (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

Another challenge for universities is the persistence of an achievement gap between many students of color (particularly African Americans, American Indians, and Chicanos/Latinos) and their White counterparts in some postsecondary institutions (Massey, Charles, Lundy, & Fisher, 2003). Research data by the American Council on Education (ACE) documents that the graduation rates of many students of color remain below those of White students (Wilds, 2000). Similarly, a comprehensive study by Massey et al. (2003) found that many students of color admitted to selective universities underperform compared with their precollege achievement. The ACE research study also showed a relatively low number of underrepresented students of color who pursued postgraduate study.

The negative implications of such educational underachievement among a growing segment of the U.S. populations are obvious (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Hayes-Bautista, 2004; Hayes-Bautista, Schink, & Chapa, 1988). For example, the future U.S. workforce will be predominantly represented by non-Whites in many regions of the country (Hayes-Bautista et al., 1988). People of color will also be needed to serve as a major part of the future professoriate in higher education, particularly as non-White faculty are often in the vanguard of diversity in teaching and research (Milem & Hakuta, 2000). Without a significant increase in rates attending and graduating from college, including postgraduate study, among students of color, the very social and economic fabrics of our society will be at greater risk.

In an effort to identify effective solutions to this critical dilemma, many scholars described effective, alternative interventions at the postsecondary level (Smith et al., 1997; Feagin, 2000; Rendon et al., 2000). Some of these interventions involve new programs and services, innovative instructional strategies, and still others involve even more basic and comprehensive institutional restructuring and transformation (Darder, 1992).

Specifically, one research investigation on the retention of students of color posited that the transformation of higher education institutions was essential
to become more inclusive (Rendon et al., 2000). They argued that such inclusiveness and transformation, in which campus culture both validates and reflects the communities that produce students of color, are driven in part by a greater understanding of the cultural complexities faced by those students who enter predominantly White colleges and universities. It was also argued that many such students experience a bicultural socialization in which they must negotiate the extent to which they identify with their “subordinate” (Darder, 1991) or non-White culture as well as the “dominant” cultural domain that pervades contemporary institutional life in higher education.

The cultural issues of biculturalism identified by Rendon et al. (2000) are linked to other scholarly treatments of ethnic identity among students of color (Keefe & Padilla, 1986; Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002; Phinney, 1990; Phinney, 1993). For students of color, there are many fundamental factors regarding their ethnic identity, including the process in which such an identity is developed and the variables that impact its development. Current trends in this area indicate that some of the significant issues and questions for students of color focus on negotiating their ethnic identity. For example, questions might include (a) how much information (e.g., history, culture, and current economic/social/political conditions) do I know about my ethnic group and (b) how important to me is my ethnic community? These two dimensions of ethnic identity, knowledge and salience, are primary research interests for us because they appear to form a lens through which students of color interpret their world, more specifically within the context of their academic experience. Therefore, we are also interested in another question regarding such students: does their ethnic identity have an effect on other aspects of their learning?

We are intrigued by such questions in large part because of the great significance attached to identity in virtually all theoretical frameworks of college student development. In their comprehensive synthesis of research on college student outcomes, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) point out the primacy of identity in most college student development theories, such as Chickering, Erikson, Perry, and other early scholars of the effect of college on students, effectively centered the student-development process around students’ identity. From their descriptions, it appears that identity is both an outcome of college student development as well as a door that facilitates the development of other critical outcomes.

With the well-established recognition of identity as a fundamental positive element of college students’ development, in effect a large part of their success, we conjectured how ethnic identity might play such a potential role in the development of students of color. If so, might it also hold potential for
contributing to the success (retention, achievement, learning, and development) of students of color in higher education. In their first edition of *How College Affects Students*, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) stated, “the nature of identity development among Black and other non-White students remains virtually unknown territory and constitutes a glaring and embarrassing gap in our theoretical knowledge” (p. 59). Although Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) described a number of studies that helped close the gap, it seems clear that we still know relatively little about how college students of color develop an ethnic identity and how that identity impacts their perceptions and experiences in higher education.

Our inquiry seeks to gain insight as to how students of color might perceive their ethnic identity, particularly its salience in their lives as they negotiate the academic and sociocultural demands of a selective, research intensive, predominantly White institution. We hoped that such insights might contribute to the identification of institutional policies and practices that lead to more positive outcomes for the growing number of students of color whose achievement has implications for our entire society.

Our interest in this topic is driven by a number of current issues that provide a challenging context for higher education in the United States in the 21st century. States such as California have populations that have become majority non-White (Ochoa, Gomez, & Ortiz, 2010). Projections forecast the continuation of these demographic trends well into the next several decades as the populations of Asian Pacific Islander Americans and Latinos, respectively, grow rapidly (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

**Method**

We conducted this study at a large public, research intensive, predominantly White university located on the west coast region of the United States. The study used qualitative methodology, using in-depth interview methods to gain vivid descriptions from participants that help discover meanings from their own life experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and understand their academic and social experiences within a particular context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Creswell (1998) defined qualitative research as “an inquiry process of understanding . . . that explore a social or human problem” emphasizing a “complex, holistic picture” (p. 15). Qualitative methods are also useful for examining institutional factors and capturing student interactional characteristics. Such institutional factors as culture or climate, norms, beliefs, and mission can be codified using qualitative methods (Whitt & Kuh, 1991).

We chose a phenomenological approach because it focuses on participants’ experience and their interpretation of their world. In addition, “there is an
essence or essences to shared experience” (Patton, 1990, p. 70). Patton (1990) also explained that to identify these essences, it involves a process of bracketing, analyzing, and comparing. It is through bracketing and analyzing that commonalities are then discovered. A phenomenological perspective is important in our investigation to further understand how people experience the world (Patton, 1990).

As this study focused on students’ perceptions and reflections of the development of their ethnic identity at a large public, research intensive, predominantly White institution, it is essential to acknowledge that the experiences of college students of color are often marginalized. Thus, this study also borrows from both critical race theory and Latino critical theory. Both theories “identify storytelling, giving voice, or naming one’s own reality as key elements of legal scholarship and important tools for achieving racial emancipation” (Fernandez, 2002, p. 48). These two schools of thought “place race and other socially constructed categories at the center of analysis” (Fernandez, 2002, p. 48).

**Participants**

A total of 19 students (6 African Americans, 7 Chicano/a students, 6 Filipino/a Americans) participated in the study. The students were current peer counselors, mentors, or tutors in the learning center on campus. All of the 12 women and 7 men were in their senior year at the university, and they were also high-achieving individuals, both academically and socially. All averaged a minimum 3.0 grade point average (GPA) out of a 4.0 scale. Each held leadership roles in campus organizations, and 12 expressed plans to pursue graduate or professional school.

The students’ demographic backgrounds revealed divergent profiles. Among the 19 students, six had parents who were born in the Philippines, five had parents who were born in the United States, five had parents who were born in Mexico, two had parents who were born in Nigeria, and one student had one parent born in the United States with the other parent born in Mexico. Immigrant status was prominent among the students’ parents, with 14 having at least one parent born outside of the United States. However, 16 of the students were born in the United States themselves, whereas 2 were born in Mexico and 1 was born in the Philippines.

The students identified what they felt was the socioeconomic status of their families. Five students described their family as working class, four described it as lower middle class, four described it as upper middle class, three described it as middle class, and three described it as low income. Thus, the majority of students did not perceive their family background as one marked by economic privilege.
Data Collection Procedures

To gain insight on their ethnic identity development throughout their college experience, participants were chosen through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling allows for “information-rich cases” for in-depth study (Patton, 1990). Info-rich cases allows for the researchers to gain a deeper understanding about the main issues of the study (Patton, 1990). During the recruitment process, each prospective participant was informed of the nature of the study and the time commitment involved. All agreed to the terms of the study.

Data Collection

We conducted individual, one-on-one semistructured formatted interviews (Merriam, 1998). The questions were open-ended to enable students to respond broadly or as detailed as they wished. We asked students to talk about their ethnic identity and explore its impact on their lives. We asked students about their ethnic identity when they first entered college and how they understood it in their present context as seniors. Examples of questions included the following: (a) How much did you/do you know about your ethnic group? (b) How much did/does your ethnic identity matter to you? and (c) How much will your ethnic identity matter to your future plans? In addition, we asked the students to tell us about any connection they might perceive between their ethnic identity and their growth in other areas (both academic and sociocultural) during college. Furthermore, to get a sense of the institutional context of their development (i.e., the extent to which institutional conditions supported or hindered their ethnic identity process), we asked the students to describe their perceptions of the campus climate at their school. Follow-up questions were incorporated into the interview format to allow participants to expand on some of their responses and obtain more in depth and detailed responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The average interview time ranged from 2 to 4 hr. To ensure privacy, the interviews were held in small meeting rooms at the learning center. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were read and discussed by the principal researchers and research assistants. Through constant comparative analysis of our research notes and transcripts, both general and specific categories among the students’ responses were identified. Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined such data categories as “a unit of information comprised of events, happenings, and
occurrences” (p. 40). The principal researchers used open coding and then assigned these codes to emerging themes or “clusters of meaning” (Watson et al., 2002, p. 41) within each category. The most prominent, unequivocal themes about the students’ responses were identified and reported as findings (Watson et al., 2002).

For credibility and trustworthiness of the study, we employed several techniques (Merriam, 1998). First, we incorporated the use of thick descriptions for a better understanding of detail and context and therefore allowing those interested to draw their own conclusions from the data presented (Denzin, 1989). We also invited participants to comment on their transcribed interview and used their feedback to keep with the authenticity of their voices (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006).

Findings

In this section, we summarized three main areas that emerged from the interviews. The findings are reported according to the following categories: (a) precollege ethnic identity, (b) current ethnic identity, (c) ethnic identity and its influence on educational outcomes, (d) ethnic identity and college climate, (e) achievement and future plans.

The students’ descriptions of their neighborhood and high school provide a context for their subsequent descriptions of their ethnic identity prior to entering college. Most of the students (14) reported that the ethnic composition of their neighborhood featured a significant majority of people of color. Only five students described their neighborhood as predominantly White.

Their descriptions of the high schools they attended were somewhat similar. Only six students reported that they attended a predominantly White high school, whereas nine said their high school was composed of a high concentration of students of color and six reported attending a high school that was a fairly even mixture of White and non-White students.

The students also described their perception of the degree to which they received strong support from teachers in their high school. Fourteen students felt they received a strong degree of support from teachers, four said they received little to moderate support, and one student said he received virtually no support. Among the students who reported receiving strong support from teachers, four said such support was provided only to the students in their high school who were enrolled in “college track” (e.g., academic placement) courses. In addition, six of the students described the support they felt they received from their counselor(s) with the responses split evenly between three students who felt they received strong support and the others who felt they
were not supported. In the following we will present the students’ voices describing (a) their precollege ethnic identity, (b) current ethnic identity, (c) ethnic identity and its influence on educational outcomes, (d) ethnic identity and perceptions of their college climate, and (e) achievement and graduation.

**Precollege Ethnic Identity**

The students’ descriptions of their ethnic identity before college revealed a number of interesting trends. The great majority of the students (16) reported that they invested little or no effort to learn about their ethnic group or community before college. Only two students said they exerted a moderate to high level of energy in learning about their ethnic group. Likewise, most of the students said they had little or no knowledge of the history or culture of their ethnic group before college. Only two students reported that they had moderate knowledge of such history or culture, whereas one student reported knowing a great deal.

In contrast, many of the students (11) reported having a high level of awareness of discrimination against their ethnic group, whereas three additional students described having seen concrete examples of such discrimination against students in their high school. Only five of the students felt they had little or no consciousness of such discrimination before college. The following reflects an example of the majority of the students’ responses:

> I know there was discrimination in high school but I always tried to buy into, you know, like there isn’t any. It was very hard to articulate in high school what was going on. Like why my counselor said I should really hold off on college and go to the community college instead.

The students also described several areas that might exert influence on their precollege ethnic identity or reflect it. Fourteen students said their parents had a significant influence on their sense of themselves as members of an ethnic group, whereas five said their parents had little or no influence. Most students (11) said their peers were composed mainly of their own ethnic group, six had peers composed of students both within and outside their ethnic group, and two had peer groups that were predominantly White. Finally, nine of the students spoke only English before college, whereas five spoke Spanish or a Filipino language (e.g., Bicol, Tagalog, Ilocano) along with English, and three students reported being Spanish dominant in their spoken language before college.
Current Ethnic Identity

There were even stronger trends among the students’ description of their current ethnic identity during their senior year. Likewise, there was a marked contrast between their precollege ethnic identity and at the time of their interview.

A clear majority of the students (17) reported spending more time and effort to learn about their ethnic group than before college. Thirteen of those students said they spend a great deal of energy on such learning efforts and an additional four students felt that although they did not spend a great amount of energy, it was considerably more than their effort before college. Not surprisingly, the same number of students (17) reported that they know much more about the history and culture of their ethnic group than they did before entering the university. One student felt he was still learning and could not yet claim a high degree of knowledge, whereas one other student felt her knowledge was still quite limited. One of the students who spent much time learning about their ethnicity shared,

I think I invest a good amount of time every week [on my ethnic identity] . . . a lot of my social time is spent on defining my ethnic identity and defining who I am as an Asian American and what I choose to believe in.

An even higher number of students reported having a high awareness of discrimination against their ethnic group at the time of their interview. Although such awareness had been relatively high among the students even before college, at this time all 19 students said they were very well aware of such discrimination. Many of the students remarked that they were also much more aware of more subtle dimensions of discrimination as well as its more systemic (as opposed to individual) manifestations. Most of the students felt they were much better able to analyze discrimination, while several felt they experienced and/or witnessed it on their university campus. A senior shared,

I’m a lot more aware just because of a lot organizations that I have taken part in have taken a political stance and have brought these social issues. I think I had a general idea before, how our society was, but never to the extent that I do now.

In terms of the students’ current perspective on the influence of their parents on their ethnic identity, 13 students felt that such influence was high and
their parents contributed significantly to their ethnic identity. Two students said their parents now had only a moderate influence on their ethnic identity, whereas two other felt the relationship was much more reciprocal with both themselves and their parents informing each other about aspects of their ethnic group.

The majority of students (13) reported that their current peer group was composed of a diverse group of non-White students, both those of their own ethnicity and other students of color. Five students said their peer group was mostly students of their own ethnicity, whereas two students said their peers were both White and non-White. In terms of the languages they currently speak, six students reported speaking only English, five spoke both English and Spanish, four spoke English or a Filipino language, and one student spoke English and a Nigerian language (Ibo).

The students’ statements about the importance of their ethnic identity also indicated strong patterns. Most of the students said their ethnic identity had a strong influence on their educational and career plans as well as their future plans for family and residence. Seventeen students reported that their ethnic identity was a very important factor in their plans for continued education and/or career. Ten of those students said they specifically wanted a career in which they could serve students of color or a community composed of people of color. Most of the students said it was important that they marry someone who was compatible with their ethnicity. It also was equally important that their future family live in a community that reinforced their sense of ethnic identity, such as a diverse community that included members of their own ethnic group.

The great majority of students (15) felt they achieved a high degree of biculturalism (i.e., an ability to function comfortably and effectively in both the dominant/Eurocentric U.S., culture and the subordinate/traditional culture of their ethnic group). Three of the students felt they were still struggling to achieve biculturalism, with the most problematic issue being their limited comfort with the dominant culture. One student shared,

I think now I’m actually comfortable with my Latina heritage because before I was forced to identify with the White environment that was almost natural to me. Now I’m much more comfortable and I have a better grasp of being a Chicana/Latina [my ethnic identity] taught me how to survive in both worlds. It’s not given to you.

All 19 students reported that it was very important for them to continue developing their ethnic identity. Various students commented that their ethnic
identity had become a huge part of who they were, that they appreciated it a great deal, that it impacted many dimensions of their life, and that it was important to both know more about their ethnic group as well as contribute more to the struggle of their ethnic group to achieve equity. One student shared,

I think coming from the background that I come from, it's important for me to go back to those communities that have the same background as I do and contribute to them making sure that they are able to succeed at the same level as I did or even higher.

All 19 students had been affiliated to some degree with their university’s learning center. Seventeen students participated in the learning center’s summer bridge program and/or its academic year support services. All of the students worked in the learning center as a peer counselor, mentor, or tutor. Students stated that the learning center made a significant contribution to their ethnic identity. They described its influence coming from staff of color who worked at the learning center, the ethnic validation of its courses and services, and its mechanisms for students to access ethnic student organizations and ethnic studies courses. A student shared the following:

I think the summer bridge program was really good for me . . . I did question my competence and ability to succeed at college with so many students who came from privileged high schools.

In identifying the most significant influence on the development of their ethnic identity during college, most of the students were split evenly in identifying their experiences as members of ethnic student organizations or their participation in the learning center’s summer bridge program. Some other students said that their network of diverse peers was most influential.

**Ethnic Identity and Its Influence on Educational Outcomes**

The students described their perceptions of the effect of their ethnic identity development on a number of critical educational outcomes often cited in literature on higher education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Some of the outcomes reflect academic skill areas, whereas others are broader indications of college student development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The students’ descriptions of the impact of their ethnic identity on these outcomes revealed some clear trends.
Among the student-development outcomes, 17 of the students said the development of their ethnic identity made a strong impact on their sense of competence. The other two students felt their ethnic identity had little or no impact on their sense of competence. A student shared the following:

Before I developed my ethnic identity I was always insecure of who I was. I know it [ethnic identity] affected my academics a lot. Like if you see my transcript, my grades improved a lot. And it had a lot to do with who I was and me being a Chicano and me being ok with being a Chicano. Once I felt it was empowering to be a Chicano I started being critical with myself in school and saying like, I know how to do this and I could get an “A.”

Fifteen students felt their ethnic identity had a strong effect on their sense of belonging at the university (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rendon et al., 2000). Four students said the impact was only moderate. There were even stronger patterns within two other student-development outcomes. Eighteen students said their ethnic identity had a strong impact on the quality of their interpersonal relationships during college. Likewise, 18 students said their commitments were strongly affected by their ethnic identity development.

The trends in responses reflecting academic outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) were also pronounced. Seventeen students reported that their ethnic identity had a strong impact on the development of their analytical and critical thinking skills. Sixteen students felt their motivation to achieve academically as well as their achievement itself was impacted positively and significantly by their ethnic identity. One student felt that her ethnic identity development actually had a negative effect on her motivation and achievement. The following quotes by two students are examples of this impact:

I feel I’m a lot better in terms of a variety of skills . . . I think the change in my writing is that I can see ideas more clearly and I’m able to revise more clearly. I see them clearer because of my ethnic identity. I have much clearer visions on why I believe certain things.

I think it greatly affected my critical thinking and analytical skills because my identity gave me a unique perspective. For me it was pretty simple, like racism is a fact and it happens to communities and there are these structural issues that keep people where they’re at. Having
those experiences as a Black woman, a Nigerian woman . . . I was able to have a wider perspective, a broader way of looking at things and looking at the world.

Fifteen students reported that their ethnic identity significantly impacted their problem-solving skills. Three other students felt there was a moderate impact on such skills from their ethnic identity. Twelve students felt there was a strong, positive impact on their communication skills from their ethnic identity, whereas two others felt that such an impact was moderate. Finally, many of the students (9) felt there was no effect on the development of their proficiencies in math and science as a result of their ethnic identity development. Six said there was a moderate, positive impact and only two felt their ethnic identity had a strong, positive impact on their math and science skills.

A student shared the following:

I did feel behind and then being a Black student kind of exacerbated that feeling in that there’s already a stigma attached to us, Black people as not smart, as lazy or whatever . . . as my ethnic identity became grounded in college it helped me get over those fears of incompetence.

**Ethnic Identity and Campus Climate**

As noted previously, campus climate has been shown to exert a strong influence on the experiences and outcomes for students of color at predominantly White institutions (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Maramba, 2008). Likewise, the campus climate of their university provides a critical context for understanding the influences on these students’ ethnic identity and associated outcomes. The students had strong, unequivocal perceptions of their campus climate, including some of the dimensions (e.g., structural representation, psychological climate) identified in the literature on campus climate (Hurtado et al., 1999).

In terms of structural diversity, all of the students except one felt there were serious inadequacies in the representation of students of color (in this case, African Americans, American Indians, Chicanos/Latinos, and Filipinos), in the student body, and among the faculty. The students had similar, clear perceptions of the student body’s perceptions regarding diversity. Seventeen students said there was little or no awareness or appreciation of diversity among the student body at their university.

The majority of students (15) felt the university provided very little programming (e.g., music, dance, speakers, etc.) that reflects diversity. Nine of
those students said that of the little diversity programming they experienced, virtually all of it was provided by the students or the university’s cross-cultural center. Eight students stated there was no sense of community on campus and that the institution’s entire focus was on academics. A student shares the following:

I don’t think the university campus climate hasn’t contributed much to my sense of belonging. I think there’s a struggle we have as people of color or underrepresented students. It’s very hard with a small group of people to feel like you belong on this campus. At the same time it’s very hard to define yourself.

The Students’ Graduation, Achievement, and Future Plans

At the time this article was written, all 19 students graduated from the university. Their GPAs ranged from 2.62 to 3.84, with 14 of the students having a GPA above 3.0 at graduation. Twelve students majored in the social sciences, six in humanities, two in engineering, and two in natural sciences (six of the students were double majors).

Although not all of the students indicated their future plans during the interviews, of the 12 who did, all said they would attend graduate or professional school within the near future. Although we are unable to track the postgraduate progress of most of the students, we do know that at least one is in medical school, one is in optometry school, two are in doctoral programs (including one at Harvard University), and one is in law school (at Yale University). The high achievement of these students is in contrast to the national pattern of underachievement among such students in predominantly White institutions (Massey et al., 2003) as well as the specific pattern of student of color underachievement at the university these students attended. These findings and their subsequent policy implications will be discussed in the following section.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined the development of ethnic identity among underrepresented students of color at a highly selective, research intensive, predominantly White institution of higher education. Using qualitative investigative methods, the study specifically examined students’ ethnic identity at the time they entered college and as they prepared to graduate from college. The study
also asked students to describe how the development of their ethnic identity intersected with other educational outcomes (e.g., critical thinking skills, communication skills, commitments, sense of competence, etc.) often seen as critical in college student development.

The experiences of these 19 students provided an interesting profile of the ethnic identity development process among underrepresented students of color at a predominantly White institution of higher education. In terms of our research questions regarding the change in students’ ethnic identity during college and the parallel development of other critical outcomes, some clear patterns emerged.

We defined ethnic identity as mainly the knowledge students had about their ethnic group and the salience that knowledge held for them. This definition also implied that the amount of time and energy students expended to learn more about their ethnic group is an important part of ethnic identity (Phinney & Alipuria, 1990). The great majority of students reported having little knowledge about their ethnic group before college and that they had expended little time and effort to obtain such knowledge. Although most students reported that they received strong support from school staff prior to college, apparently their years of schooling did little to inform them about the experiences of their ethnic group. For the most part, the students’ surface knowledge about their ethnic group was obtained rather informally through the socialization of their parents. Most of the students were born in the United States, but the majority had at least one parent born outside the United States. Although students of color from predominantly White, high socioeconomic status backgrounds often grow up detached from their ethnic communities (Tatum, 1987), these students did not reflect a privileged status and most grew up in neighborhoods and attended schools with a large concentration of people of color. Still, their ethnic identity was largely undeveloped before college.

However, one dimension of ethnic identity, awareness of discrimination against one’s ethnic group (Keefe & Padilla, 1986), was quite pronounced even in the students’ precollege experiences. Such awareness among a group of students, otherwise largely unconcerned about their ethnicity, might reflect the continuing presence of racism in our society and its institutions (Feagin, 2000) as well as increases in racial and ethnic segregation (Massey et al., 2003).

By the time these interviews were conducted during the students’ 4th or 5th year of college, all the students reported considerable increases identifying strongly with their ethnicity. They spent much more time and effort learning about their ethnic group, and that knowledge increased significantly in the eyes of the students. Clearly, the salience of that information increased greatly as well. Likewise, the students developed an even greater awareness
of racism and discrimination against their ethnic group. Compared with a more intuitive awareness at the precollege level, as advanced college students, their sense of discrimination was more analytical. The students learned more about different dimensions of discrimination (e.g., individual and structural) and were better able to recognize its multiple manifestations.

The increase in salience of the students’ ethnic identity was expressed in their descriptions of how ethnic identity now impacted their thinking. Most of the students testified that their ethnic identity exerted a strong influence on their plans for further education, career, and family (including the type of neighborhood in which they wanted to live). All the students said the continued development of their ethnic identity was important to them. They often described a form of praxis (Darder, 2002) in which they would work to learn more about their ethnic group while taking action to improve the conditions among their ethnic community.

An interesting facet of this study is the significant development of the students’ ethnic identity that occurred within the context of a campus climate described in unequivocally negative terms by the students. The students, with obvious alert antennae (Smith et al., 1997), perceived a distinct lack of structural diversity (Hurtado et al., 1999) on their campus with very few students or faculty of color. They reported an equally negative psychological climate for diversity (Hurtado et al., 1999) with a low level of concern for diversity among the student body and an almost nonexistent commitment from the institution to provide diversity initiatives (Milem & Hakuta, 2000).

In the presence of a weak institutional commitment to diversity, the students found alternative spaces that contributed to the development of their ethnic identity. All the students described their campus’ learning center as an environment with a diverse staff, curriculum, and student participants as a catalyst in their ethnic identity development. The students also described their peers as a major source of learning (Astin, 1993) about their ethnic group. Such learning occurred in both informal peer networks (Tinto, 1993) as well as in ethnic student organizations (Trevino, 1994) that supported their interest in issues reflecting their ethnic group. Interestingly, most of the students reported having diverse peer groups that included other students of color. Although their ethnic identity developed, these students did not “segregate themselves” in “ethnic enclaves” (Tatum, 1999; Tinto, 1993). As these students incorporated higher levels of knowledge about their ethnic group, they described a process of being better able to tap their parents’ history and culture for additional, salient information.

What emerged from this study is that these students reflected the voluminous literature that describes the centrality of identity development for college
students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For them, ethnicity was a key dimension of their identity development. In addition, the students perceived their ethnic identity development as a process that strongly impacted other college outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). A great majority of these students felt their ethnic identity development had a considerable, positive impact on their sense of competence, sense of belonging, interpersonal relationships, and commitments. Likewise, they perceived the increases in their knowledge of their ethnic group and its status as a subordinate, oppressed community (Darder, 1991) had a strong impact on the development of their analytical and critical thinking skills, problem solving, and communications skills, all described by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) as important elements of “intellectual and cognitive development.” This research indicates for some students, the process of learning more about one’s ethnic group and processing that information among peers and supportive college staff has beneficial effects on both cognitive and noncognitive outcomes.

In addition to the students’ self-described increases in ethnic identity, most of the students felt they achieved a high level of biculturalism (Darder, 1991; Rendon et al., 2000) during college. Although some described a continuing struggle to function comfortably in the dominant culture, most felt they could be effective and comfortable in both their subordinate and the dominant culture (Darder, 1991). This outcome goes beyond the notion of ethnic identity as increased knowledge and salience regarding one’s ethnic group to describe behavior that effectively operationalizes one’s cultural competence.

In considering the findings of this study, it bears repeating that these were successful students who had broken the pattern of “minority underachievement” (Massey et al., 2003). They all graduated from a selective, research intensive, predominantly White university with a strong GPA. Most had plans for graduate or professional school. Clearly, the development of a strong ethnic identity did not undermine these students’ achievement and in fact appears to have enhanced it.

As teachers, researchers, and student affairs practitioners at a highly selective, predominantly White university, we are often struck by the many students of color we work with who feel a strong, obvious connection to their ethnic group. Based on the assimilative pressure often found in higher education (Darder, 1992; Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005), one might expect that the rigorous process of accessing and succeeding at such a selective institution would condition a response from these students to assimilate and avoid the development of an ethnic identity. Clearly this did not occur. Instead, the students in this study continued to further develop their ethnic identity despite the pressures they may face at a predominantly White institution.
Students in this study continued to seek out more information about their ethnic group and are often actively engaged on campus and/or their community to improve the conditions and educational achievement of their ethnic group. We found such students to be unusually bright, inquisitive, hard working, and high achievers. In many cases, they have surmounted incredibly difficult economic, cultural, family, personal, and immigration barriers to experience growth in development in many areas.

Furthermore, this study involved participants who were high achieving and academically successful students. They also involved themselves in student leadership roles across campus. It is important to note that these characteristics may serve as a limitation to the study, reflecting only students’ success stories. However, the findings still prove to be of value for understanding salience of ethnic identity as a critical student outcome. Future investigations should incorporate broader samples of students of color. For example, future studies can incorporate the relationship of ethnic identity to students with varying academic accomplishments and levels of campus involvement.

**Policy Implications**

This study confirmed other research (Hurtado, Gonzalez, & Vega, 1994; Hurtado, 1994; Tatum, 1999; Oyserman et al., 2002) that supports the importance of a well-developed ethnic identity in the adjustment of underrepresented students of color and their subsequent success (i.e., achievement, learning, and development), particularly in predominantly White institutions. In their sizable database of successful students of color at selective universities, Massey et al. (2003) also found evidence of a strong ethnic identity. Given such emerging evidence, the experiences of the students in this study offered several insights into institutional policy and practice that might contribute to the development of students’ ethnic identity.

Although these students formed a well-developed ethnic identity within the crucible of a predominantly White institution perceived by the students as largely unsupportive of ethnic diversity and equity, that formation was shaped by “membership” (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) in supportive “subcommunities” (Tinto, 1997). In the short range, institutions can provide additional support for such spaces to increase their positive contribution to the ethnic identity of underrepresented students of color. As seen in this study, such spaces included ethnic student organizations (Loo & Rolison, 1986; Trevino, 1994; Smith et al., 1997); learning centers that provide culturally responsive tutoring, counseling, and diversity initiatives (Smith et al., 1997; Velasquez, 1997); and cultural centers (Smith et al., 1997).
In addition to such alternative subcommunities (which are often the province of student affairs divisions on college campuses), academic departments can also provide a substantial contribution to the development of students’ ethnic identity. A more diverse curriculum that increases students’ knowledge of the culture and history of underrepresented groups and engages their status as oppressed/subordinate groups in the U.S. racial hierarchy would be a major contribution (Feagin, 2000; Milem & Hakuta, 2002; Smith et al., 1997). Likewise, institutions could provide inspirational, “transformative” (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001) role models by hiring faculty of color (Feagin, 2000). Such faculty are generally more inclined to develop and teach a diverse curriculum (Milem & Hakuta, 2002).

Although such positive steps might make a significant contribution to students’ ethnic identity, they do not take the place of comprehensive institutional transformation (Rendon et al., 2000). Such transformation requires a strong commitment from institutional leadership (Milem & Hakuta, 2002; Smith et al., 1997):

Comprehensive commitment to the value and significance of campus diversity is a key, the research suggests, to the effectiveness of diversity initiatives. This commitment must pervade the institution from senior administrators through faculty and staff; it must be communicated and demonstrated to students. It cannot be solely the work of the student affairs staff, a small group of faculty, or those who are directly served by diversity programs. Throughout the research literature, we have uncovered consistent, positive outcomes for students who perceive that their campus has made a strong commitment to the value of diversity. (Smith et al., 1997, p. 39)

A major component of such institutional commitment might focus on the comprehensive assessment of campus climate. Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1998) argued that higher education institutions should conduct such an assessment using a framework that identifies the multiple dimensions of campus climate. Such an assessment can be used to identify and implement strategies to construct institutional conditions much more supportive than those experienced by the students in this study. Hurtado et al. (1998) posed two questions for campuses to consider in assessing their commitment to diversity and equity:

(a) How diverse does the campus look in its representation of different cultural groups? And (b) to what extent do campus operations demonstrate
that racial and ethnic diversity is an essential value. (Hurtado et al., 1998, p. 297, italics added)

Finally, this study indicates that further research is warranted regarding the connection between ethnic identity development and an increase in other educational outcomes (cognitive and noncognitive). Much as more individualistic treatments of identity occupy a central space in the literature on college students in general, we need to know the extent to which ethnic identity is the major developmental challenge for underrepresented students of color. We also need to know much more about what experiences contribute to students’ ethnic identity development and how they shape such a process.

These policy implications outline nothing less than a thorough transformation of higher education in terms of how institutions treat equity and diversity. Darder (1992) used the principle of “cultural democracy” to describe supportive, equitable conditions that contribute to positive outcomes for all students. As we continue to study the developmental processes of students who have often been marginalized in higher education, we need also to study the processes of institutional change and the barriers to deconstructing institutional racism and other manifestations of White privilege (Lipsitz, 1995). The same factors that help underrepresented students develop their ethnic identity may well yield increases in other critical outcomes and a more diverse, positive learning environment for all students.

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