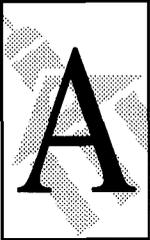


# Community and Group Identity: Fostering Mattering

by Daryl G. Smith



As campuses have engaged in the difficult dialogues surrounding diversity and multiculturalism, the concept of community emerges as one of the most elusive yet potentially important topics of discussion.

I see in the dialogues that occur, tremendous tension between those who call for a community of shared values and those who argue for the role of various groups on campus who support issues of diversity. The calls for community seem to have an important element of fear, often deep-seated, about “balkanization” on campus — the perception that student life on campus is highly segregated and isolated. At the same time, there is fear that hard-won efforts to create intellectual and support centers fostering diversity will be eradicated in some homogenized form of community. Some argue for the *Pluribus* and others for the *Unum* (Wong 1992, Cortés 1991, D’Souza 1991).

If institutions are to meet the challenge and the opportunities presented by increasingly diverse communities, it is clear that how we conceive of our institutions needs to be clarified. The angry rhetoric about balkanization (and even worse, “tribalism”), mostly focused on the existence and development of numerous support groups on campus, suggests that the choice must be between a unitary community of homogeneous “shared” values or isolation of individuals and groups. Framing the dialogue in this way ignores the segregated history of campuses in which groups were excluded or isolated by those in the majority, ignores the ways in which campuses continue to be inhospitable to those who are different, and serves to ignore the way in which support for both individual and group identities can create richly diverse communities that function effectively.

I begin with three assumptions: first, that institutions will need to have some core understandings that allow the institution to function; second, that learning occurs best when students are involved in their education through classes, subject matter, and institutional affiliations; and third, that the creation of multicultural communities has important implications for the society as well as to higher education.

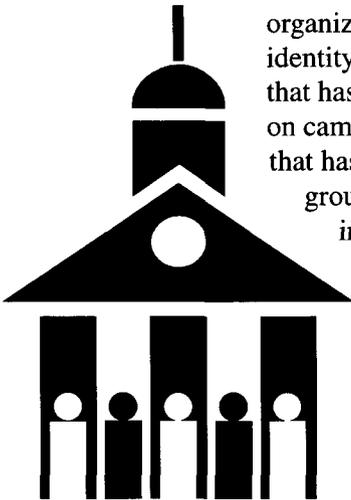
Nevertheless, the form and function of involvement and the development of community must be understood as multidimensional

and complex. I introduce two conceptual frameworks that might inform campus discussions. The first concerns the role of groups and memberships in groups, and the second has to do with the concept of “mattering.”

First however, we must not fall into the trap of imagining that this balkanization we see is a result of increased campus diversity. To do so, is to do what higher education has traditionally done — blame those who are newest to the institution for its weaknesses. The reality is that the life outside of the classroom for students has historically been quite segregated. The difference is that now groups can be visually identified by racial and ethnic group. The history of sororities and fraternities on campus has been one of exclusion. As a result many campuses have seen the development of black sororities and fraternities and Jewish sororities and fraternities — institutions that developed their own set of purposes and missions on campuses where segregation and discrimination were institutionally supported and condoned. Moreover, over the last number of decades, faculty life in departments, disciplines, and colleges has been characterized by balkanization, isolation, and “special interests.” Higher education has not paid much attention to its role as a functioning community for many years. With increasing diversity, that neglect is now becoming more obvious and the increasing number of racial incidents on campus are becoming more alarming.

It is very problematic, therefore, to blame groups such as those organized by race and ethnicity for the current lack of institutional identity and community on campus. Given the history of alienation that has been the experience of virtually every nontraditional group on campus (Smith 1989) and given the lack of genuine community that has existed for years, campus support services and support groups have developed to provide “safe havens” and support for individuals and groups that have been marginalized, if not harassed, for their presence on campus.

Moreover, the existence of these groups does not in and of themselves represent a threat to achieving a campus community that can function and, indeed, can thrive on its diversity. Group membership itself is not the problem. The existence of such groups that have now grown because of the increasing diversity of student, faculty and staffs on campus, has not only been one of reaction to an alienating and discriminatory environment. Most healthy communities that we can think of are characterized by numerous subcommunities and functioning groups; individuals are likely to participate in any one of a number of them. Indeed, the strength of the community is most often an integration of meaningful involvement as an individual, as a participant in important group functions and only occasionally in functions of the entire community. The concept of a community and the concept of belonging do not require and, in fact, cannot be achieved



on any but the smallest of campuses solely by identification with the institution as a whole.

We are comfortable as academic communities thinking of the uniqueness of the individual and respecting the rights of the individual. We are also fond of calling on loyalty to the institution as a whole. The increasing diversification of our campuses calls on us to remember and to acknowledge the importance of group membership as well. Indeed, whether the campus has created residence hall groups, advising groups, athletic teams, organization by college units, affiliations by major, or supported fraternities and sororities, groups have long been an established part of lives on campus. That is true for faculty and staff as well. Faculty meetings are times for faculty perspectives to be discussed. Staff meetings provide opportunities for staff issues to be worked on. Religious groups in our communities have been available for other community-centered activities that validate interests and identities. Cultural groups gather to celebrate, to worship, to educate so that cultural identities are not lost and can contribute to the whole.

What then might a healthy community look like? Is there a place for shared values on the diverse campus of today and tomorrow? How might an authentic community rather than a rhetorical or romanticized community evolve?

### **The Role of Groups in Community**

It is essential to acknowledge simultaneously the uniqueness of individuals, the ways in which some individuals share common identities, values, interests, or backgrounds with some others as part of groups, and the ways in which members of a specific community or institution are like all others in sharing that institutional membership (Bacchetti 1991). All organizations, campuses, communities consist of a variety of subgroups and subcultures. Each of us is a member of some groups based on mutual interests (e.g., religious affiliations, charitable work, intellectual area) or background (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation) or organizational needs (e.g., staff, faculty, student organizations, departments, divisions). At the same time, we are individuals and, at least for very successful organizations, we feel identified with others as part of the whole.

Having speeches about shared values and using metaphors of the family are rarely adequate. The reality is that identification with the institution and involvement in education will most often be developed through meaningful membership in a variety of groups on campus, including involvement in classes and with faculty.

Loyal alumni are often indebted to the institution through meaningful participation in activities and groups of one sort or another. While commencement, orientation, and football games are all opportunities for the collective whole to be acknowledged, even these rituals are often strengthened through the acknowledgment of subgroups that participate in them. Indeed, the important institutional contribu-

tion to feelings of involvement is the coherence provided by the mission of the institution (Kuh et. al, 1991).

All too often, however, the groups to which marginalized individuals have belonged are often themselves marginalized on campus. While fraternity and sorority life has often been seen as central and important, racial and ethnic groups, gay and lesbian groups, and women's groups have often been seen as marginal and peripheral to the institution. All too often, they are seen as threats. They are not part of the institution's purpose or mission.

One of the central issues, then, in the creation of a multicultural community is not to debate the appropriateness of campus groups who support diversity, but rather to ask about the ways the institution brings to the center the role these groups play on campus. If a large research university truly believes and acts as if the activities of the Asian-American groups on campus contribute to its mission of educating leaders for the society, then rather than fostering balkanization, the university is fostering the resources it has for building a multicultural community.

### **Multiple Memberships**

Two of the most powerful vehicles for building on the strengths of campus groups are through individuals who hold memberships in multiple groups and through groups which interact. If I join a women's group on campus, I am not simply a member of that group interacting with other women. I am also a member of my department in which our concerns and interests as a faculty are developed. I also serve on numerous campus committees where I also share concerns and tasks with others. At its best, my work in any one of these groups is strengthened and informed by my work and participation in others. To the degree that each of these groups functions well, they serve to increase intergroup and interindividual connections and tasks. Moreover, because most of these groups have a task, they are more likely to create genuine collaborative efforts. All too often, however, groups do not function well — they do not encourage the full participation of those who are different. The result is that people retreat to the places where they matter and where their efforts can be worthwhile.

### **Mattering**

Thus, in addition to the notion of multiple memberships, campus communities must become more reflective on how involvement and belonging are developed. If involvement is central to education and indeed to a well-functioning community, what does it mean? While Astin (1985) and Pace (1984) have developed definitions for involvement and there are indicators for assessing involvement based on levels of participation (Pascarella & Terenzini 1991), I'd like to suggest that the concept of mattering (Schlossberg 1989) is potentially useful because it articulates some of the characteristics that foster involvement and belonging and because it focuses not just

on behavior but on perception as well. Schlossberg details four major characteristics of mattering:

- Attention — The sense that one is noticed — whether by one’s presence but often by one’s absence.
- Importance — The belief that what we say or do has importance. Whether in the classroom, where what one says is acknowledged for a contribution, or in groups, where one’s work or suggestions make a difference, a sense of importance can be generated.
- Ego extension — The feeling that other people will be proud or saddened by one’s success or failures.
- Dependence — The sense that a person or the group is counting on us. Whether that comes as a function of having a part in a school play or a meaningful task in a group, the sense of others’ dependence facilitates involvement and belonging.
- Appreciation — The view that our efforts are appreciated.

While mattering can be described in terms of the perceptions of an individual — the feeling that he or she matters — mattering can also be significant for groups. That is, not only can an individual matter, but a group can matter and be made to feel that it matters in the institutional community. It can be noticed, depended on, and appreciated.

If a campus is concerned about encouraging belonging and involvement, these five qualities would be good guides for behavior. All too often, the opposite behaviors are more common and thus promote the sense that one doesn’t matter. If a student misses class or a meeting, nothing is said. Work efforts often do not generate a sense that others are dependent on its completion. If a student fails to complete the work, there is often little done to acknowledge concerned disappointment.

## **Conflict**

Some of the fear that exists about balkanization might well be traced to the presence of conflict, anger, and tension on campus. While campuses may talk about celebrating diversity, there are times when conflicts of cultures, of values, of opinions, genuinely occur between groups — much as they occur among individuals, between faculty and administrators, etc. In other words, conflict is to be expected. The key indicator of a campus that is building a multicultural community is the degree to which conflict is used to inform or improve campus decisions, the degree to which processes are in place to “work through” the conflicts, and the degree to which persons from marginalized groups feel that they have a voice in resolving the conflicts. Moreover, in a pluralistic community, these processes, values, shared tasks, and goals must be worked out periodically so that the sense of participation in their creation is constantly renewed. This practice has been common in student life areas where the turnover of students requires that practices and values be

revisited periodically. Diverse communities and ones that are constantly changing also require that issues concerning mission and values be revisited.

If a conflict emerges, I certainly know that I matter if my point of view prevails. But clearly, that cannot be the only way to communicate that my perspective is important to a decision. Feeling that one matters does not emerge simply from the outcome. It also emerges from participation in a process that is genuinely open, participatory, and sincere about the different points of view that are emerging. Here campuses have an opportunity to develop processes that foster belonging and involvement — in a way crucial not only to the development of multicultural communities but also to the success of campus participants whether they be students, faculty, staff, or groups. The characteristics of mattering — attention, importance, ego extension, dependence, appreciation — can be built into decision making.

With 85 percent of the students in higher education participating in large public universities, involvement, belonging, and mattering will most likely occur through institutional subunits and groups who themselves are valued and matter in the institution. The question, then, of building community is not one of de-emphasizing difference — it is, rather, acknowledging that we are members of multiple groups and that within and between these groups our connection with an institution is developed.

## **Implications for Practice**

### **1. Encouraging group membership**

It is essential to strengthen the role of groups on campus and support the efforts of groups that have been traditionally marginalized but that support the efforts to create a multicultural community.

### **2. Encouraging multiple group memberships and intergroup work**

The health of the community is reflected in the degree to which individuals participate in multiple groups bringing students, staff, and faculty together in a variety of ways and the degree to which intergroup work is facilitated and practiced.

### **3. Developing the means by which individuals and groups can genuinely matter in a class, on campus, in residence halls, in groups, etc.**

To feel that one matters is generated by the behavior of individuals toward other individuals and groups and is most significant when institutional members assist in helping students feel that they matter.

### **4. Developing the processes by which conflicts will be worked through**

Conflict cannot be avoided and in fact can be helpful in identifying important issues. Developing the means to bring out issues and work through them at all levels of the institution needs to be a focus of institutional efforts.

## **5. Developing a process by which the mission of the institution and the implication of that mission for all members of the community is discussed and articulated through genuine participation**

Again — shared values or working values — cannot be taken for granted; nor can they be too broadly stated. They must be discussed, articulated, and revisited periodically, in ways that minimize foreclosing on the benefits of diversity.

The current debate between community and diversity is a false one. It serves to polarize groups and jeopardize the many more opportunities to build involvement that diversity on campus brings.

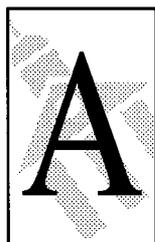
Involvement and belonging can be developed through the development of multiple group memberships and through participation that matters.

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# Under the Skin

by John Lahr



Anna Deavere Smith is a lithe, clear-eyed, forty-two-year-old actress and Stanford theatre professor who has done a great thing. She has gone into this noisy republic and, combining the editorial skill of the biographer and the precision of the mimic, has brought onto the American stage the voices of the unheard. She is offering, in what she calls “a parade of color,” a new framework from which to assess race and class in American culture. She is not writing polemical theatre but, better, doing theatre politically. “It’s crucial that whites in the audience find points of identification,” she wrote in a memo to one of the dramaturges of her most recent piece, *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* which is at L.A.’s Mark Taper Forum until July 18 and opening late October at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton. “Points of empathy *with themselves*,” she added. “To create a situation where they merely empathize with those less fortunate than themselves is another kind of theatre. . . . My political problem is this: Privilege is often masked, hidden, guarded. This guarded, fortified privilege is exactly what has led us to the catastrophe of nondialogue in which we find ourselves. I’m not talking about economic privilege. I’m talking about the basic *privilege* of white skin which is the foundation of our rare vocabulary.”

Smith wants to breach this fortress by including both people of color and their unofficial language in the public debate. She speaks heart to heart with her subjects who, in turn, speak memorably to us. There is no buttonholing, no buzz of sound-bites, nothing from the bargain basement of sociology. Instead, like the Billie Holiday song, she asks heartache to come in and sit down. That she succeeds completely is a testament to the integrity both of her performance and of the complex, often poetic feelings she coaxes out of her subjects. *Twilight*, which distills more than 170 interviews into an hour and three-quarters, attempts, through 27 narratives, to take the pulse of Los Angeles between the Rodney King incident, of March 3, 1991, and the federal trial that ended this April with the conviction of two L.A. policemen for violating King’s civil rights. The play — the fourteenth installment of a series she calls “On the Road: A Search for American Character,” which came to national attention in 1991 with her award-winning “Fires in the Mirror,” about Brooklyn’s Crown Heights riots that year — is a bold, prodigious democratic gesture that calls to mind Walt Whitman’s dictum “The United