(Mis)Understanding Students

Approaches to *Affirming Student Identities*

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ADVISING **SUCCESS** NETWORK

NASPA®
Student Affairs Administrators
in Higher Education

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is meant to serve as a resource for institutional leaders whose decisions are critical to shaping campus culture and systems. As institutions seek to change their structures, processes, and policies to better serve students, a holistic lens— one that takes into account students' intersecting identities and differences in lived experiences—is required.

Interviews with practitioners in the field of higher education and the student affairs profession inform the guide's key claims and insights, which offer a national, field-level context. The considerations and resources presented here can help senior leaders recognize systems and practices that cause harm for students and campus communities. The authors emphasize the importance of investing time and resources to recognize and address needs at the local level. Further, while insights shared here have relevance for understanding students broadly, this research focuses on a limited number of student identity groups due to limitations in project time and scope of data collected.

This guide first examines three areas related to understanding student identity and for which additional institutional attention is needed, as well as presents questions for reflection. The following section outlines common ongoing misunderstandings about student identity groups, outdated language, and suggestions for improvement. Finally, the guide offers a compilation of resources and tools for understanding students.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE ADVISING SUCCESS NETWORK

Formed in 2018, the Advising Success Network is a dynamic network of five organizations, led by NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, partnering to support educational change and improved student outcomes through a holistic approach to advising, addressing the operational, programmatic, technological, and research needs of colleges and universities in direct support of a more equitable student experience. Partner organizations include Achieving the Dream, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, EDUCAUSE, NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising, and the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.

The pursuit of equity is fundamental to the network's mission. A key focus of the network is to help institutions better understand their student populations, and to support students from a wide range of backgrounds and identities through advising and other student services. This includes helping institutions understand what questions to ask students, how to use students' information ethically, how to create culturally responsive student services, and how to set up and use analytics technologies ethically. Services developed and offered by the network focus on the student experience; support institutions in defining and reaching their equity goals through advising and student support initiatives; and help institutions include perspectives from multiple audiences such as faculty, staff, administrators, student services professionals, policymakers, campus leaders, researchers, and students.

One result of this focus is NASPA's development of a resource geared toward institutional leaders. This guide synthesizes learnings—from practitioners in the field of higher education—about ways of understanding students and ways to redesign approaches aligned to equitable student outcomes. NASPA's guide will become one of several resources integrated into the network's toolkit for providing advising redesign support to institutions. One part of the network's vision for redesigning holistic student supports is articulating the need for institutions to better understand intersecting social identities.

RESEARCH APPROACH

n April 2020, NASPA began researching student subpopulations and ways to think about their identities, mindsets, and motivations. Part of the background research involved conducting a theme analysis of Gohn and Albin's (2006) *Understanding College Student Subpopulations: A Guide for Student Affairs Professionals*. Additional analysis included desk research and an examination of two books published by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition: Schreiner et al.'s (2012) *Thriving in Transitions: A Research-Based Approach to College Student Success*; and Baldwin et al.'s (2020) *Promoting Belonging, Growth Mindset, and Resilience to Foster Student Success*.

NASPA then conducted semistructured interviews with 33 student affairs professionals to explore student experiences and development in relation to student identities. Interviewees include several chapter authors of the *Understanding College Student Subpopulations* book and representatives from 13 of NASPA's 37 Knowledge Communities, which are member-driven volunteer networks that support community-curated resources, opportunities to leverage expertise into meaningful initiatives, and development strategies and tactics to advance key higher education issues (NASPA, n.d.-a).

Interviews examined the following:

- trends in the field's understanding, over time, of different student identity groups;
- ways the field has moved toward holistic approaches to understanding student identities;
- current gaps in the field's understanding of student identities; and
- key principles for serving students and learning about their social identities.

Insights are from interviewees' perspectives as individuals—they do not speak on behalf of their employers—and findings are not intended to replace efforts by senior leaders to understand their own students. While insights shared here have relevance for understanding students broadly, this research focuses on a restricted number of student identity groups (due to limitations in project time and scope of data collected).

College students are not a monolith; there is no single student experience, and the unique combination of every individual's identities, motivations, and goals is complex and fluid. Institutional leaders who are committed to creating student-ready campuses must deepen, update, and challenge their knowledge about who today's students are and how to best serve them (McNair et al., 2016). Students indeed have some common needs; however, not accounting for student differences can lead to ineffective one-size-fits-all solutions. A thorough understanding of context can ensure that support services advance equitable outcomes and reach intended students at scale.

This guide is meant to serve as a resource for senior-level administrators whose decisions are critical to shaping campus culture and systems. As institutions seek to change their structures, processes, and policies to better serve students, a holistic lens—one that takes into account students' intersecting identities and differences in lived experiences—is required. A holistic approach requires intentional planning and integration of support services into a seamless, timely, and personal experience for every student (Achieving the Dream, 2018).

Interviews with practitioners in the field of higher education and the student affairs profession inform the guide's key claims and insights, which offer a national, field-level context. This framework will help inform institutional approaches to learning about students and socially and culturally constructed identities—namely, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, social class, first-generation status, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, religion, immigration and documentation status, veteran status, and involvement with the carceral system. The considerations and resources presented here can help senior leaders recognize systems and practices that cause harm for students and campus communities.

> *"A holistic approach requires intentional planning and integration of support services into a seamless, timely, and personal experience for every student."*

This guide first examines three areas of focus related to understanding student identity and for which additional institutional attention is needed, as well as presents questions for reflection. The following section outlines common ongoing misunderstandings about student identity groups, outdated language, and suggestions for improvement. Finally, the guide offers a compilation of resources and tools for understanding students. In alignment with the complementary work of network partners, this guide is part of a holistic package of resources for institutions seeking to understand their students.

Localized Contexts and Language

Over the past few years, the field of higher education has emphasized the need for institutions to become student-ready colleges (McNair et al., 2016). As institutions look inward, conducting an ongoing self-assessment of how systems align with local campus and student contexts is needed. The field's knowledge about and understanding of students is evolving and must be continuously updated at the local level at individual institutions.

Many of the early student development theories were largely based on the experiences of college students who were middle or upper middle class, predominantly White, Christian, cisgender male students who enrolled in school full time. Today, students seldom fit into such narrowly defined archetypes. Norms, values, and systems of higher education have historically been determined with a "traditional" student experience as a point of reference. As college students have become increasingly diverse, the field is thinking more critically about its model for delivering higher education and its approach to serving students. Today's approaches focus more and more on the strengths of students and how an institutional environment impacts student life.

Terminology about students and their socially and culturally constructed identities is now more inclusive and nuanced than in the past, but it is still changing. Referring to students as "kids" is largely considered an outdated reference, as the field has become more aware of the prevalence of older students returning to college or starting their education later in life. The practice of including pronouns in introductions by students, faculty, and staff who are cis, trans, and nonbinary or gender nonconforming is now more standardized than in previous decades (Ryan, 2014). Shifts in language reflect updates to research scholarship, legal definitions, media coverage, leadership philosophy, and levels of advocacy by students about how they would like their identities to be named and communicated.

Not all students with a shared identity will have the same preference about language. Words can carry different weight, meaning, and connotations for different students, faculty, and staff. Language preferences can vary among students across and within institutions. The field is becoming more aware of the implications of incorrect term use, the types of language-related microaggressions, and the problem of assuming shared intergroup preferences.

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Given its implications for how equity goals are determined, measured, and understood, terminology must be relevant to the campus context when disaggregating student data. For example, on a campus with a large population of Indigenous students, inclusive assessment efforts should encompass metrics that specifically count for differences among students who share this political identity, rather than lumping them into a broad metric on racially minoritized students. How an institution labels and defines its students can have consequences. Such categorizations influence how messages are framed; who is at the center of programming, policies, and practices; and who has access to certain resources on campus.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What is your institution's local history, and how are you addressing its connections with current practices and inequities?

- What are the implications of this history for understanding the students on your campus?
- How is your campus reifying systems of oppression?

What are your institution's various on-campus microclimates—described by Brown-Glaude (2009) and Siegal (2020) as localized norms and practices—and which students do they uplift or marginalize?

How is your institution collecting and leveraging local- and institution-level data to enhance your students' campus experiences and to inform decision-making processes?

How are definitions of diversity and of student identities/subpopulations localized and understood in your institution's systems, policies, processes, and practices?

- How might these definitions change in various contexts?
- How is your institution incorporating language that your students prefer and that resonates with them?

What systems are in place to gather and respond to student feedback about language?

- How is your institution adapting language so that it is affirmative and inclusive of all students?
- Does your institution have a system or process in place to remove negative and outdated phrases?

How are you and your institution continuously updating knowledge about who your students are and adapting/amending systems accordingly?

Intersecting and Changing Identities

A networked tactic, rather than an approach of identity segmentation, can better acknowledge the complexities and multiple layers of a student's identity. Students come to an institution with a unique mix of privileged and marginalized identities that can intersect with or compound each other in different ways. Critical to unpacking and understanding student experiences is recognizing the simultaneity of identity. Institutions must understand and address how multiple oppressive forces—such as racism, ableism, sexism, colonialism, and more—show up at the intersections of students' identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Bringing visibility to the multiplicity of identities and the ways systems can affect experiences is key to augmenting how the field serves students.

Additionally, some aspects of a student's identity are central and unchanging; others may shift over time and during key transition periods in life. More can be done in the field to evolve from an awareness of the need to serve students and their intersecting identities, to having a critical consciousness of its policies, practices and systems and who they are designed to benefit and marginalize.

> *Identity-based centers have immense value but are not a catchall way to tend to student identities.*

Identity-based centers have immense value but are not a catchall way to tend to student identities. Institutions should work to serve students in multiple ways across the entire campus. Compartmentalizing supports by a student's presenting identity is largely an oversimplified approach, and representation without meaningful engagement can have a tokenizing effect (Kanter, 1993). All aspects of a student's identity should be reflected within the fabric of an institution.

As the field has moved toward unpacking intergroup dynamics and complexities, multicultural and identity-based student centers have increasingly taken on more responsibilities and are often described as "mini-institutions." Students transitioning into college benefit from networks of support with campus community members—students, faculty, and staff—who share with them similar identities, experiences, and affinities. For some students, these centers offer a space for them to feel welcome, build a sense of belonging at the institution, and access relevant programming and services. Different centers at an institution may be located near one another so that students are served at the intersections of their identity.

Although many centers cater to specific identities, students may not choose to access identity-related supports for a variety of reasons. Although a center may serve as an affirming space for one or several aspects of a student's identity, that same space may be oppressive and marginalizing for other aspects of that student's identity. For example, LGBTQIA+ students of color may not feel comfortable visiting the LGBTQ resource center on campus because they may consider it a heavily White space. In this case, a center may not be a welcoming space for all members or students living at the intersection of multiple identities. Other students may not choose to publicly self-identify due to concerns about stigma or safety, or they may be shedding one identity for another.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What is the balance between providing tailored services and also recognizing that some students choose not to publicly self-identify?

How can the field balance serving the need for identity-based services while also moving away from labeling students or serving a single identity?

In what ways is your institution serving students' multiple, intersecting identities?

In what ways are multiple versions of a single identity being represented and supported on your campus?

- What systems are in place to ensure that scholarship, policies, processes, and practices do not include a deficit-based representation of students who have historically marginalized identities?
- How are student identities being represented visually and digitally?

How is your institution meaningfully engaging with students who have historically marginalized identities, while also avoiding placing the burden on those students to be educators?

What processes are in place for students to report microaggressions?

Thriving and Well-Being

Focusing on completion and retention rates can frame the field's understanding of success as the extent to which students are able to "survive" college—rather than whether students are thriving on campus (Schreiner et al., 2012). Over time, the field seems to have expanded basic needs and academic success-centered models into more comprehensive and holistic approaches. Meeting all aspects of well-being means helping students flourish spiritually, financially, socially, psychologically, academically, and in their careers. Schreiner (2010) found that students who thrive have more positive mindsets and satisfactory college experiences. Understanding student success based on level of thriving and positive mindset is an emerging focus for the field.

Holistic approaches also recognize that all services and supports could influence a student's identity development and well-being. Tending to a student's separate identities through isolated solutions is not a holistic approach. For example, supporting a student's religious identity requires more than creating a space for that student to pray. A student's culture can influence the form of religious practice or expression of spirituality, and may relate to multiple aspects of that student's college experience (McIntosh & Schreiner, 2013).

To serve students more holistically, perspectives from administrators with various expertise areas and lived experiences should be included in cross-campus decision-making processes. Organizational structures that proactively support and amplify these voices in more spaces must be in place. Collaboration can help direct attention to unnoticed opportunities or underlying tensions related to identity development. Moreover, disparate levels of funding can determine the degree to which departments can offer a holistic model of support. For example, if an office or center has a small staff serving many students, that space may be able only to prioritize basic core functions or need-based supports. Resources and leadership are necessary to expand capacity to engage in more expansive identity development and well-being programming.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Does your institution support and assess student success across multiple aspects of well-being?

Does your institution include representation and engaging multiple perspectives in decision making?

Does your institution consider student identities in decision making?

Does your institution adequately invest resources to support work at identity-based and cultural centers?

Do your institution's budgets and organizational structures support engagement with multiple perspectives and cross-campus collaboration?

How many steps does it take for students to find resources relevant to them on your institution's website?

Does your institution offer digital spaces where students feel comfortable and safe expressing their identity?

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COMMON (MIS)UNDERSTANDINGS AND RELATED RECOMMENDATIONS

The following discussions about terminology (mis)use, (mis)understandings, and recommendations are in the context of higher education and reflect a synthesis of insights from interviews as well as a considerable, though not exhaustive, examination of existing scholarship. The list that follows is a high-level snapshot of some ways senior leaders can help validate students' current realities and create supportive campus experiences. However, recommendations are not universally agreed upon and language applications and preferences do evolve over time. This list should also not preclude deeper reflection about the history and complexities of language and preferences, as well as institution-level definitions of students' racialized and social identities.

Use terms, designations, and definitions that students themselves use.

There should be some level of verification or self-identification from students about the terminology and language used to describe their identities. Different groups of students might advocate for or prefer different terms, and consultation with students themselves can help avoid harm caused from incorrect assumptions.

Seek to understand student experiences without placing the burden on students of any specific group to represent the perspectives of all students with their shared identities.

Students should not serve as uncompensated educators for the campus community. Institutions should consult and review existing resources—such as national, state, and local databases and relevant scholarship—and invest in educational tools or experts in the field.

Do not define students by the challenges they face.

Asset- or strengths-based approaches that recognize a student's abilities and knowledge should be prioritized. For example, instead of referring to students as *underserved* or *under-resourced*, it is more appropriate to emphasize the level of resources in their environment as a result of the underfunding of a system. Deficit

language should also be avoided and substituted with parallel language when making comparisons across groups (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Affirm, rather than dismiss, differences in student identity, worldviews, and cultural values.

Denial and dismissal of those student experiences, concerns, and values that conflict with the dominant culture are common microaggressions that cause significant harm. Not pathologizing students does not mean that their differences and various supports needed should be ignored; it means that students should not be treated like they are inherently flawed or wrong when they do not fit the socialized norm.

Race and Ethnicity

Race is a fluid, socially constructed notion and, thus, identities have been racialized; however, racial designations are relevant and currently function as meaningful identities. The terms *race* and *ethnicity* are distinct despite often being used interchangeably. The term *race* refers to groups of people who are categorized by physical characteristics that groups or cultures consider socially significant; race is not a universal concept for which everyone has the same understanding. The term *ethnicity* denotes a group of individuals with shared cultural characteristics such as ancestry/heritage, language, beliefs, and practices (American Psychological Association, n.d.-b; Northwestern University, Searle Center for Advancing Learning & Teaching, n.d.).

Avoid using the word minority *to refer to students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.*

The term *minority* tends to refer to non-White racial or ethnic groups and may be viewed as a pejorative (American Psychological Association, n.d.-b). The term can be isolating for students, and its framing which centers Whiteness can have a marginalizing effect. The term *minority group* is sometimes used if referring to a subgroup with characteristics different from those of the majority population. When used in the context of higher education, the terms minority or minority group can reflect an outdated assumption about who "traditional" college students are and can have harmful implications for how the field frames comparisons across student groups. *People/students of color* or *racially minoritized students* are currently more culturally significant and relevant descriptive terms. However, the term *people/students of color* raises criticism for centering Whiteness as the standard or default, in that it refers to people in relation to whether they are White or not. Considering that the White population is a minority worldwide, *students of the global majority* or *global majority students* are less deficit ways to frame student subpopulations and have

gained some traction (Columbia University School of Social Work, n.d.; People of the Global Majority in the Outdoors, Nature, & Environment, n.d.).

Be specific about racial and ethnic terms when appropriate.

When possible, use language and terms that are specific and contextually relevant when communicating about the race or ethnicity of groups of students (American Psychological Association, n.d.-a). If the ethnicity or nation of origin of a student or group of students is known, then being more exact when describing a student group may be more appropriate than more generalized descriptions (e.g., Hmong American or Vietnamese American instead of Asian American). When applicable, naming a specific racialized group of students instead of *students of color* or *racially minoritized students* is preferable.

Capitalize names of racial and ethnic groups.

Racial and ethnic groups are proper nouns and should be capitalized (American Psychological Association, n.d.-b). For example, the field has reached some consensus that Black should be capitalized when in reference to people of the African diaspora. However, *White* is capitalized inconsistently in the field. One school of thought is that capitalizing white can inadvertently empower white nationalists who capitalize white, and that capitalization is an undue benefit for White people. Others make the case that lowercase white enables White people to separate themselves from the legacy of Whiteness and how it currently operates as an identity that they benefit from (Painter, 2020). According to the American Psychology Association's (n.d.-b) style guide rules, both Black and White should be capitalized.

Do not hyphenate national origins.

Including a hyphen for identifiers such as African American or Cuban American implies that person or group is less American than others.

Note that the terms Black *and* African American *are not always interchangeable.*

American people of African descent may prefer either *Black* or *African American*. The term *African American* should not be used when referring to Black people who do not identify as American and/or African.

Note that the terms Latinx/a/o *and* Hispanic *are not always interchangeable.*

Latino or *Latina* generally refers to a person of Latin American origin and descent who can be of any background or language. The gendered application of *-o* and *-a* that follow the Latin prefix reflects the gender binary roots of the colonial Spanish language. The term *Latinx* is popularly used in the higher education context as a gender-inclusive way to acknowledge gender nonbinary people of Latin American descent and origin (Salinas, 2020).

That said, *Latinx* is not widely accepted by all people of Latin American descent. For example, the term *Latinx* can be seen as linguistically exclusive for people of descent from Latin American countries that are not mostly Spanish- or English-speaking (Salinas, 2020). The Quechua language does not have the letter "x" in its alphabet, and Portuguese speakers can pronounce the "x" in multiple ways. Additionally, outside of the higher education context, the term *Latinx* can be interpreted as having connections to languages of Indigenous communities of lands in Mexico. The term *Latin** is an alternative way to communicate about intersectional identities and experiences of people of Latin American descent (Salinas, 2020).

The scholarly understanding of the term *Hispanic* is that it refers to people from primarily Spanish-speaking countries (Salinas, 2020). Both *Hispanic* and *Latinx/a/o* refer to ethnicity and not race. The term *Hispanic* can be problematic given the implied assumption that students who are Hispanic are all Spanish-speaking, when this is not always the case. Assumptions about whether a student may be *Hispanic* or *Latinx/a/o* should not be based on name, appearance, or whether that student speaks Spanish. Terms used by an institution should be clearly and consistently defined.

Use the term Indigenous peoples *as an inclusive way to broadly describe the political identity of Native American students in the U.S. context.*

Language used about Indigenous identity can vary across contexts and is up to students themselves to define (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Referring to an Indigenous student's self-defined identity, nation, community, or tribal affiliation is always preferable.

Recognize that decolonization of higher education involves the divestment of colonial power.

Decolonization is not a metaphor for social justice or the general dismantling of oppressive systems (Tuck & Yang, 2012). The recognition that colleges and universities are on land stolen and appropriated from Indigenous populations is important, but such acknowledgment is not interchangeable with decolonization. Rather, decolonization requires a long-term process of returning stolen land and life to Indigenous peoples (Indigenous Corporate Training Inc., 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Examples of common language with racist origins include, but are not limited to, the following:

- **Tribe/spirit animal:** Both terms are appropriations of pieces of Native American culture (DiversityInc, 2019).
- **Pow wow:** The term is defined as a traditional and modern sacred gathering or ceremony involving one or more tribes; therefore, using the term as a verb or as a way to describe a business meeting or social gathering outside the Native American culture is inappropriate (DiversityInc, 2019).
- **Long time no see:** This phrase was originally used to mock Chinese immigrant or Native American speech patterns in English (University of California, Riverside, Office of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, n.d.).
- **No can do:** This phrase was originally used to mock Chinese immigrant speech patterns in English (University of California, Riverside, Office of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, n.d.).
- **Cakewalk/Takes the cake:** Before the Civil War, cakewalks originated as an elaborate dance by enslaved people performing for their enslavers for a chance to "win" a cake. The dance became popular during 1970s-era minstrel shows, which portrayed Black people dancing and aspiring to be like White people (Algonquin College, 2020; Gandhi, 2013).
- **Peanut gallery:** In vaudeville theaters, the peanut gallery was the name of a section, usually the cheapest and worst seats, where mostly Black people sat (Robinson, 2012).

- **Hold down the fort:** In the United States, the phrase has a historical connotation, referring to guarding against Native American "intruders" who were perceived as enemies (Robinson, 2012).
- **Sold down the river:** During slavery in the United States, enslaved people in the North were sold down the Mississippi or Ohio Rivers to plantations where chattel slavery labor conditions were much harsher (Gandhi, 2014).

Socioeconomic Status and Social Class

Socioeconomic status and *social class* are often linked but are not the same. A student's socioeconomic status is typically determined by either individual and/or family income, level of educational attainment, and occupation (Northwestern University, Searle Center for Advancing Learning & Teaching, n.d.).

Socioeconomic status can play into a student's sense of identification in a social class group (e.g., working class, lower middle class, upper middle class, owning class). However, socioeconomic status and attributed or self-identified social class are not always aligned. Social class is a broader concept that may include measures of socioeconomic status and the relationship with power, referent groups, cultural expectations, and socialization (NASPA, n.d.-b; Soria, 2018). A student may have a relatively high socioeconomic status based on family income but may identify or be perceived as being part of the working class due to differences in other forms of cultural capital.

Understand that a student's socioeconomic status is an incomplete measure for social class.

There is a need to have a broader and more nuanced understanding and assessment of social class beyond a student's family income and/or Pell Grant recipient status. A student may self-identify with a certain social class that is different from the social class group that others perceive them to be in. Ways to assess social class may include accessing data about whether a student and/or their family owns or rents their home or car; the highest educational attainment of a student's

parent(s)/guardian(s); neighborhood poverty levels; and the occupational prestige of a student's parent(s)/guardian(s).

Make the timing of office hours or socialization opportunities flexible.

Not all student are on campus during the "traditional" hours of 9 to 5. Offices or services open only during this timeframe limit access for students who work during the week or have care responsibilities during daytime hours. Flexibility with evening, early morning, or weekend hours is preferable.

Avoid correcting a college student's grammar, accent, or dialect.

Colleges and universities should avoid overemphasizing writing and speaking in Standard English, as this privileges upper middle class value norms (Flaherty, 2013; Kamm, 2015). Devaluing a written application because of grammatical errors can deny students opportunities for scholarships or other forms of recognition (NASPA, n.d.-b). Linguistic capital—the intellectual and social skills attained through a communication background in more than one language or style—is a form of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Multiplicities in expression, linguistic style, and vernacular dialects should be welcomed and valued by institutions. African American Vernacular English, for example, should be understood and treated as a different dialect from Standard American English rather than as a deficit. Other forms of communication, such as oral storytelling, should be incorporated into curricula.

Create an institutional fund to pay for voluntary student leadership opportunities.

Student leadership opportunities should not advantage students with more resources over others. For example, if spending on student government campaigns cannot be institutionally funded, a cap should be placed on the resources a campaign can spend (NASPA, n.d.-b).

Understand that technology ownership and online access varies among students.

A student's access to technology or reliable Wi-Fi should not be assumed (Messiah University, n.d.). Some students might not own their own laptops and rather rely on public libraries or campus labs and facilities for technology access. Computer labs and libraries on campus should offer flexible hours to provide students with broader access to these facilities. As a policy, last-minute assignments that require a computer or internet connection should be avoided. Additionally, some situations might require students to utilize technology when they are off campus. Institutions should offer programs that give students necessary technologies such as laptops, hotspots, and software.

First-generation Status

First-generation is federally defined as students whose parents have not attained a 4-year college degree (Higher Education Act of 1965, 1998). This definition is not universally shared by all institutions, and definitions can even vary across an institution's departments and programs (Center for First-generation Student Success, 2017). Some institutions may define *first-generation* as students whose parents or guardians have no education after high school, or whose parents completed a 4-year degree at an institution outside the United States (Center for First-generation Student Success, 2017). First-generation identity can also contribute to a student's sense of social class identity.

Do not consider first-generation identity status as a proxy for low-income status.

First-generation college students have complex, intersectional identities, but it is a common misconception to equate being a first-generation college student with being low-income. Although supports for these two identities may overlap, campus leaders should recognize the distinctness of these identities. For example, both first-generation and low-income students may benefit from programming about navigating campus systems; however, it is critical to name first-generation,

low-income, and social class as separate identities, to prompt deeper student discussion about the ways lived experiences can be different and yet intersect (Goward, 2018).

Proactively and consistently define the term first-generation college student.

The term *first-generation college student* is often first learned in the context of college or university, and so it may be unfamiliar to many students. Potential confusion about first-generation status may also be due to differences in how programs and departments at a single institution define it (Center for First-generation Student Success, 2017). If a first-generation college student is being asked to self-identify for the first time within an application to an institution, they may not fully understand the definition or why they are being asked to share this information. When requesting this information, institutions may consider hyperlinking to a page specially about first-generation students, to explain why sharing this information matters.

Avoid higher education jargon.

First-generation college students are often met with an abundance of new terms when entering higher education spaces. This jargon—*add/drop, office hours, syllabus, satisfactory academic progress*—can be one more barrier that first-generation students must overcome. Also, it can perpetuate feelings of impostor syndrome. Connect first-generation students to resources and supports early; give them tools and knowledge about where to find help or ask questions.

Gender Identity

Gender identity is an individual's sense of self along a spectrum of gender that is expressed differently across individuals. Gender as a construct is influenced by societal expectations and definitions associated with being feminine or masculine (Northwestern University, Searle Center for Advancing Learning & Teaching, n.d.). Sexuality and sexual orientation are different from gender identity and expression. Gender identity is not the same as a person's romantic or emotional orientation.

Gender identity may not align with the gender a person was assigned at birth, their legal sex, or how their identity is physically presented to others. Similar to the use of *Latinx* to reflect gender inclusivity in identity naming, *womxn* is also used to include nonbinary or trans women.

Do not assume or qualify a student's pronouns.

Assuming a student's pronouns (he/him/his, she/her/hers, they/them/theirs, ze/zir/zirs, etc.) based on physical appearance can reinforce harmful cultural stereotypes about gender expression. A student's pronouns reflected on official documents should also not be assumed to be correct, especially if the institution includes only binary gender options on forms (Ryan, 2014). Additionally, a student might not be able to afford the costs of legally changing their name. If you do not know or have not asked for a student's pronouns, opt for nongendered or gender-neutral language.

When respectfully asking students to share their pronouns, avoid the phrase *preferred pronouns*, as it incorrectly implies that a student's pronouns are

suggestions (University of California, Davis, 2020). Similarly, the phrase *self-identified* in the context of gender can invalidate a trans student's gender identity (Dupere, 2015).

Know that student pronouns are not always static, and comfort levels with sharing them can vary.

Not all students will feel comfortable being asked to share their gender pronouns (Manion, 2018). Students may also prefer to be called by their names only and have pronouns avoided. Asking a student to share their pronouns should be done with care and thoughtfulness. Faculty and staff can proactively share pronouns with students and include these pronouns in email signatures and nameplates to help promote a climate of inclusion.

Pronouns may change depending on context; this may be due to safety reasons, stigma, or the comfort someone feels with sharing part of their identity in certain situations (University of California, Davis, 2020). Pronouns may also change over time, and this too should be respected.

Consider both macro and micro climates at an institution.

Despite institutional, campuswide, gender-inclusive policies and practices, some spaces on campus may foster unwelcoming microclimates (Brown-Glaude, 2009; Vaccaro, 2012). Institutions should examine spaces on campus that create such unwelcoming spaces or that could be more affirming of gender diversity.

Avoid gendered language and terminology.

Use of gendered language can be marginalizing for students with nonbinary gender identities and should be avoided when possible. The phrase *ladies and gentlemen* is an example of exclusive gendered language. Or, rather than *freshmen*, use *first-year students*—a nongendered alternative. Nongendered or gender-inclusive terms are always preferable (Tandet, 2019).

Other examples of gendered microaggressions to avoid include, but are not limited to, the following:

- using gender references in a demeaning way or in a way that perpetuates false hierarchies (American Psychological Association, n.d.-a);
- assigning students tasks or roles that reinforce stereotypical gender roles (Messiah University, n.d.);
- continuing to misuse pronouns even after a student indicates their correct pronouns; and
- gatekeeping bathrooms based on passing gender.

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation relates to heterosexuality, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and other nonmonosexual identities (LGBTQIA+; Northwestern University, Searle Center for Advancing Learning & Teaching, n.d.). The terms *heteronormativity* and *heterosexism* refer to the discriminatory cultural message that heterosexuality is the "normal" or preferred sexual orientation.

Know that students do not come out only once.

The process of coming out is repetitive, given heteronormative assumptions and different contexts relating to safety, trust, and individual relationships. Sharing an identity with someone does not solidify that the identify stays the same over time. A student's identity should not be shared with others without explicit consent.

Avoid heterosexist and heteronormative biases.

Deficit-framed narratives or language about LGBTQIA+ students may still be included in textbooks and course curriculums. There may be courses where there are little to no queer writers or researchers cited in a syllabus, or where material upholds outdated, stereotypical understandings about nonheterosexual orientation. Some social groups or identity centers and predominantly heterosexual spaces on campus may also hold subtle or covertly hostile views toward LGBTQIA+ students. Continued endorsement of heteronormative cultures can result in social exclusion, marginalization, and suppression of a student's identity.

Disability Status

Students with disabilities may include students with learning disabilities, permanent health conditions, or mental health conditions, as well as those with visual, auditory, or mobility disabilities. According to the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, the presence of a disability necessitates "(a) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of that individual, (b) a record of such an impairment, or (c) being regarded as having such an impairment" (§ 12102).

The ADA Amendments Act of 2008 broadened the definition of *disability* and no longer considers mitigating measures (e.g., taking insulin or Adderall to regulate diabetes or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, respectively, mitigates the impact of the disability but should not be considered when determining disability). It also reduced emphasis on third-party documentation. The regulations acknowledge that postsecondary institutions may request a reasonable level of documentation; however, requiring extensive medical and scientific evidence perpetuates a deviance model of disability, undervalues an individual's history and experience with disability, and is inappropriate and burdensome under the revised statute and regulations.

Consider that students may not always prefer person-first language.

Person-first language emphasizes that a person is not defined by their disability and that it is not a qualifier for someone's personhood (e.g., *person with disability* or *person with autism* versus *disabled person* or *autistic person*). However, some students may prefer identity-first language, as their disability is closely linked to who they are and cannot be separated. Under this thinking, for example, acknowledging a person's identity as a d/Deaf person is analogous to someone saying that they are Black or Asian. For some, their disability is central and inextricably connected to how they identify as a whole person. Students who prefer identity-first language to describe themselves should not be corrected. Person-first language is always preferable, however, when describing a medical definition or referring to a person's medical diagnosis, such as a person with Down syndrome (Ladau, 2015).

Adopt a proactive approach to removing institutional barriers for students with disabilities.

Rather than understand a student's disability as something that should be fixed, a social model of disability frames inaccessible environments and institutional barriers as disabling societal features for students with impairments (Mole, 2013). Institutions should proactively design accessible systems, policies, practices, and learning experiences to limit instances in which students with disabilities need to make accommodations requests (Mole, 2013). Supports should be built into learning contexts and student experiences so that the campus environment is accessible for everyone.

Align language with the social model of disability.

Ableism is deeply ingrained on most campuses, and language is where it is most evident. For example, asking students to walk around campus assumes ability to walk; whereas exploring campus is a more inclusive framing of this without losing the intent. Use of terms like *crazy, nuts, lunatic*, and *insane* to insult someone or describe something that is surprising or unexpected is another form of casual ableism (The Pennsylvania State University, 2018). Institutional communications about disability should be framed in an antideficit manner that identifies systems and environments as barriers to success for students with disabilities.

Students should be empowered but not forced to disclose disabilities.

Forcing students with disabilities to publicly discuss their disability or to "out" themselves in order to receive accommodations can be marginalizing (Messiah University, n.d.). Disability disclosure is a highly personalized and continuous process that can come in multiple forms. Some students may want to avoid

disclosure in certain spaces for a variety of reasons, including fear of stigma and that their intersectional identities will be reduced into a single identity based on their disability (Pearson & Boskovich, 2019). Students with disabilities have to grapple with questions around how to disclose, why disclosure is needed, to whom they need to disclose, and more. Institutions should examine the culture of disability disclosure on their campuses, and consider opportunities for improvement from an anti-ablest lens.

Religion, Spirituality, and Secularism

Religion, faith, and *spirituality* are related aspects of identity but have different meanings. *Religiosity*, or religion, refers to belief in a god or a group of gods and can involve following a set of doctrines and behavioral practices. Some students may express their religious identity through what they wear (e.g., hijab, crucifix, Star of David; Northwestern University, Searle Center for Advancing Learning & Teaching, n.d.). *Faith* reflects an individual's personal belief system but does not require culturally defined membership like religion does. The term *spirituality* largely refers to beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life and connectedness with the world (McIntosh, 2014). Individuals who are secular tend to have a more naturalistic worldview and have identities independent of any assumptions about the supernatural. The secular identity may include nontheistic people who are atheists, agnostics, or humanists (Secular Student Alliance, n.d.).

Ensure that academic calendars recognize all religious/cultural holidays; avoid having tests and project due dates scheduled during those times.

Academic schedules and official campus holidays are often centered on Christian holidays. This practice implies that students who observe other religious, spiritual, and secular traditions are not as highly valued to the institution as are Christian students. Academic commitments that conflict with non-Christian traditions and holidays can cause students stress and negatively impact their performance.

Accommodate dietary restrictions related to religious observance.

On-campus dining options and hours should reflect the religious diversity of students. For example, Halal and Kosher food options should be consistently included in dining halls. Dining hall hours of operation can also be a challenge for students whose mealtimes are restricted during observance of a fast. Dining hall schedules should be adjusted in accordance with religious holidays that call for fasting.

Immigration and Documentation Status

In the United States, *undocumented students* include those who do not possess a valid visa or immigration documentation. Documentation status is not universally understood as an identity. While students who are undocumented may share meaningful experiences and face common challenges, some may consider documentation status as a social condition that can influence identity development rather than an identity in and of itself (Reyes, n.d.).

The term *DACAmented* refers to those individuals who are eligible and have applied and received administrative relief from federal deportation laws and employment authorization under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program (Northern Illinois University, n.d.).

International students are those who hold citizenship in another country and have a student visa in order to pursue a college education or advanced degree in the United States. Undocumented students are not considered international students and do not have to meet the same requirements for enrollment (Northern Illinois University, n.d.).

Know that documentation status is not an exclusively Latinx and Hispanic student issue.

The media tends to frame the conversation about undocumented students through the lens of Hispanic and Latinx immigrants, despite the prevalence of undocumented immigrants who are Asian, Pacific Islander, or Black. The experiences of undocuLatinx students, undocuBlack students, and undocuAsian students are not the same. For example, undocumented Black immigrants are detained and deported at 5 times the rate of any other demographic (Scott, 2017). Programs and resources centered on the undocuLatinx experience can keep undocuAsian and undocuBlack students in the shadows.

Know that the term DACAmented *is not interchangeable with* undocumented.

DACA protects only a very narrow subpopulation of undocumented students. Although undocumented students with DACA and without DACA can be part of a shared community, key distinctions exist between the two groups. For example, DACAmented students are eligible for non-Federal Work Study on-campus employment, but this is not the case for undocumented students. Communications, resources, and programs should be specific and include statements like, "open to undocumented students with and without DACA."

Do not use the words illegal immigrant *or* illegal alien *to refer to individuals who do not have documentation to live in the United States.*

These words are offensive and dehumanizing. Use *undocumented* instead of *illegal* (Northern Illinois University, n.d.).

Veteran Status

Veteran is a legal term to identify a person who served in active military, naval, or air service, and was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). Student veterans or veteran students includes students who are currently or formerly serving members of the military, including active duty, National Guard, and Reserves, regardless of combat experience, legal veteran status, or GI Bill use. Depending on the institution, student veterans may be more narrowly defined and exclude those who are currently serving, have retired, or have been dishonorably discharged (Vacchi, 2012). Going through basic training is a formative and intense identity-developing experience that is shared among most student veterans in higher education.

The term *military-connected student* encompasses those who are currently serving members of the military, including active duty, National Guard, and Reserves; veterans, or formerly serving members of the military regardless of discharge status or whether they are retired; dependents of a currently or formerly serving member of the military; or surviving dependents of a deceased military service member (Community College of Baltimore County, n.d.; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.).

Measure campus support of student veterans in multiple ways, beyond numbers accessing a veteran center.

Some students might not feel comfortable self-identifying as veterans or might not feel safe or welcomed in veteran center spaces. Negative experiences in the military, for example, can cause a student to suppress certain aspects of their identity or to avoid self-identifying as a veteran. Additionally, if a student veteran stops using the resource center, that can be a signal of identity growth—in that they have gone through the military-to-college transition experience and had some level of success.

Support, rather than replace, the skills student veterans bring to higher education.

Approaches to serving student veterans are often centered on ways to support those with post-traumatic stress disorder, without much other substantive focus on pedagogy. Students in the military go through intense training and socialization that fosters a sense of responsibility, flexibility, unity, and cohesiveness (Student Veterans of America, 2017; Vacchi, 2015). This shared experience and development of competencies serve as strengths and should be adapted into a higher education context.

Show more than one version of your student veteran population.

Diversity, inclusion, and social justice have not been part of the dominant conversation regarding student veterans. Only seeing in posters or among veteran center staff cisgender White men can be an alienating experience for student veterans. Reflecting the diverse, intersecting, and nuanced identities of student veterans across multiple spaces is critical.

Formerly Incarcerated Status

Formerly incarcerated describes individuals who were in a carceral setting (e.g., prison, immigration detention centers, local jails, juvenile detention centers) and have now been released. The term *carceral system* is an antideficit description of the criminal justice system. Not all who commit a crime enter the system, and justice is applied unevenly and understood in varying ways (Berkeley Underground Scholars, 2019). Because conceptions of justice are relative, *system-impacted* is a more student-centered term and is preferred over *justice-impacted*.

System-impacted students refers to students involved with the carceral system in a variety of ways—including those who have been incarcerated, those who have been or are on parole or probation, and those with arrests/convictions but no incarceration—as well as those who have been impacted by a loved one's incarceration (Berkeley Underground Scholars, 2019).

Do not reduce a student's identity to the conviction type.

Labeling students as *violent offenders, drug offenders,* or *felons* is dehumanizing; specifying the type of crime involved is rarely necessary and should be avoided when possible. Referring to students using terms such as *ex-convicts* or *ex-felons* is also marginalizing and implies that a student is not welcomed or accepted (Berkeley Underground Scholars, 2019). Changing language helps destigmatize former involvement with the carceral system (Johnson, 2020).

Do not require student disclosure of justice involvement.

Requiring campus background checks and that applicants report criminal records limits access to valuable employment, scholarship, and experiential learning opportunities for formerly incarcerated students. Self-identifying can also be challenging for students as they are shedding one identity for another as they are transitioning into their identity as a student (Johnson, 2020).

Create long-term structures and visible supports for formerly incarcerated students.

Formerly incarcerated students are receiving more attention in the field now than they have in past, despite having been on college campuses for some time. Formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students should not be tokenized; this group requires long-term investments in resources and visibility across campus. Students should be able to easily identify resources on their campuses and online.

CLOSING CONSIDERATIONS

This guide offers an overview of areas of attention for growth. Senior leaders should use this guide as a field-level resource to help make the case for updating and contextualizing their knowledge about students. In an effort to motivate introspection and campus dialogue, this guide highlights common misunderstandings and antiquated verbiage; however, the guide is not comprehensive and does not intend to suggest that administrators must memorize every possible microaggression and term listed herein. The guide's goal is to encourage leaders to recognize, correct, and prevent harm against students. Developing a praxis of understanding about students' socially and culturally constructed identities has no fixed arrival point; it requires continual learning, listening, and updating of knowledge.

Those looking for additional information and support should visit https://www.advisingsuccessnetwork.org/resources.
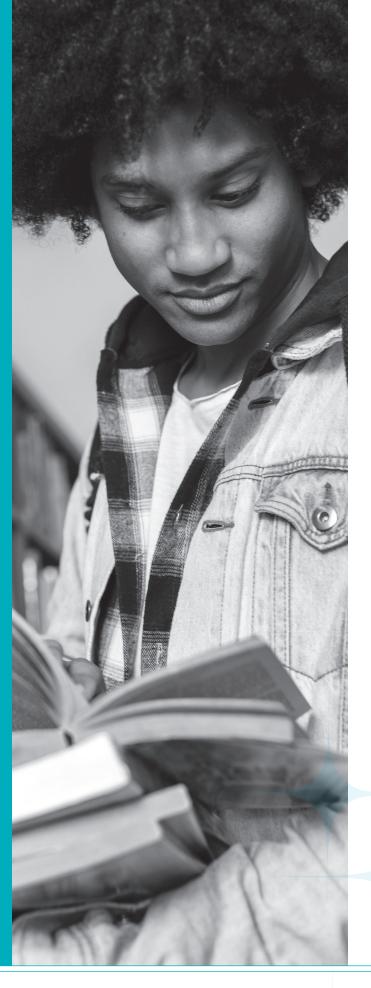
RESOURCES AND TOOLS

NASPA Knowledge Communities, Initiatives, and Events

- African American Knowledge Community: https://www.naspa.org/division/african-american
- Asian Pacific Islanders Knowledge Community: https://www.naspa.org/division/asian-pacific-islanders
- Center for First-generation Student Success: https://firstgen.naspa.org/
- Disability Knowledge Community: https://www.naspa.org/division/disability-knowledge-community
- Formerly Incarcerated Students & System Impacted Families Knowledge Community: https://www.naspa.org/division/formerly-incarcerated-students-and-system-impacted-families-knowledge-community
- Gender and Sexuality Knowledge Community: https://www.naspa.org/division/gender-and-sexuality
- Indigenous Peoples Knowledge Community: https://www.naspa.org/division/indigenous-peoples
- Latinx/a/o Knowledge Community: https://www.naspa.org/division/latinx/a/o
- Men and Masculinities Knowledge Community: https://www.naspa.org/division/men-and-masculinities
- NASPA Multicultural Institute: Advancing Equity and Inclusive Practice: https://www.naspa.org/events/naspa-multicultural-institute-advancing-equity-and-inclusive-practice1
- Socioeconomic and Class Issues in Higher Education Knowledge Community: https://www.naspa.org/division/socioeconomic-and-class-issues-in-higher-education
- Spirituality and Religion in Higher Education Knowledge Community: https://www.naspa.org/division/spirituality-and-religion-in-higher-education
- Transracial Adoptee and Multiracial Knowledge Community: https://www.naspa.org/division/transracial-adoptee-and-multiracial-knowledge-community
- Undocumented Immigrants and Allies Knowledge Community: https://www.naspa.org/division/undocumented-immigrants-and-allies
- Veterans Knowledge Community: https://www.naspa.org/division/veterans
- Virtual Symposium on Military-Connected Students: https://www.naspa.org/events/naspa-virtual-symposium-on-military-connected-students
- Women in Student Affairs Knowledge Community: https://www.naspa.org/division/women-in-student-affairs

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Additional Resources

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Student Personas as a User Design Tool

Personas are depicted as fictional characters that represent motivations, needs, and experiences of real groups of people. Alan Cooper's (1999) germinal book, *The Inmates Are Running the Asylum*, introduced personas as a way for software developers to keep customers at the center of product and service design. Typically, a persona has a name, sometimes with a tagline that characterizes it, followed by a narrative with details about the user divided into subsections. Most personas include a visual representation so that they seem more realistic. A signature aspect of a persona layout is that it offers a snapshot of information in a clear and digestible way. Personas are now widely used in a variety of industries for marketing, product development, service design, and communications.

Personas offer a range of benefits, some of which include using them to do the following:

- Build empathy and understanding about users in a memorable and clear way.
- Establish alignment about users in language that can be widely understood when referenced (Nielsen & Hansen, 2014)—for example, "this form of service delivery would make sense for Maria but would not work well with Andrew given his technology constraints when at home."
- Facilitate more nuanced discussions about how to serve a set of users grouped by similar patterns and key attributes.

Personas can serve as a powerful resource when strategically used alongside other tools for understanding and designing user experiences. However, the perceived usefulness of personas is limited when created or used improperly. The value of personas can hinge on their credibility, scope, and purpose.

The credibility challenge is rooted in the belief that qualitative data gathered from a small group of individuals are too subjective, meaning that insights drawn from personas cannot be statistically valid (Salminen et al., 2018). Difficult to validate on a large scale, personas are subject to varying degrees of bias depending on the approach used to create them. Distrust about rigor can also arise when personas are created in isolation, excluding from the process those meant to use them. In order for personas to hold value, stakeholders who use them must believe that they are credible tools that offer new, helpful information (Salazar, 2018). For stakeholders to use personas, they have to believe in them, feel invested in them, and have ownership over them. The most successful personas are created with involvement from their end users.

Another persona pitfall is when its scope is either too broad or too narrow. The choice about the level of details to include in a persona poses tradeoffs. On the one hand, the more specificity added to a persona, the less accurately it reflects the reality of the whole user group; on the other hand, trying to pack extensive amounts of real-user quantitative data into a persona can lead to vague descriptions that seem unrealistic (Salminen et al., 2018). Persona developers should be mindful about balancing accuracy with precision (Adlin, 2017).

A persona's purpose influences the methodology and data sources used, as well as the user characteristics included in the description. A common challenge with personas is when the same descriptions are used to try to satisfy different purposes over time. For example, a persona used for marketing may highlight a customer's level of desire for a product or other categories related to how a product fits with their lifestyle (Floyd et al., 2008). This type of information would have less relevance for a designer looking for gaps in services provided and who has more interest in knowing persona pain points. Personas should be continuously updated and revised to align with new goals and target specific design problems.

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