

**Promoting Racial Understanding in Higher Education: Examining the Results of the  
Wabash National of Liberal Arts Education on College Students' Identity Development**

Question #2

Developmental Analysis of Student Data

Author: Roy Y. Chan  
E-mail: [roy.chan@bc.edu](mailto:roy.chan@bc.edu)

ED 778: Theories of Student Development in Higher Education  
Instructor - Dr. Karen D. Arnold

Boston College  
Lynch Graduate School of Education

May 7, 2013

**Importance to College Students of Promoting Racial Understanding, on Scale of 1-4**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Start of Frosh Year</b>	<b>End of Frosh Year</b>	<b>Senior Year</b>
White	2.47	2.32	2.31
Black	3.26	3.18	2.95
Latino	3.13	2.93	2.82
Asian	2.88	2.63	2.74

Source: <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/04/10/study-suggests-students-grow-less-interested-promoting-racial-understanding#ixzz2ZL8Rud1r>

The survey results of 6 liberal arts colleges and 11 universities conducted by the Wabash National of Liberal Arts Education as shown above had reminded me of three developmental theories: 1) Cross and Fhagen-Smith's (2001) theory of Black identity development, 2) Jean Kim's (2001) theory of Asian-American identity development, and 3) Jean Phinney's (1989) theory of ethnic identity development.

Before examining the findings, it is important to note that the authors of the Wabash National Liberal Arts Education did not provide specific information regarding the geographical location, generational status, sexual orientation, and/or acculturation levels of the students that were sampled in this study. For instance, some campuses may be more predominantly white than other campuses. This difference can affect students' perceptions and desires to promote racial understanding on-campus. In addition to demographics, the higher education researchers also didn't provide information on whether the students sampled were mixed-race backgrounds or biracial groups. For instance, some students who consider themselves as multiracial may be pressured to conform to a specific way that is based on their racial heritage. This all may influence their views of ethnic identity development. Additionally, the researchers did not provide any statistical data on whether the students were coming rural cities, urban cities, or perhaps attended a historically Black or Hispanic-serving institution. For instance, most Latino students whose family immigrated to the United States would likely experience more dissonance between Asian and Western values. As a result, Hispanic students racial understanding may

differ compared to traditional White privilege students. All of these factors can influence students' interest to help promote racial understanding from the start of freshman year to senior year.

Looking back at the Wabash data, one of the most surprising findings presented in this study is Black and Latino, where both racial groups had started their freshman year with high interests to help promote racial understanding on-campus. Despite their interest, Black and Latino did receive the highest drop in point scale (0.31) from start of freshman year to senior year. The large decrease had reminded me of Cross and Fhagan-Smith's theory of Black identity development where most African-Americans enter higher education under stage four *early adulthood*. At this stage, many Blacks start their freshman year with some idea of their self-concept of which being Black is salient. Generally, most African-Americans are pressured to reconstruct their self-concept. They are aware of the racism that exist and are often forced to change their self-concept in order for them to establish a healthy Black identity. All of this helps explain why Blacks earned the highest points of racial understanding among the four racial groups at the start of freshman year. Most have had past experience dealing with racism in K-12 education of which has forced many to construct their own identities to meet certain environmental conditions. As a result, most Blacks enter their first year with some prior knowledge and experience to help promote racial understanding on-campus.

Unlike the start of freshman year, the data also revealed that African-Americans had earned the highest points in their senior year. Though African-Americans did experience a significantly decrease to promote racial understanding in college, the changes in points can be explained by Cross and Fhagan-Smith's five stages of Black identity development: 1) pre-encounter, 2) encounter, 3) immersion-emersion, and 4) internalization, and 5) internalization-

commitment. From these five stages, Cross and Fhagan-Smith's believe that Blacks leave higher education institutions with multiple identities. Some Blacks enter senior year at the stage of *pre-encounter* where they adopt their certain beliefs and values from dominant cultures or groups while other Blacks, on the other hand, are at the *internalization* stage where they form superficial internalization of what it means to be Black. In other words, African-Americans often have multiple senses of racial identities. Some may associate themselves as *black nationalist identity* where they commit themselves to advance the black community while others may be *multicultural*, where they focus on a wide range of identities of being Black. Consequently, some Blacks become disappointed while others are overwhelmed with anger towards other racial groups. Thus, Cross and Fhagen-Smith's theory of Black identity development is often seen as recurring process that is not linear because their identity often changes daily as a result of the many new encounters and experiences they face of being Black in college.

Compared to African-American students, the data on Asian-Americans was also quite alarming, particularly the difference between start of freshman year and end of freshman year. According to the data, the two variables between start of freshman year and end of freshman year had contributed to a 0.25 point decrease, the highest decrease among the four racial groups. This big decrease can perhaps be explained by several external and internal factors. Typically, most Asian-American students have strong influence of Asian familial and cultural values. For example, Asian cultures tend to view their identity as connected to the family unit while Western cultures view identity as the development of a self-actualized, autonomous individual (Kodama, McEwan, Liang, & Lee, 2002). Though Asian-American families often develop stronger ties with their kin unit, many are still often pressured to meet family and societal expectations in regards to academic achievement and career choice. In general, most Asian-American students

are impacted by the “model minority” whereby parents expect their son or daughter to perform well in college. Because of the constant pressure they face in college, many Asians see higher education as very pragmatic, goal-oriented, and job related (Hune & Chan, 1997). This perhaps explains why Asian-Americans during their freshman year had decreased their overall interest to promote racial understanding on-campus because they are too busy worrying about what they want to study in college or what they hope to achieve after college. Hence, the researchers’ data that claim Asians had went down proportionally is not at all surprising in large part of the “model minority” stereotype of Asian-Americans, of which perhaps explain their disinterest in promoting racial understanding during the start and end of freshman year.

From a developmental context, Asian-Americans disinterest to promote racial understanding in college can be explained through Jean Kim’s theory of Asian-American identity development. From her theoretical framework, Kim proposes five stages of Asian-American identity development: 1) ethnic awareness, 2) white identification, 3) awakening to social political consciousness, 4) redirection to Asian-American consciousness, and 5) incorporation. During the start of freshman year, Asians can be categorized under stage two of *white identification*, where students K-12 experience have led them to accept their Asian identity and to become “Asianness” as a way to fit in a particular social crowd. Usually, Asian-Americans learn how to deal and overcome several cultural norms, such as, ensuring suffering quietly, avoiding public shame, and valuing a collective group orientation (Kim, 2001). Because Asian-Americans are often made fun of during their K-12 education, it is perhaps likely that most Asian students desire to promote racial understanding in college would be affected from their difficult childhood and adolescent experience.

Aside from the decrease, the researchers did report an interesting finding between Asian-Americans at the end of freshman year to senior year. According to the data, the researchers found that Asian-Americans were the only racial group of the four backgrounds to show some increase to promote racial understanding in college. This increase may be explained in Kim's stage four theory of *redirection to Asian-American consciousness* in which Asian-American students, particularly seniors, would begin to establish and develop a sense of pride of who they as a result of their family, friends, and the Asian-American community. In other words, the small points increase between end of freshman year and senior year perhaps indicate that Asian-American students were more likely to interact positively with other races. Despite the fact that the data claims Asians were the only group to show some increase, it is important to note that the small increase may be a reflection of Asian-Americans desire to work and play hard in college. Statistically, compare to Hispanic or Black, Asian-Americans are considered to be the majority individuals who hold a bachelor degree under the age 25. Thus, Asian-American desire to complete undergraduate education may help justify why the researchers found a small increase of student interest to promote racial understanding on-campus.

All in all, the difference between each racial groups had reminded me of Phinney's (1992) theory of ethnic identity development, where she proposed three stage models: 1) unexamined ethnic identity (diffusion-foreclosure), 2) ethnic identity search/moratorium, and 3) ethnic identity achievement. In general, ethnic identity develops from culture, religion, geography, and language. After reviewing the Wabash data, the researchers claims that Whites are considered to be the least likely to promote racial understanding. This is likely true because most Whites in America often have difficulty defining their own ethnic identity, otherwise *unexamined ethnic identity*. For instance, a White privileged student once stated, "I was taught to

see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group” (McIntosh, 1989, 10). In other words, white privilege students rarely consider issues outside their cultural experience. Thus, White students often enter college with little to no knowledge of their own ethnicity. Senior students who do become *achieved*, otherwise *ethnic identity achievement*, would often become less prone to promote racial understanding because many believe they have *achieved* a good idea of their own ethnicity. In other words, when students know more about their ethnic identity, they become less inclined to learn about other racial backgrounds and thus, would see less value to promote racial understanding on-campus.

In summary, all students identify or label themselves in more than one way. Some students may identify themselves as multiracial while others may identify themselves as biracial. Because of the wide range of racial backgrounds that are present in the United States, raising awareness of how race was constructed is critically needed on-campus to help all ethnically diverse students develop a sense of ethnic identity. Higher education professionals must create effective environments to which multiracial and biracial students can explore their identities and bond with others who share similar backgrounds. Furthermore, student affairs practitioners should openly support student race relations organizations that allow the campus community better understand racism, navigate different cultural values, and gain meaningful insights into why different background groups experience conflicts.