

Social Match and Persistence: Choosing the Right Campus or Work Environment Involves Consideration of Cultural Factors

Common Psychological Stressors for Postsecondary Students

Common psychological stressors of postsecondary students include problems associated with finances, academic adjustment, and social adjustment. Some specific examples include stress related to the development of a viable career pathway involving selection of a major and career; economic issues, such as college affordability; academic stresses due to increased academic level or volume of schoolwork; transitional issues within the family related to shifting roles; romantic relationship challenges; and social adjustments involving interactions with peers and others (Pryor, DeAngelo, Palucki Blake, Hurtado, & Tran, 2011). Some of these same stresses may be present as students transition from college to the post-collegiate workplace.

When individuals experience stress and do not choose adaptive (healthy) coping strategies, they are more likely to experience psychological distress (such as depression or anxiety) that may impact their ability to reach their goals; for students, this places the ability to persist to degree attainment at risk (Bean & Eaton, 2001). In fact, in 2011, a national survey of college freshmen found that only 17 percent sought personal counseling and about 25 percent of students left college before their sophomore year (Pryor et al., 2011).

Understanding Personal, Social and Cultural Factors in College and Career Settings

When there is a difference between familiar environments and the culture of the college campus or workplace setting, it can be a cause of stress. **Development of self-awareness in regard to choosing a supportive environment** for productive learning and effective work is a key element of success. Information from the prior PDI session on Career Information Processing theory is applied in this session.

As a review, from PDI session 1, three Basic Career Information Processing (CIP) Principles:

- 1. Self-knowledge is based on perception rather than fact, and is influenced by past experience and present feelings** (Peterson, Sampson, Reardon and Lenz).
 - Understanding a person's perceptions is an important task for college and career counseling professionals.

- 2. Knowledge about occupational options is based on facts that can be verified.** "What skills are required? Where do these occupations exist? What do they pay? What is the outlook?" (See Parsons' "Trait & Factor Theory.")
 - College and career professionals can assist students by providing access to current and detailed labor market information.

- 3. In today's fast-paced society, decisions will need to be re-made and adjusted many times over** (See H.B. Gelatt's "Positive Uncertainty.")
 - Teaching decision-making skills will allow students to approach inevitable changes over the course of their career.

Cultural difference between an individual’s culture and the dominant culture may be a source of positive energy and/or a source of stress, depending upon an individual’s unique personal characteristics and the contextual circumstances. Recall Hofstede’s cultural dimensions from PDI Session 1:

Hofstede’s “Layers of Culture”

As almost everyone belongs to a number of different groups and categories of people at the same time, people unavoidably carry several “layers” of mental programming within themselves, corresponding to different “levels” of culture. For example:

- *A **national level** according to one’s country (or countries for people who migrated during their lifetime);*
- *A **regional** and/or **ethnic** and/or **religious** and/or **linguistic** affiliation level, as most nations are composed of culturally different regions and/or ethnic and/or religious and/or language groups;*
- *A **gender level**, according to whether a person was born as a girl or boy;*
- *A **generation level**, which separates grandparents from parents from children;*
- *A **social class level**, associated with educational opportunities and with a person’s occupation or profession;*
- *And for those who are employed, an **organizational or corporate level**, according to the way employees have been socialized by their work organization.*

A goal of college and career decision-making is to help the student to engage in thinking about the implications of their choices, and to determine the pros and cons. **Remember, as the advisor in the process, the student’s values are the focus, not our own.** Where there is incongruence between the advisor and the student’s cultural experience, the aim is to understand the worldview of the student, focus on their experience, and avoid taking the stance of an “expert”.

Unique Stressors for Black Students in Predominantly White Postsecondary Settings

Research indicates that black students’ experiences of racism-related stress are related to psychological health (Pieterse & Carter, 2007). For black students, who may already be vulnerable to mental health problems due to family stressors, socioeconomic status (poverty or relative wealth), and deprived or dangerous home neighborhoods, there are additional stressors inherent in the educational environment (Xanthos, 2008). Specifically for black students in postsecondary settings, perceived racism on campus is an example of a widely cited race-related stressor (Harper, 2009; Singer, 2005; Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007). This perceived racism has been described in several ways, with some of the most commonly cited research discussing concepts of *onlyness*, *stereotype threat*, *social identity threat*, *everyday racism* and *microaggression*.

Coping Skills as Protective Factors

Many studies about coping skills have focused upon how people cope with general stressors common to all people (i.e., death of loved ones, loss of employment, divorce) and not upon responses to particular race-related stressors (Forsyth & Carter, 2012). Active (rather than avoidant) coping strategies are considered to be adaptive strategies and are correlated with positive mental health outcomes. Individuals who use active coping behaviors report lower perceived stress (Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010).

Choosing Between HBCU and PWI? Consider Cross-Cultural Competence and Cultural Humility

“The Huffington Post” Ran a Poll in December 2012 Asking:

Would you send your child to an Historically Black College or University (HBCU)?

- *Yes. The experience is like no other and has produced many high-achieving alum.*
- *No. Diversity is critical at both the college level and beyond.*

How would you answer?

Ideas to consider in advising students and parents who are trying to work through this issue:

- Two goals of postsecondary education are to attain intellectual and social capital and to be able to make decisions congruent with one’s values in terms of career choice. The ability to accomplish these goals will vary according to the individual student’s personality, strengths and challenges. Campus environments vary in their ability to meet individual student needs, and therefore it is possible for a given student to find that their needs are met at either a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) or an *Historically Black College or University*, but not necessarily at all PWIs or all HBCUs.
- Student self-awareness of the kinds of real-world cross-cultural skills he or she has will be helpful in making an effective match. Determine:
 - Is the student aware of the ways his/her own cultural background, experiences and attitudes affect his/her beliefs, attitudes, values and psychological processes?
 - Can the student identify where he/she falls in terms of racial identity development?
 - How has the student responded to perceived instances of racism in the past? Which coping strategies does the student employ? (Adaptive or maladaptive?)
 - How comfortable is the student in seeking out the company of others and interacting with people who are different in terms of racial background? In terms of social class?
- Speak openly with students, perhaps in a classroom dialogue, about past experiences in terms of being a member of a “target group” (as a person of color, being viewed as different or inferior in comparison to the dominant population) and a “non-target group” (the group that promotes mainstream experiences and receives unearned privilege):
 - When have you been a member of a target group?
 - When have you been a member of a non-target group?
 - What strengths resulted from your experiences as a member of either group?
 - Can you describe a time when you were treated as better than others as a result of membership in a non-target group?
 - Can you describe a time when you found yourself treating a person in a target group as less than yourself?

(Adapted from Applegate, 2009)
- Discuss what kind of cultural experiences the student has had in the past and what kind of experiences he/she might experience on the various campuses under consideration. When it comes to impressions of campus life at colleges under consideration, ask the student which statements are assumptions and which are facts:
 - What is the student’s source of information?
 - What is the evidence?
 - Is there further investigation to be done prior to committing to a choice of college?

Helping Students to Apply Self-Awareness to the Match Process

Helping Students to Create a “Logic Model”

Objective:

Students will engage in self-reflection and dialogue designed to increase self-awareness of personal characteristics that will assist in making an effective postsecondary or postcollegiate career match.

Method:

After creating a list of potential colleges that meet the student’s academic and financial needs, consider social needs as well:

1. Ask the student to identify his/her values in relation to social considerations. Point out that there is not a “right” or “wrong” answer to the questions, and the student may choose to complete the inventories privately if he/she wishes to do so without sharing all of the responses to the questions with the counselor.
2. Ask the student to investigate available campus resources and programs that are a match for his/her social interests (sports, music, student government, etc.) In the context of this conversation about social considerations, ask the student to research the kinds of racial, cultural, ethnic, religious and gender/sexual diversity fostered on the campus.
3. Have the student identify which of the schools would be a “logical” match, given the self-reflection on values and the apparent campus climate and social offerings.
4. Encourage the student to seek additional information and clarification about his/her assumptions by visiting the campus or by conversing with current students.

LOGIC MODEL TEMPLATE

Student's Insights

Student's Likes and Dislikes

Desired End-state/Outcomes:

LOGIC STATEMENT:

Investigation Strategy:

People to Involve:

Steps and Timeline:

Student Cross-Cultural Self-Awareness

Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes and Prior Experiences Inventory

	High (+)	Low (-)	Unsure (?)
<i>Knowledge about my own cultural background(s).</i>			
<i>Knowledge about other cultures different than my own.</i>			
<i>Interest in learning more about cultures different than my own.</i>			
<i>Knowledge of other religious traditions and belief systems.</i>			
<i>Interest in traveling and seeing other parts of the world.</i>			
<i>Willingness to try new foods.</i>			
<i>Ability to speak languages other than English.</i>			
<i>Interest in learning languages other than English.</i>			
<i>Likelihood of career requiring bilingual skills.</i>			
<i>Current contact with peers of cultural backgrounds different than my own.</i>			
<i>Understanding the customs, traditions and values of many cultures will be of importance to my work in the future.</i>			
<i>I have the ability to see things from many different perspectives.</i>			
<i>Others think of me as a leader.</i>			
<i>I enjoy leadership roles.</i>			
<i>I am shy in social situations.</i>			
<i>I am social, outgoing, and extroverted.</i>			
<i>I enjoy engaging in debates in classroom settings.</i>			
<i>Comfort in sharing information about my own culture(s) with others.</i>			
<i>Anxiety about interactions or "fitting in" with white individuals.</i>			
<i>Anxiety about interactions or "fitting in" with other people of color.</i>			
<i>Concern that my personal experience makes me very different from the majority of others of my own racial background.</i>			
<i>Confidence that I can get along with others well, regardless of their cultural background, beliefs or values.</i>			
<i>Level of acceptance of different cultures by my immediate family.</i>			
<i>Level of acceptance of people of different cultures by my current peers.</i>			

Analyzing your results: Discuss themes that emerge with your counselor or other advisor. How will your knowledge about yourself be useful in choosing the next steps in your educational or career path? What opportunities and characteristics will you look for in your investigation of each campus or work setting?

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