Democracy's College Podcast

Episode 41: Conceptualizing 'Sense of Belonging' Among Students
From Historically Minoritized Racial Groups Within Higher Education

Announcer Sal Nudo: Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series, a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. We encourage you to learn more about our office at occrl.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Colvin Georges Jr., a research associate at OCCRL, talks with Dr. Nidia Ruedas-Gracia about what it means to have a sense of belonging and discusses her research in this area. They also discuss how a sense of belonging affects college students from historically minoritized racial groups.

Host Colvin Georges: Here with me today for OCCRL's Democracy's College podcast, I have the honor of speaking with Dr. Nidia Ruedas-Gracia, an assistant professor of educational psychology and affiliate of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Dr. Ruedas-Gracia, thank you so much for joining us today.

Nidia Ruedas-Gracia: Of course, thanks for having me.

Host Colvin Georges: To begin, I think that it is important for our listeners to learn a little bit more about you and your scholar identity. Can you share with us your research background and what experiences you've had that led you to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign?

Nidia Ruedas-Gracia: Yes. I think my research background actually dates back, or starts, with me growing up. So I grew up in Baldwin Park, California, which is in Southern California, and there was so much color and rich experience and stories that were going on as I grew up, from my family, but also from my friends and teachers and everyone around me. So ever since I was young, I was observing all of these different types of experiences and how people lived in the social world. I sometimes feel like I'm cheating as I go into education, or as I moved into educational and research academics spheres, because I kind of used those experiences that I had encountered to shape the way that I did research.

So, I was learning, learning, observing, and then I went to UCLA for my undergrad, majored in psychology, sociology, and minored in philosophy, so I was all over the place, kind of, sort of. But again, still *learning*. So, I was part of a

or am part of a Latina sorority, Phi Lambda Rho, and again I was learning the whole four years from them, from other fraternities and sororities, from people in my majors, just always learning about people's experiences. And then I started doing research as part of the McNair Scholars program, starting my third year at UCLA, and again, just that kind of catapulted my research career. I was working on a project with Dr. Greenfield in the psychology department, and started shaping what I wanted to do. After that I went to New York University and completed a master's there in human development, and making it a little bit more specific what I wanted to do.

So now I have this UCLA experience, LA experience, now I'm in New York, learning about all kinds of other different types of groups and populations. And then I go to Stanford for my Ph.D. program and work with Dr. Teresa LaFromboise, Geoff Cohen, Hazel Markus, Jelena Obradović, Anthony Antonio—there's just so many awesome people there. And *really* growing into my scholar identity. And in essence, what I do now is that I study sense of belonging among underrepresented groups across the lifespan. And in short, what that really means is that I study people's experiences of belonging, so whether they feel like they fit in or not in different contexts, and how that impacts their quality of life, their mental health, their academic performance.

And that has really been, as I reflect back, something that I've *always* cared about and always observed from growing up. I always kind of noticed that this nonacademic or non-hard idea, this kind of thing in the air, this sense of belonging thing was really impacting, influencing the way people acted and behave and their performance either in the workforce or in academia and school.

That's kind of my background and how I got to where I am now. And I'm having a blast; now I'm in the Midwest, so I feel like I'm hitting a bunch of different places and learning about different people and trying to see how this phenomenon of belonging really plays out in different cultural contexts.

Host Colvin Georges: And seeing that you have such an exciting journey and are committed to the success and sense of belonging for students of color, particularly those from first-generation, low-income backgrounds, how do *you* define sense of belonging along with the benefits and challenges when working with students and other campus stakeholders?

Nidia Ruedas-Gracia: It's tough for me because I don't think we're there yet in "sense of belonging research world." There's a lot of different definitions of it and we're kind of trying to figure out what this exactly means. Because it's kind of a blessing and a curse that it's something that everybody kind of knows, "Like, oh, I know what you mean when you say 'belonging.' Oh, I know what you mean when you say, 'Oh, does someone fit in or not?'" But if you ask people to define it, it's actually harder. Some people define it as a feeling, something in the air, so it's hard to pinpoint it.

But throughout my studies and throughout the studies that I've read, *I* would define it as this feeling or perception of fitting in. So, some components might be feeling of mattering. So you're in a context, say your university setting, and you feel like you matter, you feel like someone sees you, so you feel seen, feel like you are part of a group, that you are to the university. So, sense of belonging to me would encompass *those* feelings, and I think that different cultural products and things around you, things and people around you can influence that feeling.

Host Colvin Georges: So I have a follow-up to that.

Nidia Ruedas-Gracia: Yes.

Host Colvin Georges: Does sense of belonging affect *all* students homogenously, *or* does this concept differ per racial group and institutional type? And if it does, why or why not?

Nidia Ruedas-Gracia: I definitely do not think that it means the same and it has the same impact on different people. We are so colorful, we have so many identities within each and every one of us, that, one, it can be experienced differently, so maybe it's defined differently by different types of people. Not only that, but the association between belonging and other life outcomes can be different. So it could be that maybe among, say, ethnic groups, maybe the association between belonging and, say, academic performance or mental health is stronger for some ethnic groups than others based on history and trauma and just your experience in the United States as an ethnic group. It might have a stronger link to some aspects over others, or there could be some ethnic groups where, say, the link between belongingness and academic performance is a little weaker than other ethnic groups. So I think that sense of belonging can mean different things for different people, but also the effect and impact that it has on a person can be different based on different identities.

Host Colvin Georges: So, as we know, within higher education right now, there is a lot of concepts and a lot of information and conversations being had around sense of belonging. My next question is wanting to know who's responsibility is it to create a sense of belonging for students? Is it the faculty, campus administrators and/or the students themselves?

Nidia Ruedas-Gracia: I think it's everyone, and not just people that have connections to the university but the community around it as well. We are social beings and I think that no matter how much we try to create space where we have a more individualistic idea of what it means to succeed, from the get-go, almost from birth, or even before, we are collective beings. We are always striving for a sense of community; we're always striving for a place to fit in or belong. And so, I would be remiss to say that sense of belonging, the responsibility of it lands only on the student. I would say that we are collective beings, sense of belonging is a more collectivistic, communal type of phenomenon. And so we need administrators, we need teachers, we need staff, we need counselors, we need community members, church members, we need the restaurants around us, we

need everything, the political climate, kind of need this very holistic support system to foster a sense of belonging and catch all the different types of identities and cultural groups that are, whether we like it or not, are in our social spaces.

Host Colvin Georges: The racial diversity of colleges and universities has increased within the past two decades. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, from 2000 to 2016, the total college enrollment rates increased for white students by 3%, black students by 5%, and Hispanic students by 17%. As higher education institutions increase in terms of racial demographics, what critical components of student development should faculty and campus administrators apply when establishing equitable programs and a culturally responsive curriculum allowing students to feel a sense of belonging, especially those from historically minoritized racial groups?

Nidia Ruedas-Gracia: I think, first off, one thing that I think is pretty important or fundamental is to understand that you have to be aware and knowledgeable about these different groups. So at its core, just simply understanding the values, the traditions, the practices, the ways of communication that different ethnic groups, or just different cultural groups in general, how they function. Just an understanding and awareness, knowledge of that can help put things in place that don't necessarily cost a lot of money or don't necessarily take up a lot of time. For example, one of my studies, this first-generation, low-income person of color said in the interview, "You know what makes me feel like I belong?" When this dish that his mom would always make and his aunts would always make, the dish would be featured in the dorms. And so to him food was a mode of feeling a sense of belonging, and actually for other students that I've interviewed, same thing. And so even knowing that, what are the foods in different cultural groups, how can we make them here and offer space for these practices, traditions, and values to live?

One is that understanding of the different cultures. The second critical component I think is to also be kind to each other, because sometimes the elephant in the room, when I'm speaking about these things, are that some people *don't* know what these cultural differences are, but instead of maybe asking, they feel like, "Well, if I ask, then everyone's going to know that I am not culturally cognizant or that I am not aware of this. Or maybe I'm going to take up too much energy or space and I don't want it to be a teaching moment, I want it to take action." And if we cultivate this brave space where we can say, "Okay, I *don't* know every single culture and identity that is in this room, and how about if anybody has energy and space to tell me about it, we can. And now we were a little bit more knowledgeable about that.

And also using those students as resources. So a lot of times, I as an undergrad, was totally fine with someone asking me, like, "Okay, so what food would you like to see in the dorms?" Or "What kinds of resources or how should we incorporate your family-oriented lifestyle into the dorm or into this program?" And I was more than happy to tell them, but sometimes we forget that the

students themselves, these cultural populations, aren't in and of themselves funds of knowledge. And so using them—and compensating appropriately—using them we can kind of, again, build a collective, holistic plan for encouraging and supporting students in university settings.

Host Colvin Georges: I understand that you recently completed a quantitative study examining whether first-generation, low-income students—FLI, as you refer to them—experienced a cultural mismatch between their home culture and the postsecondary culture, along with investigating whether their ethnic racial identity facilitated by cultural development. Can you describe this study along with key terms for our listeners, and are there any findings that you would like to share with us?

Nidia Ruedas-Gracia: Yes. This study is currently under review. I conducted this study a few years ago with some colleagues of mine, and essentially what we did is we asked first-generation, low-income college students, which we and a lot of undergrads and universities are starting to adopt this term of FLI college students, F-L-I. We asked them and non-FLI students about their sense of belonging. We asked them about their affiliation to their ethnic identity, and we really wanted to understand both of these in relation to intersectional identities. Because as a FLI college student, especially in our sample, the FLI college students of color, now you're bringing in two different types of identities. You're bringing in ethnic identity, ethnic racial identity, or the students of color, but you're also bringing an SES identity. If you're a first-generation college student from a low-income background, that's very different from even a first-generation college student that's *not* from a low-income background, which there are some of those.

And so, now you're bringing in these two identity concepts and adding into the mix, where sometimes we tried to focus on one identity only when we're thinking about college students, but now we're introducing that there is these two identities that could be at play. So, what we did is we asked students, "How much overlap do you feel that you have between your home culture or your culture of origin, your culture back home, and how much overlap does that have with your new university culture?" And what we saw is across the board, whether you were FLI or not, there was a low cultural match. What that means is that in general, college students who are coming into college, they are noticing that there are differences between the university and the home context. So these are two different contexts and they're not completely the same, so that was understood by everyone in both groups.

But the first interesting thing was that FLI students felt more of a mismatch than non-FLI students. So you see that first-gen, low-income students are noticing that, yes, my home culture and my university culture are different and they're not exactly the same, but the similarities are very, very small. And so, they're noticing that this is a very different setting. The second interesting thing that happened is that within the FLI college students, those that strongly affiliated with their ethnic identity, so they had pride in their ethnic identity, they felt a sense of belonging to their ethnic identity, and they felt a sense of commitment

to their ethnic identity, those actually felt less of a mismatch than the students who didn't really affiliate with their ethnic identity.

That was really interesting, and so we delved into that a little bit and talked about it a lot. But essentially what we came down to thinking, and we're definitely going to run some new studies after to unpack this, is that if you do have cultural resources and access to that ethnic identities, practices, traditions, and values in the new university setting, and you strongly associate with that ethnicity, then you start seeing more matches between your university context and your home context. So for example, if there's an ethnic-themed dorm or if there's an ethnic-themed cultural center and you say, "Well, I strongly associate with this ethnicity, and look, here's this place in the university that the people look like me, they talk like me, we have the same food from back home," now you're starting to see more matches between your home culture back home and the university culture.

But, if you don't strongly identify with any ethnicity, then maybe when you come in as a first-gen, low-income student, you're starting to see that these two places are very different, your home culture and your university culture. But because you don't have maybe like a strong ethnic identity to hold on to, then it's harder for you to identify places on campus that might offer more of that match. And so, in a way, it's sending this message that ethnic identity or affiliation with ethnic identity, is something that we should actually cultivate and foster in university studies because they could be sources of strengthening sense of belonging, especially for students who do associate or affiliate struggle with their ethnic identity. So having the ethnic-themed dorms, having the cultural centers, having the cultural traditions and practices, having space for them on the university setting, can allow for students to say, "Oh, yes, I do belong here. There are some spaces here that are exactly like home. Now I feel that match."

Although we focused on ethnic identity for this paper, now I'm super-interested in extending that in studies further and addressing other cultural identities, like sexual identity, sexual orientation or gender identity, or SES, migration identities, all kinds of identities, to see if it functions the same way. But that was essentially what we found and got really excited about it, because it kind of shows that ethnic identity could be a protective factor. Doesn't necessarily have to be something that is a weakness or that's stopping you from being bicultural and developing both of your university home culture, actually can help foster this biculturalism and can help you see more matches between the two contexts.

Host Colvin Georges: If students have a higher connection to their ethnic racial identity and a cultural mismatch within the postsecondary setting, does this necessarily mean that the institution is doing *everything* right at creating programs that are inclusive and welcoming to cross-cultural differences?

Nidia Ruedas-Gracia: Probably not. If you strongly identify with ethnicity and you're still feeling a high cultural mismatch, then I would hypothesize, I would predict, that you're probably not seeing spaces, places, and people in that university that reflect your home culture. That could be, maybe there's not a cultural center for you or for your ethnic identity in that space. One participant from one of my studies before, he was like, "Yeah, they tried to do like an Asian cuisine night, but it was *not*. And maybe if they could have hired someone from back home to make this food, it would have been exactly that." So it wasn't genuine. And so the university could say, "But we have Asian cuisine every week," but it's not quite. And so, again, using the ethnicities and cultures as a resource can really help that out because now you spent a lot of money on something that's ineffective.

And so, if you're seeing that your students are still reporting a lower cultural mismatch, then maybe it's time to reassess: What are the resources that we have and are they genuine? Are they really what we think they are or are we missing something? Is there a component to this that we haven't looked at or that we messed up in a way? And it's totally okay, again, be kind. You know, we can't always understand all the intersectional identities, so going back to the drawing board I think is *totally* fine and saying, "Whoops, we got that wrong, let's try that again." I think that's where movement actually happens, instead of saying, "Well, we have Asian cuisine."

Host Colvin Georges: Is there anything else that an institution can do to create a sense of belonging for students that have experienced cultural mismatch with their college or university and home culture?

Nidia Ruedas-Gracia: I think there's a lot. That's the beauty of it—I feel like there's a lot that we can do and can actually be quite fun. So, raising awareness or having space for people to tell their stories about their educational journeys or their cultural backgrounds. So, for example, in my class that I teach right now, I teach Ed Psych 201, and their first official assignment that they have to officially turn in is a storytelling project. And so, they tell each other and me about their educational trajectory up to now, now that they're college students, and how their identities have shaped that. So even just telling your story helps a lot. It helps me greatly to understand the students and where they're coming from, and understand their modes and traditions and practices.

But it also helps them. So some students have come up to me after the end of the semester and have said, "Hey, nobody ever asked me about *my* story coming to college, and it was actually really reflective to make a PowerPoint or a slideshow or a poem about how I grew up and how that influenced what I'm doing here. And I actually shared it with my roommate." Or "It was really interesting to hear other people's storytelling projects." And so, again, just raising awareness. It can be quite fun. I have a lot of fun reading over these storytelling projects. So I would say that going back to the drawing board and learning about the different cultures and identities can actually be enjoyed. It doesn't have to be a task or something that's seen as really hard or tough to do.

Host Colvin Georges: To wrap up, I know throughout our conversation today we mainly focused on minoritization through the lens of race, but for this last question I wanted to ask about the multiple intersections of identity and what actions postsecondary institutions can take to equitably support the needs and foster a sense of belonging for students of color. As we know, students enter college with diverse needs and cultural backgrounds. These students hold multiple identities that are intersected, and some of which are marginalized. For example, being black, LGBTQ +, differently abled, from a low-income household, et cetera. Can you share a call for action with our listeners on how to support and advocate for these students as they attempt to persist and navigate chilly campus environments, where their psychological and physiological well-being is often at risk?

Nidia Ruedas-Gracia: Yeah, I guess my call for action would be twofold. The first part is a more, maybe reflective piece of it, and the second part is more actionable. So the first part, my call for action would be to step away from trying to put students in categories or boxes based on identity, and *really* try to maybe incorporate a framework that leans toward more intersectional identities or understanding intersectional identities. I know Hazel Markus talks about this in one of her books, but we are these cultural blends. So every individual is a cultural blend of their experiences and the way that they've moved in the social world. We can't really put someone, for example, in a box for African American or black students and say, "You all are experiencing it in this way," because within that group you're going to have people from different SES backgrounds, different gender identities, different religious backgrounds, even different immigration status. And so, you're going to get differences along that. So if we can step away from putting people in boxes and more look at intersectional identities, that could open up our frameworks and the way that we put on programs.

But the more actionable thing, I think, is this is not something that's going to be easy to do, because again, even across universities you have different types of university cultures. So, this isn't just easy peasy, but something maybe that is more actionable would be to incorporate or include families and communities into the university setting. So sometimes it's easier to do. So you have some universities, kind of like here that it's a university town, so everything's kind of connected to the university. And you can bring in YMCA and you can bring in the school districts, and a lot of them are working with the university in some way, shape, or form. But there are other universities, like NYU, that it's in the city and there might not *be* that many connections with the communities around New York and the university. They do try very hard, but there's different universities and different cultural contexts.

But the more that you can bring in the community into the university, I think the more effective some of this programming can be. So if you can, for example, again, I'm focusing on food here, but let's say that your dining hall staff, you choose people that are more representative of your university student demographic. You're more likely to make foods and understand food that are more representative of your demographic in terms of your students. So, really

trying to mirror your students' demographic makeup and intersectionalities in terms of your staff, in terms of your faculty, right?

You can have different types of diverse students in the university settings, but if their faculty doesn't reflect that diversity, if the staff doesn't reflect that diversity, then again, you're kind of showing these students that, "Yeah, you're here but you might not belong here because there's all of these people that don't look like you and don't understand your cultural background." But if you come into a space and the staff person or the person who takes your card at the dining hall or your counselor or your professor looks like you or has some *one* identity that you can relate to, the more likely you're going to be starting to make those cultural matches between where you come from and where you are now.

Host Colvin Georges: Dr. Ruedas-Garcia, thank you so much for your time and for providing such rich insight into your research and opinions. I'm sure the information provided today will be very helpful to all our listeners. Again, Dr. Ruedas-Gracia is an assistant professor of educational psychology and an affiliate with the Office of Community College Research and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Thank you again for joining us today.

Nidia Ruedas-Gracia: Yeah, thanks for having me.

Announcer Sal Nudo: Tune in next month when Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher, the Director at OCCRL, talks with Dr. Heather Shotton about the multiple and nuanced ways that universities perpetuate settler colonial aims of eraser for indigenous students. Dr. Shotton is an associate professor in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies and the director of the Indigenous Education Initiatives at the University of Oklahoma.

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