Mattering Theory: Implications for Working with International Students

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According to Cooper (1997), students transitioning to the college environment for the first time experience some sense of marginality. For all first year students the transition to college life is new and uncharted territory. Some may experience this time with excitement and exploration. For these students that sense of marginality may be short lived. For many more this transition is a time of great uncertainty and insecurity. Students from underrepresented populations experience greater feelings of marginality, and their college experience can create stress and anxiety. In this sense students from underrepresented groups express a stronger disconnection from the dominant college culture. International students are just one of a number of underrepresented student populations who experience marginality and disconnect. One technique for combating marginality is the implementation of mattering theory into practice. Professionals should be mindful when working with international students and other underrepresented populations, that it is important to minimize marginality through creating an inclusive environment that promotes feelings of mattering amongst all students.

**Mattering**

Mattering theory assumes that all individuals have a need to feel important to others at some level. According to Dixon (2007), “mattering to others is recognized as the fundamental need that all individuals have to feel significant and important to other people in their lives.” Mattering is considered universal and the process by which individuals determine their relative significance to others and the world as a whole. Through mattering, individuals perceive their relevance and importance in relation to family, friends, and to society. It should be noted that although mattering is considered to be universal there are varying degrees of mattering. For one individual or group mattering may have a greater significance than it does for another person or group.
According to Dixon Rayle (2006), Morris Rosenberg first established the importance of mattering in 1980. Rosenberg believed that there are two levels of mattering: the general level in which individuals perceive their importance to their society and the personal level where individuals perceive their importance to others in their lives. Since the 1980s multiple disciplines including sociology, psychology, and counseling have utilized the concept of mattering. Dixon Rayle (2006) discusses the contributions that sociologists have made in building upon Rosenberg’s original concept of mattering; adding the importance mattering has on an individual’s concept of self. What this means is, if individuals do not believe they matter to others they will never experience mattering even if the individual truly does matter to others.

Dixon Rayle (2006) focuses on the contributions of Elliott, Kao, and Grant in 2004. These three sociologists proposed that there are two categories of mattering attention and relationship. At the attention level, mattering is defined in general terms by the amount of attention and acknowledgement we receive from others. If an individual perceives a low level of attention from other’s he or she may experience superficial feelings of being ignored. Relationship mattering delves deeper and looks at the specific relationships an individual may have with others, he or she wants to matter to. This may include, but is not limited to family, friends, significant others, teachers, co-workers, or any other relationship type that may be stronger than the relationship to a stranger.

Dixon Rayle (2006) discussed how relationship mattering can also be broken down into two types. The first type being described as importance or the level to which others are interested in the individual. Followed by reliance, or the degree to which others rely on the individual. Importance is conceived through others’ extension of self. For example, when others use phrases such as, “I am proud of you” or “you embarrass me” the individual perceives that he or she
matters to that person. Reliance refers to the perception that an individual can offer something that others cannot. Individuals perceive that others depend upon them and that this dependency is important to an individual’s sense of mattering.

It is important to recognize that both internal and external validation is necessary for an individual to experience mattering. Self-esteem is one of the ways in which an individual can internally validate his or her level of mattering. Tovar, et al. (2009) pointed out that mattering should not be viewed as the same as self-esteem, but rather self-esteem is affected by an individual’s perceived mattering to others. Self-esteem in this sense is dependent upon the external factor of experienced mattering. Dixon Rayle (2006) points out that mattering to others has a positive relationship to an individual’s sense of self-esteem. What this means is the higher an individual experiences mattering the higher their internal validation of mattering will also be.

Within the context of higher education Schlossberg was among the first to consider the importance of mattering with the development of the Mattering Scales for Adult Students in Postsecondary Education (Tovar et al., 2009). The focus of Schlossberg’s work was on the experiences of college students over the age of 25. This is important to note because non-traditional college students are an important underrepresented group on a college campus. Non-traditional students often experience feelings of marginality. It is important to note that not all underrepresented groups experience marginality the same way, and the techniques for implementing mattering may not be the same for all groups.

The context specific experience of non-traditional students is not the same as the experience of students who identify as LGBTQ (Salazar & Abrams, 2005). In the same way Schlossberg’s work with non-traditional students may not translate exactly to work with
international students. However, her work has implications highlighting mattering and its importance in alleviating feelings of marginality. Since all underrepresented groups within the college context experience some form of marginality, mattering techniques should be a strategy utilized when working with students from underrepresented populations.

**Marginality**

Dixon Rayle (2006) simply stated that the opposite of mattering is not mattering. Individuals who do not experience mattering may perceive themselves as being insignificant or unimportant. In addition to feeling unimportant to others, some individuals may begin to believe that they, or their group are truly unimportant. This results in a negative self perception (Salazar & Abrams, 2005). This negative self image only serves to reinforce feelings of not mattering. Cooper (1997) discussed the issue of not mattering through the concept of marginality. In the context of higher education feelings of marginality may lead students to question whether or not they belong in school and may negatively affect the students’ development and institutional retention.

Marginality can also be positively correlated to feelings of alienation (Dixon Rayle, 2006). If individuals do not believe they matter to others they will never experience mattering even if the individual truly does matter to others. This is important because according to Salazar and Abrams (2005), the development of an accurate self-identity is critical to the process of developing a healthy identity. If an individual is overwhelmed by feelings of marginality they may never recognize their mattering to others even when they do. This is important to note, because even though it is important that professionals implement mattering techniques, students’ perception of mattering is ultimately more important.
Within the context of the United States many students may feel an unfair pressure to attend college against their own judgment. According to Harrington (1974), an increasing number of students believe higher education is unsuited for meeting their basic needs. Strong societal pressures have contributed to the belief that college is the right thing for all students to do after high school. This is important to note because many students may enter college feeling as though they do not belong, but do so do to these societal pressures. For underrepresented groups the affects of this pressure maybe multiplied and form the foundation for some of the perceived feelings of marginalization during the college experience.

Much of the previous literature and research focuses on the experiences of non-traditional students, and African American students when experiencing marginality (Cooper, 1997). These experiences of marginality typically are studied within the context of predominantly white institutions. There is little literature on the importance of mattering amongst international students and the majority of the literature focuses on the experience of American students attending American institutions. The existing literature on American students that highlights the experiences of underrepresented and marginalized populations does have significant implications for working with international students as an underrepresented population.

**The experience of international students**

With the expansion of globalization and the growth of the middle class in many countries the United States has seen a steady increase in its number of international students. From 2000 to 2001 the population of non domestic students studying within the United State was 547,867 (Tseng & Newton, 2002). This number rose to 572,509 in 2004 and 690,923 in 2010 (Yakushko, et al., 2008; IIE, 2010). These may be small numbers when compared with the total population of
students attending colleges and universities in the U.S., but this does not mean that this is a population that should be ignored. The fact is that more international students are on college campuses today, more than ever before. This is a population that will continue to grow. Professionals need to be prepared for increased exposure to international students and aware of the specific needs international students share as an underrepresented group.

Yakushko, Davidson, & Sanford-Martens (2008) point out that within the literature there is not much information regarding work with international students. However it is well known that all students, both international and American, experience similar issues with regard to their daily lives. These issues include, but are not limited to academics, social and psychological difficulties. Both populations also experience difficult transition periods to college, during, and after. However, it is important to note that international students experience these difficulties to a greater degree.

International students as a group share common experiences such as, culture shock, loss of social support systems, feelings of inferiority, loneliness, feelings of difference, alienation, isolation, difficulties with English, and loss of identity (Yakushko, et al., 2008; Tseng & Newton, 2002). International students are under constant pressure to acculturate, and as a result may often experience racism and xenophobia. Literature suggests that international students are more likely to seek support from friends first (Yakushko, et al., 2008). International students typically do not seek out student affairs or counseling professionals, but instead rely heavily on each other for support. They often hear about other resources from their peers.

There are typically only two main reasons international students may reach out for support: academic issues and depression/anxiety. Academic issues may be directly related to a
lack of English proficiency and a lack of familiarity with the American higher education system. Issues related to depression and anxiety may be related to some of the experiences listed in the previous paragraph. Female international students are typically more likely than males to seek help. International students typically define their well being by a sense that their lives have meaning (Tseng & Newton, 2002).

**Limitations of mattering theory**

Since mattering theory looks at the perceived experience of students within their cultural context there are few limitations of this approach. The approach emphasizes inclusiveness and the goal of eliminating feelings of marginality, which negatively affect an individual’s identity development. One limitation to this approach could be when students develop an unhealthy sense of mattering or dependence. Professionals implementing mattering techniques may become a student’s only source of mattering, and these students may become dependent on the professional. It is important that students feel as though they matter to professionals, but professionals should implement techniques to facilitate mattering amongst students’ peer groups.

Another limitation of this approach within the context of working with international students is the effect this theory has on students who come from more independent or private cultures. Some students may come from a cultural context in which perceived mattering is not important or discussed. When attempting to implement mattering techniques some professionals may find that they have a negative affect when working with these groups of students. Some students may become more distant as a result. Also, there are many cultures where feelings and perceived mattering should be kept to the individual. Some students may feel conflicted when professionals attempt to draw out and confront feelings of marginality. Professionals should use
caution when implementing mattering techniques or any approach. Cultural competence is vital for effectively working with international student populations. It is important to recognize that although as a group there may be many common experiences, individuals have their own cultural background which needs consideration.

**Implications**

Mattering theory has implications for many levels within the student affairs setting and for professionals. Cooper (1997) highlights the importance for professionals to create a campus environment that actively supports inclusion of all students. Opportunities for inclusion will help minimize feelings of marginality. Students who perceive themselves as not mattering are more likely to engage in antisocial behavior. Also, Lower levels of perceived mattering may lead to higher levels of academic stress (Tovar, et al., 2009). This is important to note, because educating faculty on the importance of mattering on student development is one step that student affairs professionals can take.

Increased levels of feedback from faculty on assignments allow students to feel a greater obligation to devote more time and energy to their studies (Kuh, et al., 2005). Also, the utilization of technology is important not only for student affairs professionals, but faculty as well. Technology allows students to feel an increased sense of accessibility. More response through email outside normal business hours increases a student’s sense of importance to the professor, professional, and institution. Increased communication will also help to alleviate some international students’ anxiety over English proficiency and unfamiliarity with the U.S. education system.
International students and other underrepresented groups benefit, like all students from involvement in extracurricular activities. Skipper (2005) points out that a student’s identity development, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and confidence increase through involvement and leadership positions. For students this could be serving with the general population as a resident assistant or peer leader, or membership in homogeneous student organizations. Student groups that specifically target the unique population a student may identify with allows students to adopt a safe zone for personal exploration and risk taking. Since students feel marginalized within the larger population having a culturally specific organization allows students to form a sense of belonging and importance. Professionals through mattering encourage students to form healthy relationships. Involvement in peer activities is one of the best opportunities for relationships to develop. Tseng & Newton (2002), point out that for international students establishing friendships is important to day to day life. Mattering to peers may be among the strongest of the mattering relationships.

According to Cooper (1997) underrepresented students report not being listened to in the classroom. These students may feel as though they do not have a voice at their campus all together. It is important to make sure that all students: American, international, and underrepresented feel as though they have been listened to and have a voice. Professionals should fully investigate matters brought forward by students. If it is important to the student it should be important to the professional at some degree. This will reinforce that students matter not only to the professional, but the institution as a whole. Remind students that we rely on their contributions for the successful experience of the institution and others. Express appreciation to students who have the courage to participate. Utilize basic helping skills: active listening, vernal encouragement, and empathy (Tovar, et al., 2009 & Dixon Rayle, 2006).
When working with all students, but particularly underrepresented populations and international students, it is important to remain culturally competent. The first step to cultural competence is for professionals to examine their own cultural background and assumptions. Professionals would learn how their dominant cultural background may affect the students they work with (Cooper, 1997). It should be noted that not all professionals may identify as members of a dominant culture. However, it is not necessarily important how professionals perceive themselves, but rather how the students they work with will perceive them. Many international students come from authoritarian cultures. By virtue of a professional’s job at an institution, students may view all professionals as dominant authority figures. It is important that professionals consider this and its implications in their work with international students.

**Conclusion**

Students from underrepresented populations experience greater feelings of marginality and their college experience can create a great deal of stress and anxiety. International students are no exception and are one underrepresented student population that is on the rise. Professionals need to be prepared to work effectively with these student populations. Mattering theory is one useful technique that can be effectively implemented to minimize feelings of marginality. Mattering theory strengthens the professional-student relationship and gives meaning to individuals’ lives (Dixon Rayle, 2006). One of the goals all professionals should share is creating an inclusive environment that promotes feelings of mattering amongst all students.
References


