Promoting Educational Equity: Embedding Transformative Social and Emotional Learning in Experiential Learning

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Promoting Educational Equity: Embedding Transformative Social and Emotional Learning in Experiential Learning

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College enrollment and graduation rates among Latinx and Black students have grown over the past 20 years (McFarland et al., 2019). Yet, inequities across racial and ethnic groups persist. This is concerning given that college completion is related to remaining above the poverty line across the lifespan. Research has shown that humanitarian reasons may underlie the motivation to pursue higher education among minoritized youth. Latinx and Black youth have expressed a desire for meaningful educational and work paths (DeLuca et al., 2016; Tuck, 2012). College has been viewed not simply as a vehicle for minoritized students’ own personal economic mobility, but also as a mechanism to uplift students’ families and communities (Li-Grining et al., accepted; Uriostegui et al., 2021).

Guided by the integration of strength-based frameworks, this manuscript will explore how experiential learning may serve a dual purpose: (1) helping students enact social change while simultaneously (2) reaching their education goals. More specifically, our inquiry explores how social and emotional competencies (SECs) play a role in the ways that experiential learning can help advance the social and economic status of students and their families and communities, as well as aid students in their pursuit of broader public goals, such as working toward environmental and racial justice.

Background on Transformative Social and Emotional Competencies

There are five core SECs: self-management (e.g., motivation), self-awareness (e.g., identity), social awareness (e.g., empathy), responsible decision-making (e.g., problem solving), and relationships skills (e.g., social engagement; Durlak et al., 2015). The process of acquiring SECs is referred to as social and emotional learning (SEL). Existing literature on SEL spans preschool to college, but adults, including college students, have received far less attention in prior SEL research (Conley, 2015; Durlak et al., 2015).

The five SECs can play a role in equity, and increasing equity is central in the concept of transformative SEL (T-SEL). Jagers et al. (2019) describes transformative social and emotional competencies (T-SECs) as cultural assets, where these skills are viewed as critical to the development of students becoming justice-oriented citizens, given T-SECs’ potential to empower students from marginalized groups and their allies. More specifically, Jagers et al. (2019) has defined the five T-SECs as follows. Self-awareness involves understanding the link between one’s personal and sociocultural identities (e.g., critical self-awareness). Self-management includes persistence despite facing challenges at individual and group levels (e.g., problem-focused coping that fixes the issue at hand, rather than the way one perceives it). Social awareness entails understanding social norms across diverse contexts and acknowledging resources and supports within familial, education, and community settings (e.g., critical social awareness). Relationship skills are perceived as including conflict resolution across settings with varying social norms.
Like SEL, T-SEL plays an important role in youths’ education and career paths. Prior work has found higher racial/ethnic identity to be positively related to career decision self-efficacy (Bonifacio et al., 2018) and career decidedness (Duffy & Klingaman, 2009) among Latinx and Black college students. In contrast, experiences of discrimination and race-related stressors have been linked with less career decision self-efficacy (Bonifacio et al., 2018). Also, support from family and community has emerged as an important factor underlying the attainment of educational and career goals by low-income youth of color (Arnold et al., 2012; Bonifacio et al., 2018; Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Sledge, 2012).

**Problem Statement and Questions**

Given that T-SEL may contribute to students’ success during and after college, there is a pressing need to understand the ways that college supports can foster the development of young adults’ T-SECs. For example, recent research suggests that minoritized students at historically white universities desire “radical growth,” meaning that they seek safe spaces where they can develop conceptual frameworks and narratives about the representation of their identities in the dominant culture (Keels, 2020). A key college support is the offering of experiential learning opportunities. Experiential learning that explicitly focuses on T-SEL, which includes a commitment to social change, may be particularly poised to help college students address a wide range of equity issues, including topics related to social, economic, environmental, and racial justice. Thus, the present manuscript sought to answer the following questions: (1) What existing theory focuses on students’ cultural assets in higher education? (2) How should we build on this theory in ways that can guide the use of T-SEL practices in college settings with social justice missions? (3) Following this expanded theory, what methods and approaches could facilitate the use of T-SEL practices in the context of justice-driven higher education institutions?

**Theoretical Framework**

The culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model (Museus, 2014) is an extant theoretical framework that centers on college students’ cultural assets. The CECE model of college success defines cultural engagement in terms of cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness. Cultural relevance refers to whether students feel that campuses reflect their cultural backgrounds and identities, which includes cultural familiarity (e.g., faculty who understand students’ cultural backgrounds), culturally relevant knowledge (e.g., students learn about and share knowledge about their cultural communities), cultural community service (e.g., students engage in research to solve problems affecting their cultural communities), meaningful cross-cultural engagement (e.g., students discuss societal problems with others from varying backgrounds), and culturally validating environments (e.g., students’ cultural identities are valued). In contrast, cultural responsiveness involves collectivist cultural orientations (e.g., campuses value teamwork), humanized educational environments (e.g., students feel that their humanity is recognized by faculty), proactive support (e.g., staff who go to great lengths to provide students with helpful information), and holistic support (e.g., students have a trusting relationship with at least one faculty or staff member who can provide them with information and support). Cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness are viewed as influencing students’ development by fostering, for example, a sense of belongingness, which predicts college persistence. Notably, CECE indicators have been related to more of a sense of belonging among students overall, as well as across groups of students who identified as white vs. belonging to a racial and ethnic minority group (Museus et al., 2018).

**Exploration of Conceptual Models**

Missing from the CECE model is how students’ development may be shaped by T-SEL and how higher education supports students’ career readiness. This is notable given that increasing college graduation rates among minoritized youth are steps toward social and economic justice. Experiential learning can offer a chance for students to participate in cultural community service and opportunities for their professional development, which may both promote college persistence. In a recent study by Druery and Brooms (2019), students described improvements in self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, self-management, and responsible decision-making as they reflected on their participation in a program specifically designed to support college success among students who identify as Black males. All the participants graduated from college, which suggests that college supports and opportunities that reflect cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness may improve SEL, which in turn may predict college completion.
Also, the CECE model does not speak to collaborative action against injustice, which is central to T-SEL. The self-management component of T-SEL includes collective efficacy (Jagers et al., 2019), which traditionally refers to whether neighbors feel that they as a group have the capability of taking action in a coordinated and interdependent fashion on matters pertinent to their shared well-being ( Sampson et al., 1998). Collective efficacy could operate within educational contexts (Jagers et al., 2019). For example, experiential learning may provide educators and students with the opportunity to engage in critical examination of inequities and collaboratively solve societal problems with community members.

**Methodological Approaches**

With this expanded theoretical framework in mind, what methods and approaches would lend themselves to using T-SEL practices as part of experiential education? Experiential learning and teaching may provide naturalistic opportunities for T-SEL to take place. In service-learning, there are deliberate efforts to gain lessons from community service, as opposed to typical volunteer work that does not have an explicit educational component (Jacoby, 1996). Carrying out such projects may provide real-life opportunities to foster SECs (e.g., planning, decision-making, teamwork, learning about oneself and others). Furthermore, some scholars have viewed service-learning as a tool for college students to learn about social justice (Ellerton et al., 2014; Seider, 2010).

Service-learning could be specifically designed as project-based learning (PBL) with groups of students (Larmer, 2020; Jagers et al., 2019), where activities center around an important real-world problem from the perspective of students. Central to PBL is collaborative inquiry that is sustained, active, and in-depth. In the process of PBL, students should have a sense of ownership, where they feel empowered to speak up and make decisions. Also, students and mentors jointly reflect on learning throughout their activities (e.g., what are they learning, how, and why), which may involve constructive criticism and revision of their approaches.

For instance, PBL could focus on the real-life problems related to students’ own career readiness. Identity-conscious service-learning could play a particularly salient role in college persistence and career readiness (Dorner et al., 2017), by fostering SEL among post-secondary students (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Museus, 2014; Pendakur, 2016). Pendakur postulates that college supports, such as career advice, provided in the context of identity-conscious service-learning could be particularly effective for marginalized students. Indeed, disadvantaged students tend to benefit more from service-learning (IHEP, 2014). In other words, service-learning may lend itself to a potent mix of belonging and purpose, the latter of which has been acknowledged as a powerful driving force for young adults from both disadvantaged and advantaged backgrounds (DeLuca et al., 2016; Sumner et al., 2018).

Another approach that highlights the role of community members is citizen science, which refers to community members without scientific training working alongside scientists to address policy-relevant problems that they identify and investigate together (Cavalier & Kennedy, 2016; Phillips et al., 2014; Silka, 2017). An example of a citizen science project that addresses societal inequities was conducted by Dace and Mendenhall (2018). They worked with community members who helped identify possible health-related outcomes related to gun violence and then helped collect data capturing those outcomes. T-SEL may be at work here, where citizens and scientists co-create knowledge, collect data together, and collaboratively work toward reducing health disparities.

Lastly, as part of experiential learning and teaching, students might have the chance to learn how to conduct qualitative research, which is well-positioned to capture the voices of individuals from marginalized groups. An introduction to qualitative research could utilize mindful ethnography, which Orellana (2019) defines as fully immersing oneself in social contexts using skills accessible to both the public and researchers (e.g., observing what one thinks and feels, slowing down, questioning assumptions, accepting uncertainty). Orellana recently described the global community as being filled with ethnographers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where familiar experiences now appear strange to the everyday citizen. With a focus on being critical of assumptions and empowering the public with accessible forms of ethnographic methods (e.g., reflecting on one’s surroundings), mindful ethnography might facilitate T-SEL.

**Ethical Considerations**

Despite the potential of the methodological approaches suggested above, the following issues should be considered to avoid reinforcing the very inequities that we seek to work against. Experiential learning and teaching that involves research methods such as ethnography should follow guidelines from institutional review boards. Additionally, service-learning can range from transactional to transformative, and strategies such as questioning assumptions can help
move us away from transactional experiences (Enos & Morton, 2003; Jagers et al., 2019; Orellana, 2019).

### Implications for the Field of Experiential Education

Keeping in mind these considerations, implications for the field of experiential education can be drawn, where T-SECs may offer a framework for educators to reflect on the skills, abilities, and learning outcomes associated with experiential learning. In terms of curriculum and pedagogy, experiential learning and teaching could give college students an opportunity to acquire knowledge relevant to T-SECs, from disciplines such as community psychology and developmental psychology. Syllabi could include theory and research on critical consciousness, which refers to people from marginalized groups engaging in the critical analysis of social conditions and efforts to improve those conditions (Freire, 1996). It is noteworthy that critical consciousness has been linked with career development outcomes, particularly among under-represented youth of color (e.g., Diemer et al., 2006).

A recent study by Rivas-Drake et al. (2021) offers examples of how instructors can put transformative SEL into practice. First, teachers in their study embedded a focus on students’ lived experiences and identities in their lessons on SEL. Teachers found that students were eager to discuss current events that impacted their own communities. Discussions on how such events reflect social inequities could promote critical social awareness. A class assignment could ask students to identify current events that speak to SECs, social inequities, readings on critical consciousness, and their service-learning projects (e.g., local news stories on lower access to health care in marginalized communities during the COVID-19 pandemic). Students could then write about the linkages, present their reflections to the class, and discuss similarities and differences across presentations.

Second, the study conducted by Rivas-Drake et al. (2021) revealed that teachers used discussions about SEL to validate students’ collective experiences with trauma, and Rivas-Drake et al. called for the sharing of these concerns as a chance to center on social justice. Syllabi might for instance, include readings from memoirs on the shared identity among immigrant youth. In class discussions of such readings, multiple students might share similar stories about the fear of family separation in the context of anti-immigrant political rhetoric. Furthermore, experiential learning programs could help students develop relevant service-learning projects (e.g., tutoring at elementary schools in local immigrant neighborhoods) and could work with offices dedicated to student wellness to offer support groups.

Third, teachers in the Rivas-Drake et al. (2021) study promoted students’ civic engagement by acknowledging their potential to act as change agents on behalf of their communities. For example, teachers would do so by showing students YouTube videos of youth advocates. In the context of service-learning projects, college students could, for instance, work with non-profit organizations that advocate for the protection of voting rights, lead voter registration drives, and organize “get out the vote” initiatives for local, state, and national elections.

Importantly, the field of experiential education might consider how to foster the T-SECs of students, staff, faculty, and community members alike, where the development and well-being of multiple stakeholders are considered. Schonert-Reichl (2017) states that if our goal is to foster students’ SECs, then we must consider educators’ SECs as well. For example, under-represented minority faculty and staff in STEM-related departments might mentor under-represented college students majoring in STEM fields in the context of projects that aim to support the college readiness of Black and Latinx high school students who have an interest in STEM careers. Such efforts could both increase adolescents’ knowledge about the college application process and promote critical self-awareness across different members of the broader university community. Through such projects, faculty, staff, and community members could gain a deeper understanding of their personal identities and shared sociocultural identities. In this way, experiential learning could help foster collective SEL and augment professional development programs that aim to increase a sense of belonging among under-represented faculty and staff.

Lastly, with an eye on T-SEL, the places in which experiential education occurs might expand in novel ways on and off campus (Keels, 2020). Universities could offer experiential learning opportunities that are part of events such as the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC)’s “Community Think and Do Tanks,” where UIUC and community members gathered to develop solutions to public health problems (e.g., what a local wellness center should offer to families (Dace & Mendenhall, 2018)). Furthermore, innovative spaces created for university STEM initiatives might be further extended with T-SEL in mind. The physical space of Purdue University’s Wilmeth Active Learning Center was
designed to stimulate different types of engaged learning. Also, the Ohio State University’s STEAM Factory aims to increase the public’s science literacy and to build university-community partnerships that reflect diversity and inclusivity, in part by offering events in public spaces. The STEAM Factory has fostered interdisciplinary collaboration and facilitated experiential learning (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine et al., 2018). Still, these efforts could be further developed with a focus on T-SEL, which might help ensure that all students yield similar benefits from such initiatives.

**Discussion**

In addition to describing practical implications, we also outline directions for future research. Existing studies have not extensively investigated the intersection of SEL, experiential learning, and social justice. Yet, there have been calls to focus on interpersonal and interpersonai competencies in efforts to promote students’ success in college, especially among minoritized youth (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). New research could study the integrated theoretical model; test linkages among experiential learning, T-SEL, and college persistence; and assess the effectiveness of the methods described here. For example, do minoritized students more highly rate CECE indicators if they engage in service-learning projects that address issues affecting their communities? Other possible future research questions include whether more T-SEL occurs and if efficacy is higher when students use identity-conscious service-learning projects, PBL, citizen science, or mindful ethnography to explore their career interests.

Despite the contributions of the current manuscript, it did not examine the role of students’ intersectional identities nor various types of educational pathways. Also, there can be a slippery slope toward deficit models when focusing on students’ individual competencies (Humphries & Iruka, 2017). Thus, it is vital that assets and asset building are part of discussions on T-SEL (Yosso, 2005). Additionally, adopting frameworks that encourage T-SEL may be viewed with skepticism as it can run counter to the status quo; therefore, “buy in” within universities and from community organizations is crucial.

In conclusion, experiential learning and teaching with T-SEL components may be uniquely positioned to help increase educational equity. Moreover, service-learning projects with a focus on T-SEL might yield benefits for multiple stakeholders (e.g., community members, staff, faculty). Importantly, such projects may help enhance intergroup relations and aid in decreasing prejudice, by providing opportunities for collaborative action among individuals who reflect diverse backgrounds. Finally, using the expanded theoretical model and methods discussed here might increase engagement among all students, especially among newer generations of young adults who are increasingly seeking ways to work toward social, economic, environmental, and racial justice.

**References**


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