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This chapter reviews relevant literature on multiracial student organizations, highlights challenges faced by such groups, and provides suggestions for advisers who work with members and leaders of multiracial campus groups.

## The Space in Between: Issues for Multiracial Student Organizations and Advising

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Originating with the civil rights movement, campus organizations for students of color were established on predominantly White campuses to help them meet other students from similar racial and ethnic backgrounds, have a safe space to identify with and share issues related to their race and ethnicity, and provide a group to advocate for their needs (Young and Hannon, 2002). Over time, such organizations have established themselves as permanent aspects of extracurricular campus life, but as the number of mixed-race students has grown on campuses, a new type of student organization has developed to respond to multiracial students' needs (Taniguchi and Heidenreich, 2005).

While multiracial organizations occur on campuses in increasing numbers, little is known about how they develop and function and the purposes they serve for students. Yet as these organizations become more prevalent, staff, administrators, and faculty are being asked to work with and advise them. In this chapter, we briefly review what is known about multiracial and identity-based student organizations, discuss some of the issues and challenges unique to them, and provide suggestions for working with and advising them.

Throughout this chapter, we use the terms *mixed race* and *multiracial* interchangeably. We also use the term *hapa* frequently with regard to multiracial individuals and groups, originating in Hawaii in reference

to individuals of Hawaiian and Caucasian heritage. Currently, *hapa* is often used to refer to anyone of a racially mixed Asian heritage, and even more recently to anyone who is of mixed-race heritage (Taniguchi and Heidenreich, 2005). Within this chapter, *hapa* refers to mixed Asian heritage.

## Background

Although student involvement and leadership have been well studied, knowledge of the development and functioning of multiracial student organizations continues to emerge. This increasing population of students requires that faculty, staff, and administrators be conversant with the issues that mixed-race students experience and understand how to work with such organizations within the campus structure. This section briefly discusses research about the development and functioning of multiracial student organizations and identity-based organizations in general.

**Development.** Students enter and become involved with multiracial and identity-based student organizations for a multitude of reasons. Social, political, and psychological explanations are all cited in the literature as factors that prompt student involvement in these organizations and are more salient as students take on various roles. First, students identify socializing as a major reason for wanting to participate in identity-based organizations (Renn, 2007; Renn and Ozaki, 2005). In a study exploring the development of a *hapa* multiracial student organization, Ozaki (2004) found that students overwhelmingly sought to meet new people and be involved with social activities in conjunction with wanting to be in a setting where a majority of people were *hapa*. Second, many students cite the desire to have more of a political voice as an impetus for involvement. Many leaders who began identity-based groups, including leaders of multiracial student groups, talk about not feeling welcome in other groups on campus or wanting a venue to advocate for issues related to their group (Harper and Quaye, 2007; Ozaki, 2004; Renn and Ozaki, 2005). Finally, in studies of identity-based student groups, members and leaders state that they are looking for a space to express and explore their identity in relationship to the particular characteristic of the group (Renn, 2007; Renn and Ozaki, 2005). Specifically, members of multiracial organizations cite wanting a space on campus where mixed-race students can share their similar experiences and backgrounds (Ozaki, 2004).

**Leadership.** Leaders of multiracial and identity-based groups have a particularly important role in the development and operation of these organizations. Renn (2000) suggested that three factors must be present for a multiracial student organization to develop on a campus: (1) there must be a critical mass of students interested in and seeing the need for such a group, (2) students need to identify the need for a space to express and explore their multiracial identity, and (3) they must feel that they do not belong to the monoracial groups on campus. It is the latter two factors that are often rec-

ognized and championed by future group leaders (Ozaki, 2004; Renn and Ozaki, 2005). At times this was because they felt the monoracial group was unwelcoming, but often it was that they felt that the monoracial and monocultural groups did not reflect their biracial and bicultural backgrounds, and therefore they did not see themselves in existing groups on campus (Ozaki, 2004).

Existing studies also emphasize the reciprocal relationship between leadership and identity development of group members (Renn, 2007; Renn and Ozaki, 2005). In a study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender student organizations and leaders, Renn (2007) found that a cyclical pattern developed as students became more involved and invested in the organizations. The involvement-identification cycle describes a pattern of students' increased involvement, which leads to increased public and personal identification and results in increased leadership.

Furthermore, the organization's leadership can have a significant impact on the mission, character, and even membership of the group (Ozaki, 2004; Renn and Ozaki, 2005). The leaders who become involved contribute to the activities the organizations engage in and shape the goals of the organization. For example, a group whose leader sees the organization as a venue to advocate for the needs of multiracial students is more likely to be political in nature versus the group whose leader wants to cultivate a space to help students explore their identity. The activities in which the group is involved affect the type of students it attracts.

**Role of Adviser.** Although few studies focus on the role of advisers in multiracial or identity-based groups, some studies have indicated that the level of involvement of an adviser can have a positive impact on individuals and groups. Research on identity-based student organizations found that advisers can function as a facilitator for the development of individual members and the group itself. Leaders of groups that received support, information, and resources from an adviser felt encouraged to continue their efforts (Renn, 2007; Renn and Ozaki, 2005). Furthermore, students state that through encouragement and interaction with faculty advisers, they chose to become involved with the organization and eventually pursue leadership within the group (Renn, 2007).

### **Common Challenges and Issues for Multiracial Student Organizations**

Multiracial student organizations may face unique and different challenges. In addition, although they may experience issues similar to those faced by monoracial groups and groups not based on identity, multiracial student organizations may experience them more often.

**Leader and Member Identity Conflict.** First, mixed-race students may find themselves facing some unique issues, many of which deal with

the diversity of personal and group identities within the *mixed race* umbrella term. Root (1996) claimed that the naming of one's identity is an important step in self-empowerment and validation of one's existence as a multiracial individual. Whether it be *mixed*, *multiracial*, *biracial*, *Black and Asian*, *human*, or in Tiger Woods's case, *Cablinasian* (a term he made up to describe his heritage: Caucasian, Black, American-Indian, and Asian), these terms have salience to students and can often help to recruit or deter others from being involved in the organization. For example, one student organization could be called the Multiracial Student Association, while another organization is named Biracial Students Circle. The term *biracial* often can exclude students who may claim heritages in more than two racial groups. In addition, *multiracial* may exclude students who identify as multiethnic or mixed in other ways. These nuances are often what students in these organizations deal with when creating and maintaining such groups.

Second, conflicts may develop within multiracial student organizations when the identities of the group leaders differ from those of the general members. If the leader of the group has a certain identity and perspective on multiraciality, that person can run the risk of alienating others who do not share the same common set of beliefs about race but may be of mixed race. This reflects a common notion that the goals of identity-based groups largely depend on the identity of their leaders (Renn and Ozaki, 2005). Some leaders may be more politically conscious, and the respective groups they lead may also reflect their level of awareness. These differences may lead to challenges in meeting the needs of students who seek involvement in the group for a support system versus students who want the group to be more politically active. The tool kit provided by Campus Awareness + Compliance Initiative (CACI; Padilla, 2004) recommends that new organizations try to provide a group that will meet the needs of students who are looking for a space to explore their multiracial identity as well as those who want to be more politically active and advocate for multiracial student needs. Organizations that provide a "safe space" in addition to being active politically will most likely reap increased membership and sustainability because they will be meeting the needs of the greatest number of students.

Third, challenges may arise when the leaders of multiracial groups do not share the same mixed heritage as other members within the group. For example, a diverse group of multiracial individuals may come together to start a new organization they call the Multiracial Student Alliance. The leaders of the group filter their experiences and needs through their hapa identity, while the majority of the general membership classify themselves as biracial (Black/White) and consider their needs and experiences through this particular racial mix. Whether it is personality differences or racial politics, this situation can create division within the larger group. This was the case when the Hapa Asian Pacific Alliance was created at Michigan State University in 2001. The founders felt that students of mixed Asian heritage

had their own unique set of needs and thus established a group focused on the hapa experience independent from a broader multiracial student group.

Hapa-based student organizations and broader-based multiracial organizations are found throughout the nation. These organizations want to create a community or pan-ethnicity for individuals of mixed Asian heritage; however, they also prevent broader multiracial organizing and have been referred to as exclusive and elitist (Taniguchi and Heidenreich, 2005).

**Conflicts with Monoracial Student of Color Groups.** Not only can differences between hapa and broader multiracial organizations create challenges for campuses, but issues may arise between multiracial organizations and traditional monoracial student-of-color groups. Many institutions provide services and organizations that traditionally target four racial minority groups: African American/Black, Chicano/Latino/Hispanic, Native American/American Indian, and Asian American/Pacific Islander. Current monoracial student-of-color groups, like Asian American associations, can create communities that may not be perceived as inclusive of multiracial students. Mixed-race students who create their own multiracial organizations often cite feelings of not being “[insert racial term here] enough” for the monoracial groups (Renn, 2000, 2004).

There can be a sense of competition for resources when multiracial groups form on campuses with long histories of monoracial student of color organizations. On predominantly White campuses, resources may already feel limited for students of color, who may sense they have to share another piece of the pie with yet another group of students. Notions of authenticity can create hostile environments between various groups, and identity politics can lead to disenfranchisement or divisiveness on campuses, especially when the multiracial movement has been charged with the potential of diluting numbers of traditional minority groups and undermining programs such as affirmative action (Williams, 2003).

**High Turnover Rate.** The MAVIN Foundation’s CACI created an online tool kit for mixed-race student groups in which a major focus was that of the transition from one leadership group to another. The tool kit addresses the all-too-common scenario of a group of dedicated students coming together to form a new student organization that has a few years of success but then dies out because of a lack of cultivating future leadership for the group (Padilla, 2004). Although this issue is not solely a problem facing multiracial student organizations, it may seem amplified given the high turnover rates of these on-campus groups.

Since groups largely reflect the identity of their leaders, the groups may take on different goals and objectives once the leaders graduate. Often there is a lack of strategic planning during initial creation of the group, including establishing vision and goals. While many organizations cite the goal of building community, there are no strategic plans on how to obtain this goal (Renn, 2007).

## How Student Affairs Professionals Can Support Multiracial Students and Their Organizations

Whether as an official adviser for a multiracial student organization, someone working in multicultural affairs, or possibly someone just interested in multiracial students and their organizations, there are several areas where student affairs professionals can support multiracial students' organizations. Following are ten suggestions for working with multiracial students and their organizations:

1. *Assist students in focusing on the vision and goals for the organization.* As recommended by CACI's tool kit (Padilla, 2004), focusing on clarifying the vision and goals of the organization may help with increasing membership and decreasing turnover rates. As an adviser, you can assist students to identify the best methods for creating a vision and strategic plan toward that vision, as well as hold the students accountable as they progress toward their goals. This may be as simple as asking how a proposed program, like the so-called date auctions that are popular on some campuses, aligns with their possible goal of building community.
2. *Advocate for multiracial issues and not just the student organization.* Although advocacy is an extremely important tool in supporting multiracial students on campus, longer-lasting benefits may be found when advocating for multiracial issues, not just students. For example, by supporting the right of students to check more than one racial/ethnic identity box on campus surveys or challenging ethnic-based support programs that do not explicitly include multiracial students, you can help create a more inclusive campus environment for multiracial students. Advocating for broader multiracial issues also has the potential to plant seeds in colleagues' heads about potential changes they can make that will have a broader impact. Advocating just for the student organization may leave out potential benefits that could also reach students who are not involved in the organization.
3. *Help students navigate potential racial politics on campus.* Advisers can assist new student organizations with the necessary steps to create a new organization on campus: writing a constitution and filing it with the student activities office, for example. In addition, advisers may need to assist students by teaching them the necessary tools to advocate for themselves and navigate conflicts that may arise due to racial politics on campus. Student groups are often focused on building community through social gatherings and discussions of shared experiences related to being multiracial. However, there may be a lack of discussion of specific issues of racism and racial oppression. By helping students to examine race and openly discuss issues related to racism, professionals may help multiracial students gain a better understanding of why others may be hesitant to support their group's formation and future success.

4. *Assess your own racial identity and personal biases about multiracial identity.* By reflecting on your own racial identity and how you came to identify that way, you may be better prepared to assist students in their own personal journeys of identity development and why they may be so passionate about their safe space on campus. You can assess your own thoughts and biases around multiracial identity as well by asking yourself questions such as, “Do I believe there should be a separate multiracial category on the U.S. Census?” and “Do I feel that multiracial individuals need more help than others?”
5. *Understand how your identity may be perceived by students.* Students may perceive your personal racial identity and beliefs about multiracial identity as possible areas of solidarity or conflict. Advisers must be aware that their identity may have an impact on their effectiveness as an adviser. Students may question whether your views on multiraciality are their own, and conflicts may arise due to those differences, whether real or perceived. By understanding the impact of your identity on the relationships you build with students, you will be one step ahead in confronting conflicts that may arise.
6. *Create opportunities for dialogue between leaders of multiracial and monoracial student organizations.* Advisers of multiracial student organizations may also find it helpful to create opportunities for dialogue about multiracial students and identity in which leaders of all groups are invited and potential areas of conflict can be brought into the open in a facilitated manner. Reaching out to the advisers of monoracial groups to discuss issues at hand will help all parties involved understand the need for dialogue and collaboration.
7. *Help students to understand the differences among race, ethnicity, and culture.* Advisers may be able to help students better understand the nuances among the terms *race*, *ethnicity*, and *culture* and why it is important to have a clear understanding of these topics and how they relate to identity.
8. *Be aware of resources on the mixed-race experience so you can better inform students.* Advisers who are familiar with resources on the mixed-race experience will be able to provide better support for students who may need extra support while they are exploring their multiracial identity. Such resources include national advocacy groups like the MAVIN Foundation, Association of Multi-Ethnic Americans, and Swirl, Inc., and books such as *Mixed Race Students in College* (Renn, 2004) and *The Multiracial Experience* (Root, 1996).
9. *Keep in mind the potential and important impact you can have on the development and sustainability of organizations and their individual members.* At times the adviser’s role can appear to be reduced to a mandatory signature for the organization, but advisers can have an impact on individual students and the group itself through their position. Advisers can keep in mind the importance of their role as educator, facilitator,

counselor, and resource for students and organizations that are continually developing and changing.

10. *Be open to change.* Just as the overall student population continues to change in terms of demographics and ways of thinking, so will the multiracial student population. We are seeing more students who identify as multigeneration multiracial or who come from long lineages of interracial or interethnic mixing. New ideologies about race and culture may continue to grow, like the opting out of racial categorization altogether (Renn, 2004). Student affairs professionals working with multiracial students should not only be open to change but should expect it.

## Conclusion

This chapter aims to educate faculty, administrators, and staff on the unique dynamics involved in the development and functioning of multiracial student organizations. The information about existing research on multiracial and identity-based student organizations provides a base for being fully informed about their development and functioning. The challenges facing multiracial student organizations are both issues confronted by many student organizations in general and issues unique to the multiracial population on campus. As these organizations become more prevalent and the multiracial student population increases, faculty and staff must be aware of the unique challenges they face as individuals and in formalized university organizations. Advisers are in the position to have a significant impact on the individuals who participate in these groups and the groups themselves. Through thoughtful education and sensitive encouragement and interaction, advisers have the potential to help create an environment on campus for multiracial students to explore their identities, develop socially, and cultivate their voices.

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