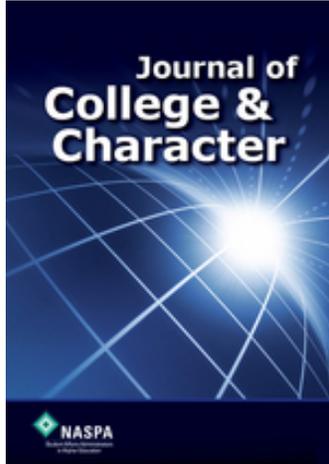


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Challenging College Students to Learn in Campus Cultures of Comfort, Convenience and Complacency

Jon Dalton, Co-editor

Pamela Crosby, Co-editor

Student learning and development in college depend greatly on an optimal balance of challenge and support. Challenge is necessary to motivate personal exploration, reflection, and risk-taking. Support is needed for those inevitable times of vulnerability, uncertainty, and failure that can threaten to overwhelm a student. Nevitt Sanford (1968) argued that learning and development are mediated by the complimentary influences of challenge and support and that one of the most important tasks of educators is to create learning environments that balance these two for as many students as possible. Chickering (2004) observed that “Environments that provide a combination of challenge and support tailored to students’ level of development are recommended to assist students in adapting appropriately to the challenges they encounter,” (p. 117).

Finding just the right balance of challenge and support is, of course, tricky business. A student who is overly supported may stagnate in his/her development while a student who is too severely challenged may simply avoid or withdraw from growth-producing experiences. Sanford noted :

We could run an institution in the interest of positive mental health that would so protect individuals from challenging stimuli that they would not develop at all.

They might remain quite healthy but very simple, underdeveloped people. (p. 98)

At the heart of Sanford’s concept of challenge is the notion of psychological *disequilibrium*, an unsettling stimulus or experience that disrupts or alters one’s prior understanding or beliefs. Disequilibrium can be produced by almost any stimulus that agitates one’s current way of understanding and being. One of the reasons college life is so fertile for learning is that it provides an array of challenging stimuli for students such as classroom discussions, reading assignments, encounters with diverse individuals, community service, travel, exposure to the arts, living-learning experiences, and leadership opportunities.

The experience of psychological and cognitive disequilibrium, according to Sanford, produces feelings of internal “dissonance” that manifests itself as uncertainty, and sometimes as conflict and even threat. But it is the experience of such dissonance that opens up the possibility for learning and growth because it nudges students into confronting and considering new ways of understanding, thinking, and acting that help to unsettle the old and integrate it with the new. It is essential for students’ learning and growth in college to have challenging stimuli and experiences of positive restlessness

because these provide the creative disequilibrium and intellectual foment that drive personal exploration and development.

The pivotal role of intellectual and psychological disequilibrium is widely recognized in the research on college student learning and development. Many of the leading theories of college student development make disequilibrium a central feature or dynamic of their conceptual schemes. Erik Erikson employed the concept of “crisis” to describe the pivotal experience of disequilibrium in which individuals confront a defining conflict or turning point in understanding and development. Individuals who avoid or retreat from the challenge of these turning points are likely to stagnate in their learning and development. On the other hand, individuals who are able to incorporate new understandings from such developmental encounters are able to achieve greater integration of knowledge and identity.

Cognitive dissonance or disequilibrium also played a central role in Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory of moral reasoning development. Through the use of moral dilemmas Kohlberg was able to demonstrate that it is the struggle with cognitive disequilibrium in ethical dilemma situations that provide a catalyst for richer, more complex ways of thinking and understanding. Without such conflict and struggle moral reasoning can become stuck at conventional and conformist levels of thinking. It is the successful struggle with intellectual dissonance that makes possible an integration of conflicting elements into more encompassing way of understanding and resolving complex moral situations.

William Perry’s scheme of intellectual and ethical development hinged on the notion of cognitive disequilibrium or dissonance. In his scheme, individuals advance in cognitive development as they are able to adopt increasingly complex levels of thinking that resolve and integrate opposing or conflicting affirmations of truth. Consequently, effective teaching requires some understanding of how and when to engage students with issues involving cognitive disequilibrium and dissonance in order to stimulate them to think in more sophisticated and complex ways.

Theories of racial and sexual identity development also incorporate the concept of disequilibrium as a central dynamic for expanding self-awareness and acceptance. In describing the dynamics of identity development, Cass (1979) claimed that *disrupting personal experiences* often serve as psychological triggers for promoting self-awareness and development. Such experiences may be uncomfortable and even painful for students but they can serve to motivate them to confront aspects of their racial or sexual identity that may have been ignored or simply gone unnoticed.

Finding the right balance of challenge and support has always been a moving target in higher education institutions. Some colleges strive to emphasize the aspect of challenge in constructing the learning environments of their campuses. They want students to expect a high degree of intellectual and personal challenge, and while they usually provide many support services for students, they also expect students to possess and cultivate a high degree of independence, flexibility and coping skills. On the other hand, some institutions place great emphasis on providing a nurturing and supportive environment for students in which comfort, convenience, community, and caring are major priorities. Other institutions strive for different degrees of challenge and support in their academic and student life programs based on their assessment of what they believe

to be an optimal balance between the two. No doubt some students require greater doses of challenge to motivate them to learn while other students simply will not succeed in college without significant levels and types of personal support. Consequently, it is not easy even under the best of circumstances to create learning and living environments that incorporate the optimal balance of challenge and support for every student.

One reason for the increased emphasis on student comfort and support has to do with student *safety and security*. The events of 9/11 marked a watershed for campus safety and security as it did for the society at large. Densely populated college campuses with large scale public events and easy accessibility make them potential targets for terrorist acts and random violence. Moreover, highly publicized school shootings galvanized attention on the complex problems of safety and security in educational settings. In particular, the shooting deaths of Virginia Tech University students and staff put college and university administrators everywhere on notice about the need to escalate efforts to provide for the safety and security of college students. Concern about safety and security led to enhanced student support programs and services in such areas as mental health counseling, advising, crisis management, and personal problem-solving. More attention is now given to assisting students who encounter personal problems and having a campus early warning system for identifying and responding to a wide range of student needs and problems.

Another reason for increased emphasis on comfort and support for students has been a by-product of the efforts of colleges and universities to adopt a business model approach to institutional marketing and student satisfaction. The business model approach to enrollment management emphasizes high student (customer) satisfaction as a key strategy for attracting and retaining students in college and enhancing school reputation. In order to promote greater student satisfaction more emphasis has been placed on student services and amenities such as upscale recreation centers, apartment-style residence halls, technology enhancements, and gourmet food plans. Most students now enter college with high expectations of entitlements to comfort, convenience, support, and satisfaction of their diverse needs and wants.

Millennial students are ambitious and achievement oriented but many have not been allowed to make significant personal decisions or to take responsibility for themselves. They come to college expecting the conveniences and comfort that they received at home. They view challenge, dissonance, and disequilibrium as indicators of poor customer services and unnecessary obstacles. They expect colleges to anticipate and fulfill their needs and interests, not to disrupt them. They want college to help them to succeed but not necessarily to learn. Richard Flacks (1998) notes that the “culture of disengagement by many of today’s advantaged students is rooted in a pervasive belief that the main purpose of going to college is economic...” Flack’s research indicated that advantaged students who had experienced low “adversity” (having to make sacrifices to enter and complete college) performed more poorly in college than students with high adversity experiences. Students whose parents are highly educated and affluent were more likely to drink, use drugs, and party frequently and less likely to spend time studying. In short, advantaged students are often less engaged than students who must struggle with some adversity.

The increased involvement of so-called “helicopter” parents has also inflated the emphasis on student needs, expectations, comfort and support. Parents of the millennial generation are perhaps the most involved and demanding mothers and fathers in higher education history. They intervene often with college officials on behalf of their sons and daughters and are aggressive advocates for student support, attention, service, and convenience. In particular, the high cost of college tuition leads parents to expect institutions to provide exemplary *customer services*

Some educators are concerned that a growing imbalance between challenge and support is making it harder to create the most effective learning and development conditions for students on campus. Richard Light (2001) argues that it is important that educators “get in students’ way” by creating learning conditions that challenge students to see new perspectives and open themselves to new experiences. He cautions that educators should not underestimate the propensity of college students to isolate and insulate themselves from the kinds of risk-taking, challenging situations that contribute to deep learning. We see this illustrated in the case of diversity encounters in college. Despite the increasing racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity on most college campuses today, most students will avoid challenging encounters with others who are different unless educators “get in their way” by structuring diversity learning experiences.

The recent ten year annual report from the National Student Engagement project (2007) makes it clear that the most important conditions for deep learning in college must be intentionally structured and promoted in order for students to take advantage of them. Research suggests that, left to themselves, most students will not push themselves to increase their study hours, seek out a faculty member with whom to do research, find ways to connect coursework with service and career, enroll in intensive academic seminars, or take a demanding senior capstone course. If colleges do not intentionally create the structures and conditions for an optimal balance in challenge and support, in both classroom and student life, students will likely gravitate toward those things that they view as comfortable and convenient, especially when they feel pressured.

Sharon Parks (2007) uses the metaphor of “shipwreck” to describe what many college students experience when they find their comfortably constructed worlds disrupted. It is a strong metaphor that suggests a serious disruption or re-orientation in one’s perspective. Parks notes that “shipwreck” reflects a depth of dissonance or disequilibrium that can sometimes require considerable personal bravery and courage. As sailors, the metaphor of “shipwreck” resonates with us. We have felt the fear that a little floating world would sink beneath us or run aground on some submarine shoal far from shore. The fear of shipwreck often makes one reluctant to leave the dock so that every cast off requires a small act of courage. But the longer one stays in port the greater the courage required to venture out again. In responding to life’s challenges, courage and confidence are nurtured by daily acts of faith.

Creating an optimal balance between challenge and support in college requires us to call for students to leave the dock regularly, to push out into the open water where they are more exposed and vulnerable. An optimal balance of challenge and support is one in which students are encouraged to venture out but not alone or unprepared. It is this delicate balance of personal nudge and nurture that creates possibilities of deeper learning, confidence, courage and self-mastery.

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