DEVELOPING SOCIAL EMPATHY IN ACADEMIC AND STUDENT AFFAIRS PROGRAMMING

Dr. Phillip A. Olt

THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL POLARIZATION

Fundamental Disagreement

◦ 80% of Americans say they disagree with the other side about the very nature of American values and what the goals for the country should be

   ◦ Pew Research Center. (2020, October). *Amid campaign turmoil, Biden holds wide leads on coronavirus, unifying the country*. https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/10/PP_2020.10.08_Election-and-Voter-Attitudes_FINAL.pdf

Seven Political Tribes
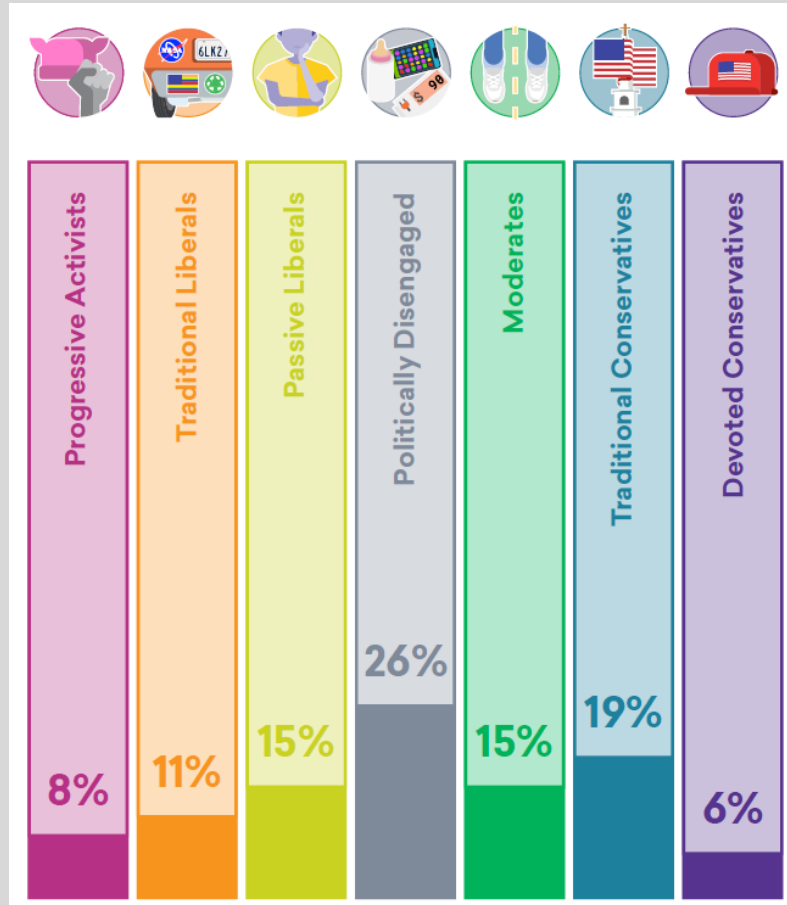
Hawkins, S., Yudkin, D., Juan-Torres, M., & Dixon, T. (2018). Hidden tribes: A study of America's polarized landscape. *More in Common.* https://hiddentribes.us/pdf/hidden_tribes_report.pdf

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Allport's Contact Hypothesis

◦ Direct contact between people of difference promotes tolerance and breaks down barriers when there are equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support.

   ◦ Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Addison-Wesley.

Allport's Contact Hypothesis in Higher Education

- "Regardless of their level of engagement with the residential environment, White residential students expressed experiencing diversity through interaction with peers, including student groups, friend groups, and social experiences. It follows that increasing students' opportunity to engage with students of Color within the context of their residence halls could have positive implications for increasing White residential students' diversity appreciation." (p. 500)

  - Garvey, J. C., Richter, E., Payton, S., Kiemele, R., & Sanders, L. A. (2020). Diversity appreciation among White first-year residential students. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 57*, 487-504. https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2019.1662794

Social Empathy

◦ "The ability to understand people and other social groups by perceiving and experiencing their life situations" (p. 4)

  ◦ Segal, E. (2018). *Social empathy: The art of understanding others.* Columbia University Press.

Honest Diversity

◦ Promote the voices of all groups—from the smallest identity to the largest majority

◦ Avoid group shaming, reliance on labels, etc. (ex. White fragility)

◦ Balance demographic diversity with individuality

◦ "Recognize the plural sides of each being, including the different points of view within any group" (p. 184)

   ◦ Manji, I. (2019). *Don't label me: How to do diversity without inflaming the culture wars*. St. Martin's Griffin.

Honest Diversity

◦ Why college students shouldn't avoid difference of opinion (1:52)

  ◦ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJ1vyuY3ns8

THEORY APPLIED TO PRACTICE

Honest Diversity in Practice

◦ Should the Confederate flag still fly in Mississippi? (9:53)

  ◦ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ird_I0aK1h0

Dealing with
Social / Controversial Topics

1. **Define your terms!**

   ◦ Language and definitions change

   ◦ Much of our polarization comes from people using terms in ways that are fundamentally different (exs. equality/equity, racism)

   ◦ Higher education emphasizes specificity

   ◦ Each time you write / speak with terms that are at the center of a social issue, clearly define how you are using them

Dealing with
Social / Controversial Topics

2. **Rather than counter-events or anonymous comments, intentionally design engagement activities between groups who have different beliefs**

   ◦ Casual and social engagement appears as valuable as directly engaging with ideas (i.e., a social event co-hosted by College Democrats and College Republicans with the commitment to just have a good time and no discussion of politics)

   ◦ Engagements on the issues must be based upon equal status among groups, common goals (ex. furthering understanding between the groups), cooperation (identify common goals, even if broad and generic), and institutional support (ex. moderation)

   ◦ AEP 880 Duoethnography Project

Cultural Diversity

Another course that had an impact on me professionally and personally was the Cultural Diversity course. This course afforded eight full weeks of feeling internally conflicted and uncomfortable. It was unnerving but being uncomfortable and truly reviewing my long held beliefs was necessary in order to better serve my students.

Identification

I had to work with a partner to write a Duoethnography paper. This paper had us review our belief system and our partner's belief system. We chose religion and I hold onto my faith quite vigorously. I knew this could be uncomfortable at times, but I would by lying if I did not say my feelings were never hurt in the process of writing the paper. The partnership, while difficult turned into a professional relationship. After working together on this paper for hours, we worked through a lot of our issues and found respect for one another. We respected one another's faith and were able to see similarities that would not otherwise have been discovered if it not were for the hard conversations we had in the beginning of the project.

Dealing with
Social / Controversial Topics

3. **Host events that involve experts / speakers from multiple points of view (ex. panel discussion rather than lecture) – Robert P. George & Cornel West Model**

   ◦ "All of us should be willing—even eager—to engage with anyone who is prepared to do business in the currency of truth-seeking discourse by offering reasons, marshaling evidence, and making arguments" (para. 4)

   ◦ As a foundation, participants must "will the good of the other for the sake of the other, to treat even our adversaries as precious members of the human family" (para. 15)

   ◦ Essential for participants to "recognize and acknowledge that there are reasonable people of goodwill who do not share even some of our deepest, most cherished beliefs" (para. 12)

   https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/07/15/opinion/unite-country-we-need-honesty-courage/

Dealing with
Social / Controversial Topics

◦ Participants must "recognize our own fallibility" and "consider with an open mind and heart points of view that challenge our beliefs" (para. 11)

◦ As an extension from social empathy, participants must give the benefit of doubt to those of difference and see them "as partners in truth-seeking and fellow citizens of our republican order, not as enemies to be destroyed" (para. 13)

https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/07/15/opinion/unite-country-we-need-honesty-courage/

Dealing with
Social / Controversial Topics

4. **Emphasize elements of common humanity, rather than division or guilt, in both problems and problem solving**

   ◦ Singling out a group—whether merited or not—triggers a defensive response among group members. Research has shown this is likely the biggest reason with trainings and initiatives have not worked over the years

   ◦ Almost all social problems arise from psychological or behavioral problems that people from all groups have (ex., bigotry is not specific to a single group)

   ◦ A foundation of conflict resolution is finding common ground (i.e., we want everyone to feel welcome here)

   ◦ None of this means that both sides are equally guilty, individuals cannot be responsible, etc. Nor does this suggest that high-level research / discussions should not happen about group-level emanations of problems.

DO WE WANT TO FEEL MORALLY UPRIGHT, OR DO WE WANT TO MAKE PROGRESS?