

Talking Across Difference Final Paper

Intercultural Inquiry: What forces at Carnegie Mellon University determine how a student portrays his or her cultural identity?

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Students at Carnegie Mellon University exist as a varied collection of interests, ideals and values. *Mestiza*, as described by Gloria Anzaldua in *Borderlands, La Frontera*, means to be “torn between ways.” Carnegie Mellon is known as a culturally diverse campus, yet *mestiza* describes the diversity within each individual. Every student is a unique conglomeration of identities and cultures. This mix of values that define our identity, however, is often ambiguous and contradictory. There is no single definition that does justice to all combinations and variations. The unifying perception, however, is that during our time at college we exist in a constant negotiation with the internal and external voices at play in our lives. In this inquiry, we attempted to understand what voices influence students’ portrayal of their *mestiza* aspects to the rest of the community. We heard:

College is all about experimentation. This is my chance to try everything! *“I know I should help out with Spirit Buggy, but I have to be loyal to my frat brothers, ya know?”* I don’t know why everyone wants to fight about it. It’s stupid. I’m the one that will decide who I am and what I want. The color of my skin is all the world will ever see. Minority survival is contingent on how well we stick together. I don’t want people on campus to be uncomfortable around me because my faith is so important to me. I just want them to know I’m a Christian. **We don’t have much help getting out the word of God at CMU. It’s important that we are active.** I’m sick of being the token Hispanic. I don’t know why they don’t see the rest of me. But, I guess if I don’t speak up about my race, no one will. I was the president of the Society of Christian Athletes in high school, but I guess nobody cares about that here. **I know I could join APhiO or Circle K, but they just weren’t what I was looking for.** Spending time with the girls on my floor is really important to me. I just don’t have time to go to practice. I guess lacrosse isn’t all that important. High school was a past life. I don’t do those things anymore. **I would have done that as a freshman, but if I want to find a job by the end of this year, school has to come first.** I don’t think there is really a problem. Some people just complain a lot. **I think what makes me different is not just any one thing. What makes me different is that I’m a combination of different things. I guess I haven’t ever met anyone here exactly like me.**

These are the voices of a cross-cultural network of students who spanned the diversity of the campus. We invited the participation of students with varying cultures, religions, sexual preferences, interests, academic disciplines, and ages. As a collection of

students from the class "Talking Across Difference," we too fall within the range of diversity exhibited in our network. With them, we represent a wide sampling of experiences and attitudes at Carnegie Mellon. We asked the people in our networks to respond to our created narratives, which illustrated identity conflicts that are common on campus. Their responses, as well as their own experiences in similar incidents, allowed us to reconstruct the "story behind the story" and extract the voices involved in the public identity negotiation. From these critical incidents, we hope to present a glimpse into some relevant voices influencing many students at CMU.

College is all about experimentation. This is my chance to try everything!

How many of us were thinking this the moment after our parents left our dorm rooms with their teary eyes and promises to call every weekend? Freedom, right? You most likely have a dorm room that's half the size of your room back at home, but neither that or the unnatural habits of your new roommate will deter you from experiencing 'the best years of your life'. From *Felicity* to MTV's reality show *Sorority Life*, television shows depicting college life leave adolescent mouths watering at all of the possible encounters to be had in college—the enchantment of finding your one true love in the mass of faces, the decision of whether to try sushi or not, whether to join a fraternity and which one are enticing to students coming out of high school away from parents who drug them to church every Sunday and made them eat vegetables. Many share Gloria Anzaldua's sentiments in leaving home for the first time. In *Borderlands, La Frontera*, she writes, "I had to leave home so I could find myself. Find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been opposed on me (38)." College *is* all about the

freedom to experience finding oneself—for four to five years you will live at school with thousands of other students just like you and thousands more absolutely nothing like you. To say the least, Carnegie Mellon offers a very unique college experience to its students. Andrew Carnegie's quote "My heart is in the work" is more than just the school's motto. It is the work ethic that, like air, is invisible but essential in the campus atmosphere. Amidst falling in love, joining organizations, and experimenting with hair dye, there are 3-hour labs to prepare for each week, crew to do before each play, reports to compile, presentations to give, papers to write and always a fresh homework problem set for the week. The trivial decisions are gradually replaced by more critical ones: "Do I sleep or eat?", "Go to sleep or go to class?", "Sleep for an hour or sleep for 10 hours?" "Trying everything" soon takes a distant backseat to the priorities on your busy always-changing schedule of responsibilities—the type of responsibilities that can at times become overwhelming, along with the ones your mom wagged her finger to and said you would one day have.

"I know I should help out with Spirit Buggy, but I have to be loyal to my frat brothers, ya know?"

Now this is where trying to do "everything" stops being fun and becomes time-consuming hard work. This is when you're trying to attend the meetings for all of those organizations you've signed up for at the Activities Fair. Once you realize that it's not humanly possible to attend every meeting, finish homework *and* wake up in time for morning classes—you begin to make choices. You filter out what you want to do and what your friends want you to do with them and what you feel you *should* do. Arguably,

making such decisions can become major dilemmas to some CMU students. While some may feel free to join whatever associations they want, some students may join certain organizations because they feel obligated. The obligation could stem from cultural or religious affiliations or perhaps moral connections, which take precedence over what they are really interested in. For instance, those students committed to religious practices and beliefs may feel more obligated to participate in religious functions as opposed to student activities. Or, some under-represented minorities may feel a greater need to join organizations centered around their culture. While some think this counteracts the diversity of the ideal community on campus, others feel that it provides a place for support. The causes some to be in what Jake Lamar calls “social limbo”. While knowing that “the protectiveness of grouping together [based on race] could prove stifling”, he also acknowledges that among his black friends there was “a comfort, a knowingness, a sort of exultation among us. We could get together and talk about the peculiar nuances and prickly ironies of our lives, sustaining each other when things got weird by reminding ourselves that we weren’t going through this alone”. This extra support system helps many feel that they aren’t abandoning their values once they are in a new place. Some may feel like Gloria Anzaldua in that they don’t need an added support system to constantly remind them of who they are and where they come from. In *Borderlands, La Frontera*, she states “in leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because *lo mexicano* is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go, I carry home on my back (43). ” Hence, we become negotiators—negotiating our internal aspirations with our external pressures.

A key factor in negotiation of public identity among our network was the idea of responsibility to either the deity or group associated with the ideals being portrayed. In our interviews, we found several instances where a person was deciding how they should project themselves publicly or whether to continue supporting a group on campus consonant with their identity. Often the person would either favor continuing in the support of the group or continue to portray said values due to these feelings of responsibility. The breadth of arenas in which this factor entered into the negotiation processes was found to be quite broad, ranging from support of a minority group on campus, allowing oneself to be frequently used as the “spokesperson” for a culture, and deciding to continue promoting religion zealously in public despite mixed reaction on campus.

Minority students at CMU feel a large push to get involved with groups celebrating their culture. One group on campus is Spirit, known as a predominantly African-American group. Black students our group interviewed felt a responsibility to get involved with the group. One student, Joe, had recently pledged to a fraternity and was being pulled by both the fraternity and Spirit to be a pusher for the annual buggy event. Joe eventually opted to help out Spirit, because he felt responsible to his culture and their underrepresented status on campus.

The fact that someone is a minority gives them an obligation to support their peers.

The In the real world, this is all they are gonna see (pointing to his skin). A minority’s survival is contingent on how well we stick together.

Another student holding a major leadership role in Spirit defended the position of a minority student's responsibility to the organizations on campus. Since African American students are under-represented on campus, they feel a need to stick together, and the responsibility to do so is magnified. He also argued that, as members of the minority culture, these students have a responsibility to the group regardless of their own needs, but for the preservation of the group to enable it to help the needs of incoming minority students. Jake Lamar, in his autobiography *Bourgeois Blues*, described a similar feeling of responsibility for doing things not necessarily important for him, but for others close to him: "I would go to Harvard so that my own children could feel free to go to any college they damn well pleased" (Lamar 86).

"I'm sick of being the token Hispanic. I don't know why they don't see the rest of me. But, I guess if I don't speak up about my race, no one will."

Although she wished to be typified for her other attributes, she found that oftentimes people still expect her to give a stereotypical Hispanic response, on command, to the particular situation. Despite misgivings, she allowed others to stereotype her and ask her opinion about Hispanic events because she hoped that her culture could be represented well. As a member of the Hispanic culture, she felt responsible to portray the Spanish culture to her friends. Depending on how responsible she felt to explain her culture as a whole, she could have chosen to ignore others who were stereotyping her as if she knew everything about Spanish culture, but her feelings of duty overrode the other issues.

“I don’t want people on campus to be uncomfortable around me because I share my beliefs with them. It’s not that I’m ashamed about it-no, I want them to know I’m a Christian... My faith is important to me. We don’t have much help getting out the word of God at CMU. It’s important that we stay active. If I don’t keep spreading the gospel, I’m sinning.”

Brian, an active Christian on campus, realizes that others view him negatively because of the extremely active role he takes in spreading the gospel on campus. Brian gives out hot chocolate during finals with a religious group and invites others to their meetings as they pour the drinks. Most accept the chocolate with a quick thanks. However, it is not uncommon for students to either skip by the table to avoid a religious conversation or be taken aback by the people confronting their religion as they walk to class. Brian wants everyone he meets to like him, and not immediately paint him as obtrusive. However, he knows this occurs inevitably with the outreach he participates in on campus. Brian admits that, if not for being a Christian, he would not feel comfortable participating in similar activities and would want to avoid similar confrontations. But, he feels responsible to God to continue this work, for if he did not, he believes that he is not being faithful to God. Other responses to this feeling of duty vary; many Christians on campus do not participate in these public activities because they do not feel as responsible as Brian does, or other responsibilities supersede their responsibility to witness on campus. Others may not feel as responsible to be as publicly religious on campus due to the difference in moral upbringings among students at CMU; “being good” takes on completely different meanings between two students depending on their upbringing, as described in *Habits of the Heart* (Bella 60).

To conclude our research on the role responsibilities to cultures and beliefs play in the negotiation of public identity, we also found that these responsibilities, past a certain point, break down in the face of the students' primary responsibility: their education. They allowed themselves to be pulled to a point at which the amount of time they devoted to campus support groups for their culture or belief-system was affecting their studies more than desired. At this critical point, the students would halt their support of the group, and defend their stance with a statement that their primary responsibility as a student was to do well in classes. Thus we have found that feelings of responsibility play a paramount role in not only deciding which facets of their identity they choose to publicly display, but how much time they devote to display these facets.

I was the president of the Society of Christian Athletes in high school, but I guess nobody cares about that here. **I know I could join APhiO or Circle K, but they just weren't what I was looking for. Spending time with the girls on my floor is really important to me. I just don't have time to go to practice. I guess lacrosse isn't all that important.**

One of the prevalent voices at play in CMU students' negotiations is the voice of support. We found that students are often very concerned about the support system that exists here on the CMU campus for the specific mestiza component they are negotiating. This support often takes the form of a group or organization. The existence of a group of people that share a strong connection to a single value is often a large driving force for a student to let that value become more prominent in their outward identity. Similarly, students often feel that if a support system does not exist to nurture their personal value

that the best plan of action is to let it slip into a more latent part of their identity. This is the case seen in the student who was the president of the Society of Christian Athletes in high school. When the perception is that no one on campus shares the value, the student may be likely to let it pass.

There is also a contradictory face to the idea of support. We found that students often did not outwardly portray specific values, even though a support system existed on campus. Several times we heard the voice of the second student. The group dynamic of the support system also comes into play as the student is negotiating. If the specific group on campus does not portray the value in the same way as the student negotiating, or if the student feels uncomfortable with the group personality, the student does not feel as strong of a pull towards the support of that group. The student may feel a very strong desire to portray the value, but the voice of the support quiets when that student does not feel they “fit in” so they may deduce that that group activity “is not for them.”

Another main concern about the force of support is that, as always, CMU students are a mestiza. They are at once not only negotiating one value, but many. Support may simultaneously exist for several of those values on the CMU campus. Again, the negotiation must continue, and the support must be weighed and balanced. As seen in the response of the lacrosse player, it is often that one support group becomes de-emphasized so that another may take a more central role in the current negotiation. The multiple voices of the negotiation are constantly shifting and superceding each other as the student and the support change.

High school was a past life. I don't do those things anymore.

We saw that even though many students respond to external forces when forming their identity at CMU, a few will actively, internally, choose to change their behavior in order to form a different identity than the one they had in high school. Of course, there are students who experience a gradual change during their undergraduate stay, but never feel like they are actively choosing to change their identity. We encountered a few students who entered CMU ready to take advantage of the fact that no one knew them and they could be anyone they want to be. They adapted their dress, taste in music, religious preferences, and chose to make friends with different interests. For example, one student highly involved in the high-school drama club who once dyed her hair black and wore “grunge” style clothes chose to become a cheerleader, join a sorority, and wear preppy clothes here at Carnegie Mellon. One student who was shy and quiet in high school came to CMU and made a conscious decision to have a stronger, louder personality more like that of his older brother. His discourse became more assertive and aggressive. This was an external change in what he chose to project but his internal interests seemed to remain the same.

A student who says, “High school was a past life – I don't do those things anymore,” may chose to put the old “partying lifestyle” behind him and focus on his academics and career goals at CMU. As mentioned before, many students are constantly evolving and making choices as to how they want they want to be identified. One way to do this is by selectively choosing one's academic and extracurricular activities.

Participating in many activities might pull a student in different directions. This internal

and external conflict can cause stress when the student's lack of free time demands that they chose only a few activities in which they wish to identify.

I would have done that as a freshman, but if I want to find a job by the end of this year, school has to come first.

A common trend for the students was to join several clubs and interest groups at the Activities Fair their freshman year, but as time went on, they had to chose to be more active (and usually in more responsible roles) in a smaller number of organizations. The academic rigor of Carnegie Mellon challenges students and their time-management skills so that some students choose to focus primarily on their schoolwork.

I think what makes me different is not just any one thing. What makes me different is that I'm a combination of different things. I guess I haven't ever met anyone here exactly like me.

The interviews we conducted support our hypothesis: each CMU student is a collection of ideals, goals, personalities, morals and relationships. Decisions on how to project a public identity are in essence negotiations between voices stemming from either outside sources and pressures or those from the voices similar to those described throughout the paper. Although we feel we were able distinguish the voices heard during the identity negotiation process from several of the intercultural network members, an interesting point was brought up during one interview. We also noticed that, similar to the above quote, no two negotiation experiences are congruent. "Finding oneself in college" takes on two different meanings for any two people. While students may be listening to voices that are stemming from forces described above, the manner in which the students

perceive the voices and subsequently react to them are distinct. One must also note that many voices that were not listed in this paper still exist. Although we attempted to list and describe negotiation patterns, students have different personalities and encounter unique circumstances, which hints that there are possibly an infinite number of distinct negotiation processes going on as we speak.