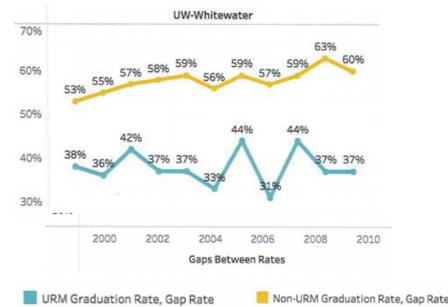


# Who Am I? Helping Students Navigate Their Identity Exploration Through Academic Advising Initiatives

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## BACKGROUND



UW-Whitewater has recognized both a retention and graduation gap between minority and majority students. Since 2010, the graduation rate of White students has steadily improved (53% to 60%) while minority graduation rates have remained flat (38% to 37%), meaning the gap is persistent and steadily widening. The six-year graduation rate for minority students has been below the UW System average seven of the last ten years.

## EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Emerging adulthood is characterized as a precarious time period between the late teens and early twenties, when young people in a 21st-century industrialized society experience great volatility in both change and exploration as they pursue a variety of life directions. This time period in a young person's life is distinctly different from both adolescence and adulthood. Young people are no longer fully dependent on their families, but are still free from declaring a defined societal role.

Arnett (2000) explained: *Emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period (p. 469).*

Phinney's (1989) model of ethnic identity is especially useful in understanding a young adult's negotiation of their ethnic identity. Phinney explains members of an ethnic group advance through three stages: (a) unexamined ethnic identity—a person has not yet considered the perceived positives or negatives of their group membership; (b) ethnic identity search—a person starts to explore what it means to be part of their ethnic group, and (c) achieved ethnic identity—a person has engaged in identity exploration and has formed a strong sense of what their own ethnicity means to them.

Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood. A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *The American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469-480.

Phinney, J. (1992). The multigroup ethnic identity measure: A new scale for use with adolescents and young adults from diverse groups. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 7, 156-176.

## RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODS

**Qualitative** Two students were selected for individual semi-structured interviews. Both students self-identified as Black/African American and both were raised in large cities and lived in minority-dense areas at some point in their lives.

The participants were asked eight questions pertaining to the transition to college, self-identity exploration, and ethnic identity exploration. For example, regarding ethnic identity exploration, the participants were asked "At what age did you have the deepest internal questions about what your race means to you?"

**Quantitative** Understanding stressors may be unique to students at different institutions, the Tasks for Measuring Stress and Self-Efficacy survey was used for both a pre-test and post-test with the goal of measuring change from the beginning of the semester to the end. This instrument helped to determine which high and low stress items students brought with them to UW-Whitewater, as well as an understanding if those items changed during the semester. The survey includes 27 items and each item has an 11-point Likert scale. The items include tasks that are common for college students such as "talking to my professors", "making friends at school", and "doing well in my toughest class". (n=15)

Zajacova, Anna & Lynch, Scott & Espenshade, Thomas. (2005). Self-Efficacy, Stress, and Academic Success in College. *Research in Higher Education*. 46. 677-706.

## PRELIMINARY QUALITATIVE RESULTS



The following four themes emerged from the interviews:

**Changing schools, from an ethnically homogenous school to a more diverse school, or vice versa, sparked an ethnic identity crisis.**

*"I went from a melting pot to a predominantly White school. For the first time, I become the Black kid from Chicago and I started to have questions about my race."*

*"...that was a time in my life I thought I didn't know much about myself culturally and that was confusing. I remember taking a course on African American history and it was taught by a White professor. I was like 'oh this is interesting'. But she knew a lot, and it was weird, because she knew way more about it than me."*

**Not feeling a sense of belonging from fellow minority students sparked an ethnic identity crisis.**

*"There were very few Black people. And the Black kids judged me too because I wasn't the stereotypical Black kid from Chicago. I didn't talk a certain way. I didn't dress a certain way. I didn't act a certain way. I didn't listen to right music. On one end I'm a minority, and on the other end, I'm getting judged because they think I'm acting more like the majority, like I'm a sellout. Why is it that some accept me, and others are like 'he's a White dude'? So it was like 'where's my place here'? I didn't know who I was or where I belonged. I had self-confidence and self-worth issues. It was a rough time."*

**Starting college sparked more questions about their self-identity in general.**

*"I questioned who I was a lot. Self-worth as well, whether I was good enough to make it to the goals I had for myself. Am I just good enough in general? It was a lot of self-doubt and a low point mentally. I essentially hit rock-bottom."*

*"There were so many times I asked myself 'what am I doing here', 'do I even want to continue', 'should I be in this major?' I just didn't have my footing. I was going through a lot of questions and I didn't talk to anyone about it. Maybe I was scared about coming into myself."*

**An identity crisis is an invisible problem that can be helped by using campus resources.**

*"Starting my senior year of college, I started going to some counseling, because there was a lot of things I still didn't know about myself. I was determined, like on a mission, to figure out who I am and who I wanted to be."*

*"I finally decided to use the counseling center. I was just holding things in and then I made my way over to the counseling center and was like let's get this thing figured out."*

## PRELIMINARY QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Highest stress items, beginning of the first semester

ITEM	PRE-TEST MEAN (0-10)	POST-TEST MEAN (0-10)	DIFF
1. Doing well on exams	6.47	6.2	-0.27
2. Writing term papers	6.36	5.43	-0.93
3. Preparing for exams	6.21	6.4	+0.19
4. Having enough money	6.07	5.5	-0.57
4. Doing well in my toughest class	6.07	5.87	-0.2

Lowest stress items, beginning of the first semester

ITEM	PRE-TEST MEAN (0-10)	POST-TEST MEAN (0-10)	DIFF
1. Understanding college regulations	1.87	1.6	-0.27
2. Getting along with family members	2.07	2.27	+0.2
3. Getting help and info at school	2.67	2.07	-0.6
3. Making friends at school	2.67	1.8	-0.87
3. Parents expectations of grades	2.67	3.0	+0.53

Greatest increase in stress, beginning to end of the semester

ITEM	PRE-TEST MEAN (0-10)	POST-TEST MEAN (0-10)	DIFF
1. Managing time efficiently	4.27	4.93	+0.66
2. Parents expectations of grades	2.67	3.2	+0.53
3. Getting the grades I want	4.87	5.33	+0.46
4. Having multiple tests in the same week	5.47	5.8	+0.33
5. Getting along with family members	2.07	2.27	+0.2

Greatest decrease in stress, beginning to end of the semester

ITEM	PRE-TEST MEAN (0-10)	POST-TEST MEAN (0-10)	DIFF
1. Talking to college staff	3.33	1.87	-1.46
2. Participating in class discussions	3	1.73	-1.27
3. Asking questions in class	3.13	1.87	-1.26
4. Researching term papers	5.87	4.93	-0.94
5. Writing term papers	6.36	5.43	-0.93

## CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

- Family relationships, family expectations, and personal expectations were related to increased stress from the start of the semester to the end.
- Negotiating self-identity is a challenge for all emerging adults, but can be more challenging for minoritized students transitioning to a predominantly White institution.
- Implications for practice: Institutions should explore expanding first year programming and curriculum tied to identity exploration, as well targeted activities which consider the items of greatest stress shown above.
- Academic advisors should consider routinely using open-ended questions that uncover any student's stress related to identity formation.

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