

Marginality and Mattering: Key Issues in Building Community

By Nancy K. Schlossberg, from *New Directions for Student Services*, No. 48, 1989

One of the deepest current concerns in higher education is to find ways to more fully involve students in learning. Astin (1977, 1984) found that greater degrees of involvement with the programs and activities of the campus influence student satisfaction with college, academic achievement, and persistence toward graduation. Involvement, "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (1984, p. 297), includes five postulates, two of which are critical in understanding our task of building community on a college or university campus: "The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement" (p. 298).

Involvement creates connections between students, faculty, and staff that allow individuals, to believe in their own personal worth. This involvement also creates an awareness of our mutual relatedness and the fact that the condition of community is not only desirable but essential to human survival. Therefore, the concern over involving students, although expediently related to satisfaction and retention, is the very process that creates community. Those working to build a sense of community through activities are challenged to understand why certain individuals get involved, thereby creating community among themselves, and why others seem unable to establish connections or a meaningful level of involvement. The study of patterns of student involvement and what encourages or discourages that involvement could result in more purposefully designed programs and activities that more effectively promote the quality of community. The concepts of marginality and mattering offer new ways to explore these concerns.

This chapter defines a new construct for specifying how involvement can be achieved. The construct allows us to consider whether students feel marginal or that they matter. Qualities of a mattering environment will be described and the issue of rituals, which provide a sense of mattering, will then be explored.

Marginality Versus Mattering

We are aware of classifications and issues that divide us. There are many – ethnicity, age, gender, social class, sexual preferences, religion, and politics, to name a few. This awareness of different experiences, different expectations, and different voices raises a perplexing set of questions: With all these differences separating us, what connects us? Do we have a shared humanity? Can a campus community be created that allows all students to find a place of involvement and importance?

The polar themes of marginality and mattering connect all of us – rich and poor, young and old, male and female. Are we part of things; do we belong; are we central or marginal? Do we make a difference; do others care about us and make us feel we matter? I will now examine these two constructs, marginality and mattering, and illustrate how students deal with these issues through the college experience, how differently they work with them depending on their age, gender, social class, ethnic and religious identifications, and the state of their emotional and financial resources. These two issues, which illustrate continuity and change in life, have been relatively unexamined. They may have great significance.

My work on transitions – events or nonevents that alter our lives – convinced me that people in transition often feel marginal and that they do not matter. Whether we are entering first grade or college, getting married, or retiring, we are concerned about our new roles. We wonder, will we

belong? Will we matter? Although this is not the case for everyone, its recurrence in my interviews of people in transition led me to a search that is still in progress--a search for a clearer understanding of the human condition.

Marginality. At work, where I have been a professor for twelve years, I feel central, important. I belong. However, when I walk into a student dining area or when I visit my son's school for parents' night, I feel marginal. For some reason, it seems that people don't smile at or talk to me. Why do I feel marginal in one place and central in another? Perhaps some of the answer lies in the different approaches that exist for understanding marginality.

Instances of feeling marginal are numerous. Young people report feeling "out of things" when they enter junior or senior high school or, especially, when they go off to college. People moving from one city to another often feel marginal. We are often nagged by the question, do I belong in this new place?

Every time an individual changes roles or experiences a transition, the potential for feeling marginal arises. The larger the difference between the former role and the new role the more marginal the person may feel, especially if there are no norms for the new roles. The first students of nontraditional age to attend traditional campuses, for example, faced such problems. They had no norms to anticipate their pioneering role.

Marginality has also been applied to describe a personality type. Robert E. Park labeled the marginal person as "one who is living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples, never quite willing to break, even if permitted to do so, with past and traditions, and not quite accepted, because of prejudice, in the new society in which the individual seeks to find a place" (Park, 1928, p. 892). In describing what happens psychologically to this marginal person, Stonequist postulates that the person experiences "pride and shame, love and hate, and other contradictory sentiments ... such individuals are constantly aware of their status and turn their attention upon themselves to an excessive degree: thus increased sensitiveness, self-consciousness, an indefinable malaise, inferiority and various compensatory mechanisms, are common traits" (Stonequist, 1935, p. 16). In some cases, individuals become "obsessed" with the problem of marginality, and this becomes their dominant mode of thinking and behaving. They often become professionally involved in the topic of their marginality. For example, some who are learning disabled spend their lives studying learning disabilities or running support groups for students who have special needs.

Marginality can also refer to a permanent condition. For many bicultural individuals, marginality is a way of life. In contrast with the person who moves to a new city or new job, a bicultural person feels permanently locked 'between two worlds. This individual identifies with two cultures simultaneously. International students in the United States try to relate well to American culture but are still proud of their national origins. A Hispanic student from this country feels American but also takes pride in being of Spanish descent. Each culture defines its marginal groups and designates certain groups as invisible or invalid. Ralph Ellison's landmark book *The Invisible Man* (1972) dealt with the invisibility of blacks. More recently Evelyn Torton Beck (1982) has referred to the invisibility of gays and lesbians. However, people within a culturally defined marginal group may not suffer from marginality when they are centrally involved in that group.

Apparently marginality can be a temporary condition during transition, a description of a personality type, or a way of life. Clearly this is a complex, almost overwhelming subject, which could leave student affairs staff and counselors perplexed about what, if anything, to do. However, they could begin by dividing the situations into those that are transitional and those that seem permanent. Social action can alleviate permanent marginal status; therapy can relieve an obsession with marginality. For individuals in transition from one role to another or for groups in

transition, like new students, the development of rituals can be useful and innovative. (Rituals are discussed later in this chapter...)

We can conclude that everyone is marginal from time to time. The college freshman, marginal at first, can become a part of the community, yet this same person will feel marginal many more times in life—possibly after graduation on entering the job market or moving to a new city. This issue affects everyone differently. Often, feeling marginal leads us to conclude that we do not matter or confuses us about the group to which we do. Joining a campus student organization can evoke feelings of marginality. It can take time for students to feel central to a group, as if they matter to others. In short, marginality elicits feelings about mattering.

Mattering. The sociologist Morris Rosenberg and his colleagues suggest that "mattering is a motive: the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension exercises a powerful influence on our actions" (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981, p. 165). Their research shows that adolescents who feel they matter, regardless of their self-concepts, will be less likely to commit delinquent acts. Although their research focused on adolescents, they suggest that "one problem of retirement is that one no longer matters; others no longer depend on us" (p. 179). This suggests an interesting question for further study: Do those retirees who feel they matter to others in their new roles adjust more easily to retirement than those who feel they do not? I remember hearing Lee Bradford (founder of National Training Laboratory) describe his shock after retirement when his phone no longer rang. He was not the "elder sought-after statesman." In fact, he realized that his former colleagues felt obliged to have lunch with him when he was in town. Contrast that with the words of an eighty-three year-old man who feels he matters: He is on the board of a hospital and is currently raising money for a center for abused children. He describes having time to go out each night but time for golf only once a week. "I must say that a lot of people think I am silly at my age to be doing all these things, yet I see so many of my friends who have nothing to do. I feel the hospital needs me, and my special friend needs me." Consider, too, the quandary of students whose lives were the center of their families' attention and who then go off to college, only to find that the family can survive very well without them. What about the high school football hero who is just one of many on a college campus?

Mattering is paradoxical. That both adolescents and older persons need to feel they matter is axiomatic. However, in early and mid life, the relationship between mattering and satisfaction might be quite different. In contrast with the earlier example of the student whose absence is not felt is the likelihood that the more one matters--to doting parents, for example--the more pressured, more stressed, and less satisfied one becomes. The research on mid-life women presents another example. Women often consider themselves the "kin-keepers." They care for the various generations and keep in touch on family matters. They are the "ministers of the interior," while men serve as connections to the outside world (Hagestad, 1985). When, then, is mattering essential to well-being and when does it become a burden? The search for an answer has led to several efforts to develop an index for measuring the degree to which people feel they matter (Schlossberg, LaSalle, and Golec, in press; Morris Rosenberg, personal communication, June 1985).

This approach requires a clear definition of mattering. Rosenberg states that mattering is the "direct reciprocal of significance." "Significant others" refers to those we count as significant. Mattering refers to our belief, whether right or wrong, that we matter to someone else. This belief acts as a motivator. Students may not attend a school far from home because it would require leaving friends or parents, who depend on them. Adolescents and young adults with depression may rule out suicide if they feel they matter to others.

Using this construct, we conducted structured interviews with twenty four men and women ranging in age from sixteen to eighty. These interviews took four aspects of mattering identified by Rosenberg--attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence--and looked at the degree to which

the interviewees experienced mattering in three domains of life, namely, close interpersonal relationships, work, and voluntary/community activities. These interviews led to the addition of another dimension – appreciation – to the construct of mattering (see below).

Attention. "The most elementary form of mattering is the feeling that one commands the interest or notice of another person" (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981, p. 164). Think for a moment how lonely it feels when we go to a new city, new job, or new setting, where we know no one and where no one would notice if we did not appear. A woman who had a sick, demanding husband and two demanding teenagers always felt "at the end of her rope." When her husband died and, soon after, her children went away to school, she was disconcerted that no one noticed or cared when or if she came home.

Importance. "To believe that the other person cares about what we want, think, and do, or is concerned with our fate, is to matter. Whether the adolescent goes on to college or becomes hooked on drugs may deeply concern his/her parents" (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981, p. 64). Mattering does not necessarily mean approval. How often do we hear young people say to their parents, "Stop bugging me"? The young person knows, however, that the bugging indicates caring if not approval.

Ego-Extension. Ego-extension refers to the feeling that other people will be proud of our accomplishments or saddened by our failures. In other words, we feel that our success will be the success of another and our failure, the other's failure. Although knowing that our failures are critical to another can be a burden, it also reconfirms that we matter to someone.

Dependence. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) write: "That our behavior is influenced by our dependence on other people is easily understood. What is... more mysterious is why our actions are equally governed by their dependence on us" (p. 165). We all know how it feels to depend on someone else; we also know how it feels to have others depend on us. A college sophomore, deeply depressed and possibly suicidal, was unable to complete a course of study or prepare for a career but got out of bed each day to be at play rehearsals because "they need me." Being needed saved a life.

There is, however, a dark side of dependence. One of the interviewees in our study, a woman in mid life, reported that she gave up graduate work and changed her work hours because of her mother-in-law's and her mother's illness. Despite her constant attention, her mother became difficult, refusing to eat and at times hitting her. This, coupled with her eleven-year-old daughter's depression, was almost too much to bear. The woman mattered too much. As the interviewer, Karen Swetz, wrote: "This is an actual case of a 'sandwich generation' couple. They are being pulled from both sides. They are depended upon by their parents by their siblings by their children and also by their employees. They perceive they matter too much" (Schlossberg, LaSalle, and Golec, in press).

Appreciation. In our interviews we identified another aspect of mattering, appreciation. Over and over our interviewees expressed the importance of feeling that their efforts were appreciated. One person mentioned that the boss only noticed what was done wrong and never mentioned the positive contributions. The woman in the sandwich generation felt clearly unappreciated by her mother, who hit her. How many times have parents needing care been less appreciative of the daily care giver than of the son or daughter who lives far away and calls once a month? And how often do we make extra efforts at work when we feel appreciated?

To design a scale for measuring the degree to which people feel they matter, we generated items based on the interviews. We included items for each domain so that we could differentiate feelings of mattering at home, at work, and in the community. To look at mattering as neither good nor bad, we designed a five-point Likert scale on which respondents mark the degree to which

they feel they matter. Respondents were asked to indicate when mattering is beneficial and when it is counterproductive. As one woman said, "I dread the prospect of moving from a period of being stretched beyond my capacity to anticipating not being needed" (Schlossberg, LaSalle, and Golec, in press).

We are now examining institutions and the degree to which they make their constituents feel they matter. Recently we studied adult learners who had participated in some of the nontraditional educational options designed and promoted by the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (Schlossberg and Warren, 1985). Many adult learners felt they mattered to an adviser or to an institution. This feeling kept them engaged in their learning. We realized that a mattering scale could be used by institutions of higher education (Schlossberg, LaSalle, and Golec, in press). This scale, currently being validated, should enable institutions to answer these questions: Do they make students feel they matter? Are their policies, practices, and classroom and cocurricular activities geared to making people feel they matter?

In summary, mattering refers to the feeling that you matter to another; significance refers to those people who matter to you. If what Rosenberg suggests and what we are exploring is true--that mattering is a motive and does determine behavior--we need to make sure our programs, practices, and policies are helping people feel they matter. When a traditional Freudian therapist went to her patient's high school graduation, it enabled the patient to feel she mattered. When institutions of higher education devote desk space to the concerns of adult learners and provide relevant secretarial and message services and activities, adult learners can feel they matter. When an activity program is designed to reach all learners, it can help all students feel connected and involved. We will discover that mattering is important all through life—people need to feel that they count, they belong, they matter. When this is so, they no longer feel marginal. We will also discover that mattering is played out differently depending on one's transitions, sex, and social class.

By examining mattering across spheres of life, we can get a more complete picture of the individual. People may feel they matter too much at home and not enough at work. This information provides some guidelines for intervention.

But describing marginality and mattering is not enough. There is a critical need to help people deal with marginality so that they will eventually matter. Rituals can help. They sometimes occur naturally, but if they do not, then inattention to ritualistic passage can result in the individual feeling isolated. The next section describes the affirmation of rituals.

Rituals

The film *Rites of Renewal* shows the late anthropologist Barbara Myeroff discussing the role of rituals, ceremonies, or rites of passage in helping people deal with marginality by marking "the transition of an individual from one phase of life.., to another" (Myeroff, 1985). Rituals help people make sense out of the contradiction and paradox of many transitions--the paradox being that there is no single truth, there are many truths; that individuals are part of the past, but also the future.

In this film Myeroff describes the three stages of a ritual. First, the individual is segregated. Look at any ceremony--graduation, retirement, wedding – to observe the separation made obvious by placement or dress of the persons in question. Second, the individual moves into a feeling of being between the old role and the new role--what Victor Turner (1977) labels *liminality*. The person is still a baby and not a baby; still a worker, not a worker. As Myeroff states in the film, "That middle stage, the marginal one, the liminal one, is an especially interesting one because that's where the person is neither one thing or another." Although most people pass through this stage, Turner explores "how whole sets of people can be marginal like tricksters, clowns, poets,

medmen"—people who do not fit into any category. The final phase of the ritual is "reincorporating the person., back into society as a new creature with a new identity" (Myeroff, 1985). For example, high school graduates entering college are not sure of their identities. The final phase of the transition will be when they develop identities other than those connected to the high school roles and relationships they previously had.

Ceremonies help define the person; they segregate or single out a person in the company of a meaningful community or group. A personal example might illustrate this point. One night our daughter announced that she was not going to college, that she had a job and planned to move into her own apartment. We were startled. Coincidentally, I attended a lecture by Myeroff in which she discussed the importance of rituals in helping people deal with marginal periods; that is, when they are moving from one phase of life to another. Our eighteen year old was doing just that; she was moving from adolescence to adulthood. We took Myeroff's lecture to heart and decided to ritualize Karen's departure by giving her a celebration dinner and inviting some close family friends. Everyone chose gifts, wrote poems to commemorate her past, and presented them at the dinner table. Our gift was the promise to pay for the installation of a telephone (connecting her to her past) while reminding her that she would pay the monthly charges (propelling her to adulthood). This helped our daughter cope with a transition in which she did not feel like a child anymore yet was not quite grown up. It also helped us define this as a positive, not a negative, transition.

The problem is that for many transitions we have no rituals. We ritualize the entry to and final departure from the college environment, but for many other transitions--completing a project or program for a student organization, selecting a major, separating from a relationship-- we have no rituals. How would we ritualize and dignify an adult's return to college when most students are of traditional college age? How could the decision of a student to "stop out" or transfer be acknowledged and affirmed as a legitimate decision? These students are in a liminal, marginal state with no rituals to help them deal with the separation. Because individuals in transition often feel isolated and vulnerable, ceremonies connecting them to society or to the group keep them from feeling lost.

Many life changes have no rituals. Myeroff (1985) devoted a great deal of energy to teaching people how to develop rituals for themselves at these lost moments, to "punctuate and clarify that otherwise amorphous condition." In the film *Rites of Renewal*, a divorce ritual is shown. A minister calls together the divorcing parents and has them repeat an oath of caring but unconnecting. He then addresses the children and has the parents pledge their care, concern, and love for them even though their love for each other has vanished. In-laws and friends now enter the ceremony. Many who watch the film cry during this sequence, probably because we have all been intimately connected with dissolutions that have not had the aid of community and definition. Ritual, though not a panacea* can help people with lifelong issues of marginality and mattering.

Conclusion

Marginality and mattering are two issues that have not been elaborated in psychological and student development literature. Marginality is at one pole, mattering at the other. Identification of these issues adds understanding to some of our complex feelings and can help us develop new coping strategies.

Furthermore, by looking throughout the campus at the diverse backgrounds and experiences of students, we can begin to understand what continues and what changes during the college experience. There will be many continuous aspects that enable students to recognize themselves as they move to new living environments, change academic majors, and take on new leadership roles; there will also be many discontinuous aspects of their college lives. This approach makes it possible to communicate with all students; for whether they are traditional or nontraditional, gifted or

average, male or female, all students are concerned about belonging and mattering. As people tell us their stories, we can listen in ways that connect us. As we listen to students and plan activities with them, we need to hear the common underlying concerns: will they fit in, will they matter? Despite these commonalities, we must acknowledge individuality. However, the most important lesson is that even with our differences, we are connected by the need to matter and the need to belong.

The creation of environments that clearly indicate to all students that they matter will urge them to greater involvement. Such involvement should lead to the accomplishment of the goals with which Astin (1977, 1984) has challenged higher education. Clearly, institutions that focus on mattering and greater student involvement will be more successful in creating campuses where students are motivated to learn, where their retention is high, and ultimately, where their institutional loyalty for the short- and long-term future is ensured (Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering, 1989).

...

References

- Astin, A. W. *Four Critical Years: Effects of College on Beliefs, Attitudes, and Knowledge*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977.
- Astin, A. W. "Student Involvement: A Developmental Theory for Higher Education." *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 1984, 24, 297-308.
- Beck, E. T. *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*. Trumansburgh, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1982.
- Ellison, R. *The Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage Books, 1972.
- Hagestad, G. "Vertical Bonds: Intergenerational Relationships." In *The Adult Years in Videorecording: Continuity and Change*. Alexandria, Va.: American Association for Counseling and Development, 1985.
- Myeroff, B. "Rites of Renewal." In a film produced by N. K. Schlossberg and others, *The Adult Years: Continuity and Change*. Owings Mills, Md.: International University Consortium, 1985.
- Park, R. E. "Hunan Migration and the Marginal Man." *American Journal of Sociology*, 1928, 33, 892.
- Rosenberg, M., and McCullough, B. C. "Mattering: Inferred Significance to Parents and Mental Health Among Adolescents." In R. Simmons (ed.), *Research in Community and Mental Health*. Vol. 2. Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1981.
- Schlossberg, N. K., LaSalle, A., and Golec, R. *Mattering Scale*. College Park: University of Maryland, in press.
- Schlossberg, N.K., Lynch, A. Q., and Chickering, A. W. *Improving Higher Education Environments for Adults: Responsive Programs and Services from Entry to Departure*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989.
- Schlossberg, N. K., and Warren, B. *Growing Up Adult*. Columbia, Md.: Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning, 1985.
- Stonequist, E. V. "The Problem of the Marginal Man." *American Journal of Sociology*, 1935, 41, 3-16.
- Turner, V. W. *The Ritual Process Structure and Antistructure*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977.

Nancy K. Schlossberg is professor of counseling and personnel services, University of Maryland, College Park. She is a recognized proponent of concern and attention for adult students.