

THE PROBLEM OF INDIVIDUALISM: HOW THE CULTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION ALIENATES MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

PRESENTER(S):

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DESCRIPTION/ABSTRACT:

It is a frustrating reality in higher education that when compared with their peers from middle- and upper-class families, students with working-class (low socioeconomic status or first generation) backgrounds experience lower achievement in college. Institutions often focus on what working-class and first generation students may lack—adequate preparation in K-12 education, financial resources, family support, etc. However, even when these factors are accounted for achievement and success are still lower among working-class students. Some scholars assert that there is a cultural issue at play that may be overlooked and unaddressed in most institutions of higher education—the problem of individualism. While autonomy and agency are understandably important in higher education, faculty and other professionals often assume individualism in a manner that can be detrimental to students. Many first generation, non-traditional, and working-class students encounter “cultural mismatch” in higher education, as universities tend to focus on and value individualism while these students are often more accustomed to values of interdependence.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

This session is intended to be interactive and generative—we will discuss the ways that academic advising and other student services at UTK support our working class students and support the development of “student selves” that encourage self-identification as belonging in the university community. We will also examine the taken-for-granted policies and rhetoric in higher education that promote individualism at the expense of students who may not conceptualize their choices and actions based on values of independence. Most importantly we will talk about ways that we can reframe our interactions with students to be inclusive and supportive of students whose prior experiences and educational goals may be more grounded in a context of interdependence, and we will devise ways to promote a better sense of fit and belonging for these students.