

**Irvine Fellows and Graduate Student Socialization:**  
**Reframing the Learning Context**

by C. Dean Campbell and William G. Tierney

Traditional attempts to explain the attrition and dissatisfaction minority graduate students encounter in the academy focus on pipeline initiatives, well-used recruiting and retention interventions based on affirmative action philosophies and policies. Robert A. Ibarra<sup>1</sup> recently published a book in which he explains the perils Latino doctoral students encounter in the graduate study as a consequence of cultural conflict. He proposes a model of *multicontextuality* an organizational change as a way to improve how minorities get socialized into the academy.

In the idea of *multicontextuality*, context is the “information that surrounds a [cultural process] and is inextricably bound up with the meaning of that event. Individuals get sorted into populations based on how they perceive and communicate with one another. The relationship is between the information surrounding a particular cultural process. Those from high context cultures make meaning and learn using “multiple streams of information which surround an event, situation, or interaction.” Those from low context cultures “filter out conditions surrounding an event and focus on words and objective facts” (p. 53).

Latinos in Ibarra’s study describe graduate study as “entry into the professoriate as a metamorphosis into a dominant ethnic group rather than a transition into a profession,” (p. 18) underscoring the friction between competing cultural paradigms. The dominant low-context and field-independent culture of department faculty goes unaltered and accommodates minority students sparingly. Students of color, on the other hand, must develop “scripts” (p. 100) which have repertoires of high context cultural behaviors and field-sensitive cognitive styles. Students use the scripts to learn to adapt to graduate school culture while enduring the difficult process of becoming low context, field-independent learners. These scripts reflect the idea of *bicognition*, or “coping behaviors and adaptive strategies [used] to resolve life’s problems” (p. 58). The graduate experience, Ibarra argues, is an identify transforming experience wherein minority students “subordinate, rather than culturally blend, one set of identities for another in order to succeed in academia,” (p. 82) only to find future dismay in a profession that defers to linear, sequential, low-context thinking.

Ibarra maintains a cultural imbalance exists, the low context pedagogical culture works to the exclusion of other legitimate learning modes and styles (p. 17). Ibarra proposes that departments and institutions reframe their contexts and cultures to ensure the success of minority students. The intent is to create a more balanced institutional environment wherein individuals with different learning orientations can work and learn together successfully.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibarra, R.A.(2001). *Beyond affirmative action: Reframing the context of higher education*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press.

With regard to reforming graduate education, Ibarra argues for change in departmental practices, the center of faculty-student interactions. Ibarra develops an organizational learning-and-effectiveness model that rewards faculty work differently, particularly research, the quest for new knowledge, and teaching. He states, “critical knowledge areas are often associated with individuals or groups that have been marginalized in their organizational activities;” (p. 225) generating new knowledge taps into the marginalized who “lie dormant [within] our academic institutions” (p. 226). The use of high context teaching practices and the development of interdisciplinary studies exemplify reforms Ibarra suggests. These practices create a learning context more suitable for minority doctoral students; moreover, faculty benefit from the creating of new knowledge by tapping into previously overlooked resources. With regard to the goals of the Irvine project, Ibarra (p. 250-251) offers a sketch for structural and cultural changes within the academic department:

<b>Irvine Project Goal</b>	<b>Suggestions for Altering Departmental Culture</b>
<p>Enhance the climate for faculty of color to engage in sustained intellectual dialogues.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify academic departments in low context fields (e.g., physics and mathematics) with potential for introducing high-context pilot projects.</li> <li>• Recruit entrepreneurial department, programs, and faculty willing to rethink traditional practices such as tenure review, teaching and learning styles and curriculum content, and research.</li> <li>• Create or adapt successful high-context-oriented projects and implement them in appropriate academic departments.</li> <li>• Establish contact with discipline-focused minority organizations to coordinate collaborative initiatives with academic departments (e.g., Society for Hispanic Professional Engineers, American Sociological Association).</li> <li>• Use ethnic studies programs and student service programs as learning resources, or use program directors as collaborators with departments to introduce <i>multicontextual</i> awareness and needs.</li> <li>• Have a professional facilitator from the university’s quality improvement office help the department determine what high-context activities they can develop.</li> </ul>

