

“In-Between” Identities: Inclusive Teaching Perspectives from a Graduate Student Mentor

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As a graduate student mentor situated “in-between” faculty and students, I see hidden undergraduate and graduate student needs that are unaddressed by campus services. Specifically, undergraduate and graduate students feel “in-between” identities and exclude themselves from academic, professional, and social support opportunities. As a Graduate Student Research Supervisor in my department’s Undergraduate Research Apprenticeship (RA) Program, I see how students are learning their identities and often feel like “outsiders.” Similarly, as a Graduate Writing Consultant, I see how graduate students struggle with feeling “in-between” and excluded from their peers. Graduate students from my own communities often feel stuck “in-between” their personal and academic identities, because their research interests in their community histories were often questioned as lacking justification of a validated research problem. In my campus positions, I create collective learning spaces through innovating my RA mentorship and building campus partnerships that empower students to include their whole selves into research and writing. With a graduate student in my university office for Asian, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, Desi American (APIMEDA) Programs, I co-founded our writing center partnership to address the unmet needs within my graduate student communities. As an Asian American graduate student who understands and shares struggles of being “in-between,” I recognize how students experience exclusion. Although I am sometimes unsure of how to address students’ emotions of feeling out-of-place, I am always determined to give students agency by teaching them tools to build their individual positionality, which they can use to identify their belonging and craft their academic voice. When students feel confident in their positionality and voice, they feel ready to succeed within and beyond university.

Since 2017, I have taught my 30-35 Undergraduate Research Apprentices (RAs) across disciplines to conduct research in ways that leverage each student’s interests and strengths. As

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the supervisor, I train students through scaffolded tasks to conduct interviews and participant observations and synthesize findings based on my doctoral dissertation research about the educational and mental health experiences of Asian American and multiracial Asian American students. My first experience working with an RA who self-identified as an “outsider” deeply taught me how to customize research tasks to ensure every student feels like they belong on our team. This RA student self-identified as mixed-race Native American and Mexican American, and she confessed feeling unsure about researching Asian American student experiences. I was also initially unsure about how to alleviate her concerns, but I was inspired by how she was extremely motivated to work on our team. I recognized that her feelings of being unprepared and lacking self-confidence are common among my RAs, and I wanted to try adapting my mentorship to fully support this student.

One of my strategies is to require RAs to attend, write, and discuss reflections on campus events that serve as learning opportunities, under the name of “conducting participant observation research.” I encouraged this student to come with me to a panel discussion about Black and Asian American multiracial identities and cross-cultural solidarity organized by our university office for Asian, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, Desi American (APIMEDA) Programs. Undergraduate students often feel unsure attending campus events because they fear feeling alone, and as a graduate student, I help these students feel more comfortable by tasking multiple RAs to attend events together and/or bring them with me. After the panel, we discussed our reflections with the group, and other RAs were interested to learn about how this event helped the student consider her own researcher positionality. The student commented that she felt reassured after hearing about how a speaker discussed her identity as a Black and Asian American scholar, who was often questioned why she was studying Asian Americans instead of African American populations. While the RA student did not identify as an “insider” or “research subject” of our team, she felt reassured to conduct research within our team as an outside observer who can listen, ask questions, and contribute insights from her communities. In our group discussion, I drew upon my “student and mentor” identity to emphasize that as racial identities are socially constructed, our experiences as students of color may be connected, and exploring those connections makes us insightful researchers.

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Teaching my RAs taught me that inclusive teaching is deeply meaningful and necessary, as I am teaching undergraduate students how to embrace the complexity of their identities. I mentored the student to continue developing her researcher positionality to craft an academic writing voice through a year-end writing project. With peer feedback, group discussions, and individual feedback from myself, the student wrote a multimedia blogpost using her outside-observer research positionality and experiences. My goal is to continuously adapt my RA team environment for a safe collective learning space and connect students to existing campus learning opportunities. As a graduate student mentor, I see future opportunities where graduate students can help undergraduate students feel less isolated in the university.

At the same time, graduate students also feel isolated from campus communities. As a Graduate Writing Consultant, I noticed how graduate students in my own communities felt excluded from their departments. These graduate students were often the only ones who identified as Asian American in their departments and conducted research based in their own communities. Students felt like they were constantly asked by academics to justify their research interests, which exacerbated their sense of isolation. These perceptions formed obstacles for students' access to the writing center, as the graduate students felt the writing center was a "white space" that would also ask them to justify their research interests. In 2020, I co-founded the writing center partnership with our university office for Asian, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, Desi American (APIMEDA) Programs to create a safe collective learning space for addressing these unmet needs.

As with my RAs, I empower graduate students to embrace their complex identities through crafting an academic voice. For example, I rebuilt our fellowship writing workshop to help graduate students practice articulating the intersections of their research, community leadership, and personal identities. This workshop was especially significant for Asian American graduate students, as many were applying to diversity initiatives that expected them to write about personal identities. I found that graduate students were very uncomfortable with writing about themselves and felt like they were "selling their souls" for funding. Students lacked positive learning opportunities for writing their professional narratives, and I used the Ford Fellowship as

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an example to help students strategize writing multiple statements for one funding application. We discussed how a “Previous Research Activity” statement is like a “flashback arc” in anime or songs, in which a protagonist’s “flashback” shows how their backstory informs who they are presently, and who they want to be in the future. Discussing media that students experience as fun and relevant reoriented them into a more confident mindset and shifted their focus away from perceiving writing multiple statements as repetitive. Instead, students understood how a “flashback arc,” or “Previous Research” statement, gains meaning as basis for the present and future.

Furthermore, I recognized how graduate students felt “alone” when writing these statements, as I have also struggled to find peers who understood my experiences of feeling “in-between” different communities. In the fellowship workshop, I guide students to draft a brief biography through multiple discussion and writing exercises for collective learning. I teach students to craft an academic voice that embraces the intersections of their identities through questions like the following:

1. What is a meaningful research project you’ve done?
2. How does that experience relate to who you are now?
3. How does that experience relate to the funding opportunity you’re applying for?

Although the fellowship workshop is about writing applications, I professionalize students to craft a self-introduction that highlights intersections of their research, community leadership, and personal identities. Through writing and discussing their narratives together, students practice an academic voice that will serve them throughout and beyond graduate school. Articulating the ways through which students’ personal identities and experiences contribute to their unique strengths as scholars and community leaders helps strengthen their self-confidence, and receiving encouraging comments from peers further supports their sense of inclusion. I encourage students to return to these writing activities as their private “works in progress,” as we are all in the process of learning to embrace the complexity of our identities.

My teaching strategies stem from teaching undergraduate and graduate students outside the typical classroom. As a graduate student mentor who is “in-between” faculty and student, I

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realized that I occupy a position that gives me unique insight into student perspectives and unmet needs. I have learned to draw strength from my position and use my different campus roles to innovate my mentorship, create campus partnerships, and redesign activities to teach students the skills to craft their academic voices. My experiences inspired me to work in higher education after my PhD to consider policy and curricula changes that will scale up these learning opportunities. When undergraduate and graduate students feel like their complexities and “in-between” identities can be acknowledged and valued, we can ensure all students have equal access to success.