Social Identities vs. Personal Identity

Purpose and Variations – This exercise allows us to think about our own multiple social identities as a means of heightening our consciousness about how we all experience and embody our social identities differently. This exercise can be done as an “Identity Walk” — instructing students to respond to the following list of questions by moving to the areas of the room designated as: race/ethnicity; Gender; Sexual Orientation; Physical & Intellectual Ability; Religion; Socio-economic Class. This is good for kinesthetic learners (i.e. learning through the sensation of movement). Or it can be done seated and filling in the blanks on a handout. It is helpful to have students name different aspects of social identity and have them listed on the board. This allows you as the facilitator to explain the distinction between social identities and personality traits or interests.

- The aspect of social identity of which I am most aware
- The aspect of social identity that I think about the least
- The aspect of my social identity that I am most proud
- The aspect of your social identity that gives you the most privilege
- The aspect of your social identity that limits your access or options
- The aspect of social identity that has the strongest effect on how you see yourself
- The aspect of social identity (yours or someone else’s) which cause a “trigger” in you—makes you feel emotional, uneasy, or conflicted
- The aspect of social identity which you would like to know more about

Debrief Go through the list and get a few different responses for each. The point is to illustrate that what might be a point of pride for one person could be a “trigger” for someone else. It is also good to keep the following characteristics of social identity in mind throughout the dialogue.

Social Identities are:

- **Multiple**: We have many simultaneous identities. We shouldn’t identify others just based on one social identity trait.
- **Intersectional**: One identity affects others. E.g. How does one’s white privilege affect one’s ability to be “out” about sexuality?
- **Chosen/born**: Some we choose or our family chooses for us (religion); others we are born with or are unchanging (age, “race”/ethnicity, sex, sexuality).
- **Changing**: Some identities are fixed & some change over time. Age always changing. Wealth changes; gender expression can change.
- **Observable/hidden**: Can we see, hear, sense them in others? Do we assume we know based on some small thing we observe?
- **Temporarily Salient**: Some aspects of our identities we are only aware of at certain times? e.g. citizenship status when traveling across borders.

Suggested Closing: After the dialogue, close the activity by asking each student to share own way that they are going to think differently about a particular social identity.

*For further instructions or suggestions for modifying this exercise, feel free to contact Dr. Kristi Brian briankj@cofc.edu 843-953-6452 in the Office of Institutional Diversity.*