

CULTIVATING "HIGH-STAKES" STUDENT CULTURE RESEARCH

George D. Kuh

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Peers have a substantial impact on undergraduate learning and personal development. This article discusses five principles that can increase the utility of student culture research by blending outcome measures with qualitative research to determine the effects of peer group membership.
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At all but the most selective residential colleges, undergraduates today are different in almost every way from their counterparts of one or two decades ago, especially with regard to enrollment status, aspirations, and preparation for college-level work (Levine, 1991). However, one thing about students has remained constant: their key role in the learning process.

Models of undergraduate student learning (Pascarella, 1985) and socialization (Weidman, 1989) acknowledge that peer groups influence student behavior. Peers determine where, when, and how much student peers study, what they learn, and other aspects of what undergraduates need to know to succeed in college (Baird, 1988; Kuh, 1990; Newcomb, 1966). In fact, peers are "the single most potent source of influence" (Astin, 1993a, p. 398), affecting virtually every aspect of development—cognitive, affective, psychological, and behavioral (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). The dynamics of peer influence on learning are not well understood, however (Van Maanen, 1987). Little is known, for example, about how peer groups mediate such psychological and behavioral outcomes of their members as knowledge acquisition and critical thinking as well as practical competencies (e.g., decision making, time management).

Accountability demands coupled with unfavorable economic conditions are prompting colleges and universities to seek ways to increase learning productivity (i.e., students learning more for the same or reduced institutional costs) (House, 1994; Johnstone, 1993; Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993). But even if faculty spend more time teaching (larger classes, more sec-

George D. Kuh, Professor of Higher Education, Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, School of Education, Indiana University—Bloomington, Bloomington, IN 47405.

tions), students will not necessarily learn more (Johnstone, 1993). The key is to get students themselves more actively involved in the learning process by devoting more time and effort to educationally purposeful activities (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 1981; Pace, 1990). Nurturing student cultures that foster this kind of behavior is one approach to enhancing learning that does not necessarily require structural changes (e.g., more faculty, more classrooms). Rather, it requires knowledge about peer group effects on learning that occur inside and beyond the classroom and a redistribution of institutional effort (faculty, administration, staff, and students) in order to engage students in types of behavior that are more congruent with the goals for higher education.

An undergraduate student peer group is any group with which individual members identify, affiliate, and seek acceptance and approval over a prolonged period (Astin, 1993a; Newcomb, 1996). Thus, it is possible that an individual student may be a member of more than one group during college, or belong to two or more groups at once. The members of some groups can be easily identified; such groups frequently have formal selection processes and distinctive attire (e.g., fraternities, athletic teams). The members of other groups (e.g., honors students) are often "invisible" because they may not live together or participate in public events as a group that would reveal their identity. Other groups are not officially recognized by the institution but nonetheless exert considerable influence over their members' behaviors and attitudes because of the appeal that group membership has for the members and through socialization experiences that produce conforming actions. Examples of the latter might be members of learning communities who are linked electronically (Schwartz, 1993).

The processes by which various types of peer groups form (Newcomb, 1962, 1966), and subsequently exert influence over their members (Baird, 1988; Weidman, 1989), can be viewed as cultural phenomena; that is, the norms, language, values, practices, and beliefs that guide the behavior of members on a daily basis and serve as a frame of reference that group members use to interpret the meaning of events and actions, both on and off campus (Kuh and Whitt, 1988). Student culture research refers to the inquiries designed to examine these phenomena.

Only a few (e.g., Holland and Eisenhart, 1990; Kuh and Arnold, 1993) of the handful of studies of student culture in the last 15 years (e.g., Horowitz, 1987; Katchadourian and Boli, 1985; London, 1978; Moffatt, 1989; Weis, 1985) examined the manner in which students form peer groups and their effects on their members. As Thelin (1992, p. 1717) observed:

The inventories and statistical profiles on student characteristics . . . identify new student groups (e.g., commuter students, returning students, new learners, etc.), but the composite profiles drawn from aggregate data have yet to be followed by close examination of how such new groups actually affiliate and organize, whether on a typical day or throughout an academic year.

Given the renewed interest in the quality of undergraduate education, the number of investigations into student cultures may very well increase in the near term. What should researchers, policymakers, and practitioners look for in these studies to have confidence in their findings?

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR CONDUCTING STUDENT CULTURE RESEARCH

In the past, student culture research has ignored the effects of peer group membership on desired outcomes of college (e.g., Bowen, 1977) and the processes that produce variations in these outcomes. For this reason, student culture research has been “low-stakes” inquiry. That is, although the results from these studies may be of interest to scholars, they do not explain how college affects students (which is of increasing interest to state and federal policymakers), nor do they stimulate institutional agents and students to rethink how they are spending their time. As a result, inquiries into peer group influence rarely point to changes in institutional policy and practice. The key to transforming student culture research from a low to potentially high-stakes area of inquiry is to go beyond descriptions of the undergraduate experience as primarily social phenomena and attempt to determine if distinctive patterns of learning and personal development are associated with membership in various types of peer groups.

In emerging areas of research, establishing standards or guideposts can stimulate conceptually sound, well-crafted studies. For example, Emerson (1987) posited four criteria for evaluating an ethnographic study. In a similar vein, I offer five principles that have the potential to increase the utility of student culture research. These principles were distilled from my knowledge of investigations of student culture conducted over the past four decades and my own work in the area (Kuh, 1981, 1990, 1993a, 1993b; Kuh and Arnold, 1993; Kuh and Hall, 1993; Kuh and Robinson, 1995; Kuh et al., 1991; Kuh and Whitt, 1988).

1. The study attempts to discover how group membership mediates member behavior and contributes to valued outcomes of college. The single most important factor differentiating high-stakes from low-stakes student culture research is linking measures of gains in learning and personal development with peer group experiences. As mentioned earlier, student culture researchers typically have not included outcome measures in their research designs. Student culture research will be more likely to gain the attention of institutional agents and policymakers if the study is related to the institution’s educational purposes and to the aspirations and expectations of its students and other constituents. For example, the members of some groups behave in ways that enhance attainment of the institution’s purposes, such as Clark and Trow’s

(1966) academics, Katchadourian and Boli's (1985) intellectuals, and Astin's (1993b) scholars. Examples of groups that endorse values incongruent with the academic ethos are Clark and Trow's vocational, Horowitz's college man, and Astin's hedonist. Members of certain groups participate in some activities and not others (e.g., Astin's activists who engage in voluntarism and political activity). However, it is not known whether membership in these groups is related systematically to variations in college outcomes. Thus, a particularly fertile area of inquiry is determining if affiliation with certain peer groups is linked with distinctive patterns of outcomes.

The data collection process itself can contribute to or facilitate student learning. The most powerful way to influence positively students' intellectual development is to create conditions that require students to engage in self-reflection (Cross, 1994). Self-reflection is a cultivated skill; many students simply do not think about their thinking, or try to make sense of and integrate their experiences from various classes with their out-of-class lives or how these experiences are helping them attain their aspirations. The process of self-reflection can give voice to students, opening up the possibility for students themselves to become what Giroux (1992) calls "cultural workers"—people who use self-reflection and information to change their circumstances, thereby ameliorating the oppressive aspects of their cultures.

Incorporating outcome measures in studies of student culture may also identify aspects of student life that warrant institutional intervention. For example, at some institutions students devote fewer than three hours per day outside of class to their studies (Marchese, 1994; Wolf, Schmitz, and Ellis, 1991). Weis (1985) found that black student culture at an urban community college (a culture that the students themselves created and perpetuated through their interactions and constructions of their experiences) essentially ensured that the vast majority of these students would return to ghetto-like living conditions comparable to those from which they came. "It is the culture that students *produce* within the college that makes a significant contribution to low 'success' rates in traditional academic terms and the reproduction of a social structure that is strikingly unequal by class and race" (Weis, 1985, p. 159). It appears that unless students are willing to work harder, and peers endorse an expanded range of effort, attempts to increase learning productivity will fail. A key factor, then, in enhancing institutional productivity and student learning is developing strategies that militate against the conforming influence of the student culture which often dictates a low amount of effort be directed to academic activities (Hughes, Becker, and Geer, 1962).

Because a student may belong to more than one group, the effects of group membership on the outcomes of interest can only be estimated, not precisely determined. Such estimates must rely on the student's assessment of the relative contribution of membership in the respective group to various outcomes. This

procedure is consistent with the qualitative data collection and analysis approach described in the next principle and illustrated by Kuh (1993, 1995).

2. Employ best practices in qualitative research. To apprehend and appreciate the meaning of student behavior in the context of their peer group and the larger institutional context, an investigator must become intimately acquainted with students' psychological and physical habitats (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987). For this reason, qualitative methods such as interviews and observations constitute the preferred approach for studying cultural phenomena. As contrasted with quantitative methods, which rely on what students say they do, qualitative methods are more likely to discover what students actually think and do (Kuh, 1990), and the relationships between these activities and the outcome measures. Moreover, recent research shows that the processes associated with learning and personal development are complex, cumulative, and mutually shaping (Kuh, 1993, 1995; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Terenzini et al., 1995; Volkwein, King, and Terenzini, 1986). Unless these interactive effects are taken into account, "the magnitudes of those effects will be underestimated and the relative importance of various general or specific aspects of the college experience will remain unclear" (Terenzini et al., 1995, p. 19). Qualitative methods are well suited for identifying the complex relationships within and among student cultures, and their impact on college outcomes.

The outcome measures themselves need not be qualitative. That is, instruments such as the College Student Experience Questionnaire (Pace, 1987) or the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal can be administered and the relative influence of group membership determined subsequently from student attributions as described by Kuh (1995). That is, outcomes data collected by the institutional research office or as part of the assessment program can be combined with the results of qualitative inquiries. By systematically disaggregating these data, it may be possible to determine how group membership influences attitudes and behaviors that are directly or indirectly related to the outcome variables.

As with other forms of inquiry, this approach has some limitations. For example, the presence of the investigator influences the behavior of the participants in unknown ways. In addition, student culture research is unavoidably labor intensive. Prolonged engagement with participants in situ is needed to obtain more than a superficial understanding of the readily observable elements of student culture. That is, several contacts with a student group may yield information about aspects of group culture that are immediately accessible and visible, such as physical and verbal artifacts (Kuh and Hall, 1993). Not immediately apparent, though, is the meaning these artifacts have for members, their role in the group's history and day-to-day lives of members, and their connection to guiding assumptions held by group members that shape their behavior. Magolda's (1994) year-long study of the characteristics of community in a student subculture is an exemplar of prolonged engagement.

The nature of the settings in which student culture research is conducted requires that investigators be especially well prepared in several areas of qualitative data collection and analysis. For example, the timing of the data collection may be a key to discovering how certain aspects of group culture influence members' expectations and subsequent behavior, which consequently is associated with outcomes. For example, new members learn the assumptions and values of their group through socialization experiences (Crandall, 1978; Van Maanen, 1984). Attempts to discover how newcomers learn a group's assumptions and values some months after the most recent batch of newcomers has been inducted (first-year students, fraternity pledges) makes identifying cultural properties more difficult. Similarly, the time of the year may influence what students say, how they feel, and so forth.

Just as there are various ways to analyze quantitative data, different techniques have been developed to analyze qualitative information. For example, Lincoln and Guba (1985) advocated a unitization and categorization process. Less expensive and time consuming (and, therefore, more appealing to many student culture researchers) are approaches similar to those recommended by Merriam (1988) and Patton (1990) in which major themes and salient patterns in the data are distilled from interviews, observations, and other data sources. Other key data analysis steps include establishing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This requires member checking; that is, asking student participants to review, critique, and modify investigator interpretations as well as their own attributions of outcomes associated with group membership. Investigators should strive to establish a close working relationship with key informants—such as that enjoyed by William Whyte and “Doc” (Jones, 1991)—so that when the investigators encounter aspects of group life that they do not understand or do not make sense, the key informants can explain them. Key informants also can make it easier for the investigator to gain access to events and activities from which nonmembers are typically excluded. In his study of gay and bisexual men students, Rhoads (1994) used an advisory panel to obtain feedback about research questions, interview protocols, and his interpretations of the gay and bisexual subculture. This process reduced the contentiousness of focus group meetings and increased the credibility of his findings with various respondent groups. A similar approach could be adapted for studies of groups that may be viewed by some as controversial on a given campus, such as athletes or fraternity members.

In summary, prolonged engagement, multiple sources of data, and member checks are essential to obtain trustworthy, credible information (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). These and other recommended procedures for conducting qualitative inquiries are discussed by others (e.g., Denzin and Lincoln, 1993; Fetterman, 1984; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles and Huberman, 1984), including multiple data collection approaches (individual and focus group interviews, ob-

servations, document analysis) and rigorous data analysis and interpretation techniques.

3. Use flexible cognitive frameworks when collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data. It is widely accepted that multiple student subgroups exist on a typical campus (Clark and Trow, 1966; Kuh and Whitt, 1988; Lyons, 1991). Furthermore, the experiences of members of one group may differ significantly in substance and quality from the experiences of members of other groups (Kuh, 1990). Yet studies of student cultures often underestimate the complexity and variety of peer groups and overestimate the degree to which members of a particular group share attitudes and values, and engage in similar behavior. For example, consider the major findings from what are arguably the three most influential descriptions of student culture in the past half century.

From their observations of undergraduates in the 1950s and 1960s, Clark and Trow (1966) developed a four-category typology of student culture (academic, vocational, nonconforming, collegiate). The authors offered the typology as a heuristic device, warning that although an individual student would probably have one of these as a dominant orientation, students could belong to more than one group at the same time. Subsequent efforts to operationalize the typology (e.g., Gottlieb and Hodgkins, 1968; Reichel, 1981) did not determine whether students assigned to the various categories interacted with each other, or if these interactions were associated with different patterns of outcomes.

Based on a historical analysis of student culture, Horowitz (1987) also identified four dominant subcultures: college men, outsiders, rebels, and new outsiders. New outsiders comprise the majority of undergraduates today. Horowitz described them as serious—almost dour—in their pursuit of good grades; learning is of little interest compared with obtaining high grades. As contrasted with the collegiates of Clark and Trow, who it is assumed determined the social climate on campus, Horowitz observed that new outsiders:

. . . control no organized life which remains unimportant [to today's college students]. They do, however, provide the dominant model of how to be an undergraduate. As they hunger to reproduce the material world of their parents, they work in college to achieve, and they hold themselves in. (p. 288)

Finally, based on his study of dormitory life, Moffatt (1989) described a ubiquitous undergraduate culture that essentially mirrors the contemporary youth culture in the United States. He observed that the behavior and appearance of college students are no longer distinguishable from their same-age counterparts who are not attending college. Support for this point is the typical residence hall room that contains the variety of electronic devices (e.g., televisions, compact disc players, refrigerators) found in the apartments inhabited by young people who work full-time.

Student cultures on a given campus are more numerous and dynamic than suggested by Horowitz and Moffatt (Rhoads, 1994; Williams, 1994). Their de-

scriptions ignore the potential differences that exist within and among student groups. Portrayals of dominant, or highly integrated, student cultures are, in large part, a function of the frame of reference employed by the researcher. According to Martin (1992), cultural research is conducted from one of three perspectives: integration, differentiation, and fragmentation.

Student culture research has been dominated by the **integration** perspective. That is, the investigator's orientation to data collection and analysis emphasizes consensus (i.e., everyone sees or interprets cultural properties the same way). Systematically overlooked are aspects of group life that are ambiguous or about which there is disagreement. As a result, the degree to which values and interpretations are shared is overstated. Exclusive use of the integrative perspective contributes to the widely held belief that a college campus can and should be characterized by a strong sense of community.

The **differentiation** perspective suggests that within any institution, organization, or culture with some history, subgroups develop that share distinctive values, attitudes, and norms that differ to varying degrees from the larger dominant group, or other subgroups; their particular combination of interests and behaviors sets them apart from other groups. Athletes and fraternities on many campuses are examples of this point. To accurately depict distinctive subgroups of undergraduates, investigators must look for them (i.e., adopt a differentiation perspective).

Investigators who adopt a **fragmentation** perspective are sensitive to pockets of dissensus that often characterize aspects of group existence, even within subcultures or peer groups. This suggests that groups marked by relatively "strong," conforming cultures (e.g., fraternities) may have affinity groups of members whose views and interpretations of group life are very different. For examples, even within "islands of clarity" (i.e., peer groups whose members see things pretty much the same way) (Martin, 1992), some individuals will interpret aspects of group life differently. The meanings of certain cultural properties may be ambiguous to some or many group members; therefore, the relative importance of these properties to outcome measures cannot be determined.

Studies guided by a fragmentation perspective are likely to produce findings that will challenge the myth that a college campus—even a small residential college—is a single community of people who interpret their experiences in similar ways. The fragmentation perspective also accounts for why investigators may encounter "contested terrain" within a group, or between the investigator and some group members. Contested terrain represents disagreements about the meaning of certain aspects of group life. An example of this is what has been characterized as offensive sexist behavior directed toward women by men at certain fraternity functions (Griffin and Robinson, 1992; Kuh and Arnold, 1993; Rhoads, 1992). For example, Kuh and Arnold found that women and alcohol—the latter being illegal and prohibited by chapter rules—were

often present at various “alcohol-free” pledgeship events. Nevertheless, considerable quantities of alcohol were consumed at these events and women were treated in a degrading manner; that is, they were viewed as sex objects or “toys” to be handled or managed in any way the group saw it. However, some respondents (both men and women) disputed what they considered to be specious interpretations by these researchers and offered their own constructions of these events (Arnold and Kuh, 1992). Investigators who adopt a fragmentation perspective must present such competing views so that readers can draw their own conclusions. Whether the varying interpretations of group life represented by group members are associated with different patterns of outcomes remains to be determined.

4. Describe the conceptual and analytical perspective(s) guiding the study. An investigator’s disciplinary orientation influences what gets attention and, therefore, what can be discovered about student culture and how cultural phenomena will be interpreted. For example, consider a common problem: resistance by first-year students to discussing ideas in class. A developmental psychologist might attribute the students’ inability to talk in class to a dualistic level of cognitive development (i.e., many first-year traditional-age students function at an intellectual level that compels them to see things as either black or white, or to seek right and wrong answers to complicated questions) (Perry, 1970). However, a teacher educator may analyze this situation by focusing on the instructor’s behavior and recommend teaching techniques that feature active learning strategies compatible with the students’ learning styles. The cultural researchers may opt for yet another discipline-based interpretation (sociology, social psychology, or anthropology), and conclude that a tacit social contract has been struck between students and faculty whereby students agree not to challenge or debate questions because such behavior is considered either impolite, or will force both students and faculty to work harder. Knowing the primary disciplinary orientation of the inquirer allows the reader to evaluate whether other interpretations of the data might be produced if different analytical and substantive frameworks are used.

The researcher’s values, previous experiences, and views of student groups similar to those being studied also should be declared. These factors may result in describing some groups in more favorable terms (e.g., honors students) than others (e.g., fraternities), and certain kinds of social behavior (e.g., dating compared with social functions done in small groups of people, expectations for college that emphasize vocational training over intellectual development).

Finally, student culture researchers have a moral obligation to examine the experiences of those groups whose stories have not yet been told (Carter, 1990). For example, members of historically underrepresented groups attending predominantly white institutions have higher dropout rates than white students. Administrators at predominantly white institutions often attribute premature de-

parture by students of color to their inability to “adjust” or accommodate to institutional norms. A rival explanation that merits consideration is that these students’ cultures or orientation (Van Maanen, 1984) differ from those held by the majority and their worldviews are not valued by their peers or institutional agents (Tierney, 1992). For this reason, the characteristics that students bring to college (e.g., abilities, aptitudes, attitudes, interests, values, expectations, aspirations) (Pace and Baird, 1966) must be taken into account when conducting studies of student culture.

Those researchers who adopt a postmodern, critical theory stance will discover aspects of the student experience that cannot be “seen” or “heard” by inquirers who use other perspectives (e.g., functionalist views) (Rhoads, 1992, 1993; Tierney, 1992). Research into peer group influence guided by critical theory has the potential to identify the conditions that perpetuate power relations among people and regulate social and educational opportunities on campus (Giroux, 1992). Critical theory also promises to produce more meaningful, accurate, learner-centered interpretations of students’ experiences (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Tierney, 1992), ensuring that the story told is the students’, not the researcher’s. This is particularly important for people who have been, for whatever reason, silenced or culturally marginalized (Love et al., 1993). Examples of groups that can become marginalized in a given institutional context include gay, lesbian, and bisexual students, members of athletic teams, and victims of physical assaults (Miller and Hare, 1992; Rhoads, 1993).

5. The institutional context is described and taken into account in interpreting the findings. Student cultures are shaped to varying degrees by the other student and faculty subcultures with which students come into contact. Members’ perceptions of their group’s status relative to other groups influence how students view themselves and make meaning of their experiences inside and outside the classroom. Student peer groups also influence faculty-student interaction by encouraging or discouraging students to spend time with faculty outside of class. Yet, the views of faculty and administrators often are ignored in student culture research. It is as if students experience college in a vacuum.

According to Weis (1985), faculty culture “is linked dialectically to student culture” (p. 167). That is, faculty shape student behavior in important though not readily observable ways—through their requirements for class and their interactions with students inside and outside the classroom. They also influence indirectly the nature of relations among students when they require students to work independently (competition) or in small, collaborative groups (cooperation). Unless faculty and administrators understand the nature of the cultural arrangements that “students produce within the institution, how can they intervene to ameliorate the negative aspects of such environments?” (Weis, 1985, p. 163).

CONCLUSION

Cultural studies of peer group influence are more likely to become high-stakes inquiries and capture the attention of institutional agents and policy-makers if researchers describe how student cultures mediate learning and personal development and determine whether variations in outcomes are linked to group membership, particularly for those students whose experiences have heretofore been underrepresented in the literature. Such studies may foster additional learning and development gains when the data collection and analysis process encourages students to think and talk about what is happening to them and why, and students consider changing aspects of their cultures that prohibit them from attaining their educational and personal development goals.

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