

Early College Folio

The House of Education Needs Overhaul

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Early College as Sites for “Moratorium”

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EDITORS’ NOTE: *This is one of several responses to Elizabeth Blodgett Hall’s “[The House of Education Needs Overhaul](#).” Hall was the founder and president emeritus of Bard College at Simon’s Rock, the only full-time, four-year, residential college of the liberal arts and sciences designed for students ready for college after the 10th or 11th grade. Hall’s article is published alongside these responses by early college leaders in this first issue of Early College Folio.*

Reading “The House of Education Needs Overhaul,” I was immediately reminded of the work of child and adolescent psychology pioneer Erik Erikson, whose classic collection *Identity: Youth and Crisis* first appeared in 1968, one year after the original publication of Hall’s essay. I have no way of knowing if Hall was in any way a follower of Erikson’s work, but I hear echoes of much of his writing from the 1950s and ‘60s (which were assembled for the 1968 anthology) in Hall’s argument, particularly with regard to his theory of psychosocial or developmental moratorium.

Since Erikson’s time, his work has been rightly criticized as being based primarily on observations of White, male, middle- to upper-class young people. Nevertheless, I begin my youth development course for the Bard Master of Arts in Teaching program, “Identity, Culture, and the Classroom,” with excerpts from Erikson’s text. As my contemporary students’ reactions to his work attest, Erikson’s articulation of the identity development process transcends time period and can shed useful light on the experiences of adolescents across differences of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, perceptions of ability or disability, and a host of other factors. As Hall perhaps knew, it is also at the heart of why early college can make a profound difference in the lives of young people as they stand on the brink of adulthood and contemplate, consciously or unconsciously, who and what they will become.

Hall suggests that many adolescents around tenth grade “have mastered the three Rs but are still not in a position to make a commitment as to the way in which they will spend their lives” (p. 4). She then goes on to make an argument for liberal arts education at this critical juncture, before the impending pressures of adulthood loom large:

These are the middle years, before vocational or profession-

al training, for finding out about oneself and what one is interested in and able to do, without regard for what one has to do for a living. These are the years for a liberal education . . . (p. 4)

While the notion of “finding out about oneself” may sound to some like a frivolous pursuit reserved for the privileged, it is at the very heart of positive youth development, according to Erikson. He called this active identity exploration a necessary “psychosocial moratorium, during which the young adult through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society, a niche which is firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely made for him” (Erikson, 1968, p. 156). As scholar Michael Nakkula (2020) has explained further:

If adolescents can experience a “developmental moratorium,” in which they have an opportunity to reflect on and experiment with who they are, particularly with respect to their skills, interests, and relationships with others, they are likely to move toward adulthood with enhanced possibilities for long-term health and success. In essence, such a moratorium provides a “break in the developmental action.” It allows adolescents to use their advanced cognitive abilities to explore a range of possibilities for future development—to ask, “Given my present interests, aptitudes, and motivations, what life course(s) should I pursue?” Remaining open to possibility is the key to a successful moratorium experience (p. 15).

By this definition, artistic pursuits, participation in a team sport, and, yes, liberal arts education can all serve as moratorium experiences that foster deep exploration of the self at this critical life stage.

The importance of moratorium for all young people—especially those who do not come from socioeconomically privileged backgrounds—comes into sharper focus when viewed alongside its counterpart, *identity foreclosure*. Building off the work of Erikson, psychologist James Marcia (1966) developed this concept to describe a young person’s decision to pursue a life course and ways of being in the world *without* the exploration of alternatives, without the kinds of experiences that foster developmental moratorium. Young people with foreclosed identities view their life options in an extremely narrow range, and these are often shaped by stereotypes, damaging cultural norms, and perceived limitations on who or what they can become based on their race, gender, sexuality, social class, immigrant status, ability/disability, or other factors. The young people most vulnerable to identity foreclosure are those inclined to believe that the images they see around them—in their neighborhoods, in their families, or in society—define them and their life chances. For adolescents who would otherwise have relatively few opportunities for self-exploration, moratorium experiences can be life-altering.

As executive director of Bard’s early college program in Hudson, NY, from 2016-2020, I witnessed first-hand the transformative effect an early liberal arts college experience can have on a young person’s sense of possibility at the age of 15 or 16. I watched students who entered the program as high school juniors,

believing they would not go on to obtain a bachelor's degree afterward, stretch themselves not only in terms of their academic skills but also their future ambitions. Many of these students told my colleagues and me stories of being disengaged and bored in high school, "checked out" not because they were not interested in learning but because the learning they were asked to do was, in many respects, something from which they were clearly ready to move on. The rigor and diversity of their early college courses helped them understand the world—and perhaps more importantly, themselves—at a deeper level, one better aligned to their stage of development, both intellectual and psychosocial.

Perhaps the most gratifying conversations I had with students in the early college program were with young people who had recently decided to attend a four-year college "even though I don't really know what I want to do yet." For these students, their early college experience taught them that the journey is, in itself, at least as rewarding as the destination. Something had hooked them on the idea of investing in themselves before they felt compelled to pursue a profession. These students exemplified Hall's belief "that liberal learning has no end because the search leads more often to further questions, and that its satisfaction lies in the development of a disciplined mind that is able and free to pursue the quest throughout a lifetime" (p. 9).

Even if only a small percentage of the students who attend Bard's early college programs across the country adopt this way of thinking—and I suspect it's more than a small percentage—then for these students the house of education has been overhauled in a profound, life-changing way.

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