

the identity workbook



4D Experience
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

To know yourself as the Being
underneath the thinker, the stillness
underneath the mental noise, the love
and joy underneath the pain, is freedom,
salvation, enlightenment.

ECKHART TOLLE



who are you, **really?**

Identity is the **evolving** story of who you are, shaped by your *worldview, personal identities, social identities, and lived experiences*—including your values, skills, race, gender, culture, education, life circumstances, and even the social and political context you live in. In college, your identity often expands as you explore new ideas, communities, and ways of thinking, being, and doing.

Rather than something fixed, identity is **fluid** and *multifaceted*. You might express different parts of yourself in different spaces, from the classroom to your internship to social media. When you understand your identity, you feel better equipped to make more aligned choices, build authentic relationships, and navigate challenges with greater *clarity* and confidence.

Reflecting on identity helps you understand how your values, passions, and sense of belonging intersect—so you can *live and lead* with greater **purpose**. When you get clear on who you are and what you want, you can begin to see how your identities and experiences shape your path across all four dimensions of the DU 4D Experience (*intellect, well-being, character, and careers & lives of purpose*), empowering you to design a more meaningful and self-aware college journey.





why it **matters**

There is a growing body of psychological research showing that doing “**identity work**”—cultivating a *clear, stable, and coherent* sense of self—supports mental health, well-being, and productivity.

Studies show that people with high self-concept clarity (i.e. they understand themselves **consistently** across situations and time) report higher self-esteem, greater psychological well-being, and fewer depressive and anxiety symptoms (Usborne, 2010). As a result, maintaining a *stable identity* helps people maintain their functioning and health over time (Lodi-Smith, 2017).

In work and goal-oriented contexts, identity clarity also makes people more **motivated** and effective. A 2025 study found that employees with higher self-concept clarity were positively associated with *psychological empowerment* (feeling competent, autonomous, and that you have impact). This in turn increased *intrinsic motivation*—which drives deeper engagement, creativity, and achievement without external rewards (Ozcan, 2025).

Beyond motivation, identity clarity can help with **decision-making**. A 2022 study found that self-concept clarity predicted better performance on *social decision-making* tasks, which suggests that knowing who you are helps you make smarter choices when your goals, values, or relationships are at stake (Ugurlar, 2022). Increases in self-concept clarity have also been associated with increases in *sense of meaning* and **purpose** in life (Chen, 2024).

Altogether, the evidence suggests that identity work isn’t just “self-reflection” for its own sake—it helps make people *healthier, happier,* and more *productive* as they begin to **align** their values and choices.

- **How do you think your immediate community** (e.g. close relatives/friends), your peers/classmates, and your professors/supervisors would describe you? Would they tell a similar story, or might the details vary and why?



- **What messages about yourself are reflected back to you in media?** How and where do you see yourself represented in *cultural images* and *leadership* (e.g. professors, advisors, mentors) around you?



worldview

Our worldview is the **internal** lens through which we take in information, interpret events, make decisions, and form opinions. It is more than just how we “see” the world—it's about how we *make meaning* of everything we experience. It affects not only what we notice, but how we understand what we see and what we choose to do about it.

This lens is **shaped** over time by our personal experiences, social identities, cultural upbringing and values, education, environment, etc. Because these influences are different for everyone, no two people can have the *exact same* worldview—even if they share some identities or experiences. This means that in college, where people from many different backgrounds come together, it's common for classmates, professors, or teammates to interpret the same situation in very different ways. And that's not just okay, it's *valuable*.

College is a time when your worldview is often **challenged** and expanded. You'll meet people with perspectives that may surprise, confuse, or even contradict your own. Understanding that everyone operates from their own lens can help you approach these moments with *curiosity* instead of judgment.

Your worldview is not fixed—it's **dynamic**. The more you learn, experience, and reflect, the more your lens will grow and shift. In a college community, recognizing that everyone's lens is different is the first step toward building *inclusive, respectful, and meaningful* connections.



personal identity



Personal identity is the collection of traits, interests, experiences, and characteristics that make you a unique individual. Think of it as a **constellation**—each part is one star, and together they form the picture of who you are. Some common elements of personal identity include *education, profession, likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, personality traits, organizational memberships, etc.*

While you might share some aspects of your personal identity with others (like enjoying the same music or being in the same major), the overall combination is uniquely **yours**. In a diverse college environment, personal identity is often the *starting point* for reflection, connection, and growth. You may feel most comfortable exploring identity at this level because it centers on the **individual** self—your preferences, story, and path. It's also a place where we start to understand how we relate to others, not just by our similarities, but by appreciating our *differences*.

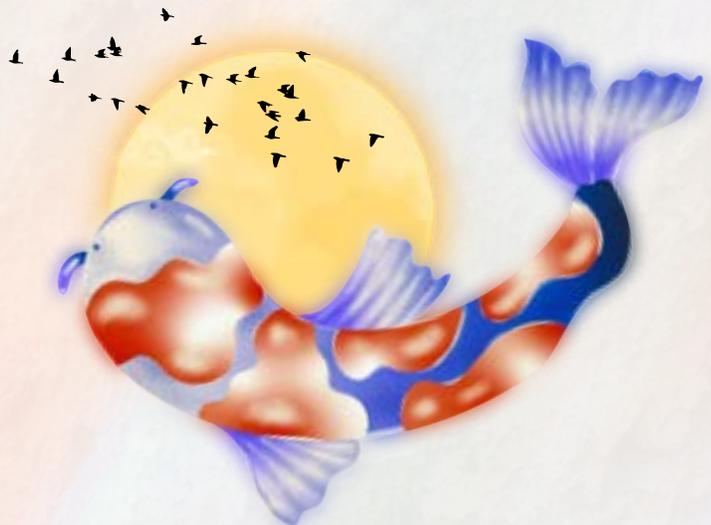
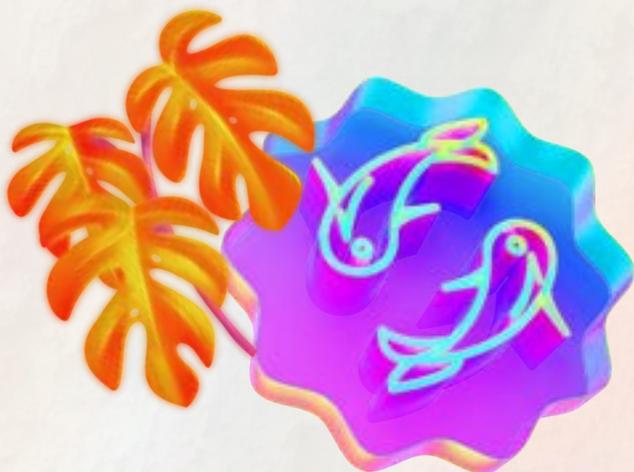
As you begin or continue your college journey, it's helpful to take time to reflect on the many aspects that **shape** who you are. Here is a breakdown of different dimensions of personal identity—some light and fun, others *deeper* and more *reflective*. Together, they create a fuller picture of you as an individual and how you show up in different spaces.



- **Think back to when you were a child. Did you have a favorite toy?**
- What color was it? What was its function? Was it raced or gendered?
- Was it expensive? Easy to use and interface with for a variety of needs?



- **How did it come into your possession? What value did it hold for you?**
- Did you enjoy it alone, or shared it with other people e.g. siblings?
- What does it tell you about who you were then and who you are now?



personal identity



Favorites: Music, Books, Films, Foods etc.

- These are often the most immediately relatable aspects of identity—our go-to playlists, comfort foods, binge-worthy shows, or most inspiring reads. While they may seem simple, our favorites are often tied to our cultural background, emotional memories, and social circles. They can be great conversation starters and a way to find common ground or appreciate differences.

Education, Vocation, Occupation

- This includes your academic background, current studies, and future goals. Are you a first-generation college student? Choosing between majors? Dreaming of a specific career or exploring your options? This area of identity also includes part-time jobs, internships, or volunteer work, all of which shape how you view success, purpose, and achievement.

Hobbies, Talents, Personality Traits, Skills, Abilities

- These are the things you enjoy doing and the qualities that come naturally—or that you've worked hard to develop. Whether you're athletic, artistic, tech-savvy, outgoing, detail-oriented, or a strong communicator, these strengths are a big part of how you express yourself. In college, these traits help you navigate group projects, leadership roles, and new social dynamics.



personal identity



Organizations, Teams, Memberships

- What groups or communities are you part of? This could include campus clubs, sports teams, academic societies, fraternities or sororities, faith-based groups, advocacy organizations, or cultural associations. These memberships often influence your sense of belonging, your values, and how you spend your time outside of class and work obligations.

Political and Social Values

- While sometimes harder to talk about, your beliefs about fairness, justice, leadership, freedom, and equality are a key part of who you are. These values may be influenced by your upbringing, education, or lived experiences—and they often shape how you engage in conversations, activism, and decision-making. College is a time when many students begin to critically reflect on, affirm, or re-evaluate these values.

Family Dynamics: Number of Siblings, Birth Order

- Your family structure—how many siblings you have, your position in the family, whether you were raised in a large extended household or as an only child—can influence everything from your communication style to your level of independence or sense of responsibility. Understanding these dynamics can help you reflect on how you relate to authority, peers, and collaboration.





personal identity mapping

what's in your constellation?

- *How do you identify across each category?*
- *How has it evolved over time and in college?*

Favorites (Music, Books, Films, Colors, Foods)

Education, Vocation, Occupation

Hobbies, Talents, Personality Traits, Skills, Abilities, Core Competencies

Organizations, Teams, Memberships

Political and Social Values

Number of Siblings, Birth Order



social identity

Social identity refers to the categories or **groups** we belong to based on characteristics that are often socially defined and *culturally significant*. These include aspects like race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, nationality, ability, and more.

Sometimes we choose these identities, and sometimes they are assigned to us by others or by society. Our social identities are shaped by how we see ourselves and by how **others** perceive and respond to us. They play a major role in how we move through the world—and how the world treats us in return. Here are some key things to consider when it comes to social identity.

Multiplicity: We Are More Than One Thing

- Each of us holds multiple social identities at once. No single identity fully defines us. For example, you may be a Latina, a first-generation college student, and a member of the LGBTQ+ community. None of these identities alone can fully explain your lived experience—but together, they shape how you see yourself and how you're seen.

Simultaneity: Our Identities Exist All at Once

- We don't "switch off" parts of who we are depending on the situation. Even if one aspect of our identity is more visible or emphasized at a given time (like race in one context or gender in another), all of our identities are always present. For instance, a Black woman doesn't experience the world first as Black and then as a woman—she experiences both simultaneously.

Observability: What Can Be Seen

- Some aspects of identity are readily visible to others, such as race, physical ability, or the clothing we wear that may reflect religious or cultural affiliation. Others, like sexual orientation, mental health status, or socioeconomic background, may be less visible or completely invisible unless shared. The visibility of an identity can affect how we're treated, sometimes before we even speak.

Changeability: What Can Shift Over Time

- Some identities are fluid or changeable over the course of our lives—such as religion, political beliefs, gender expression, or even nationality (through immigration or citizenship). Others, like race, ethnicity, or the generation we were born into, are fixed and don't change. Understanding which parts of identity can evolve helps us appreciate the complexity of human growth and experience.

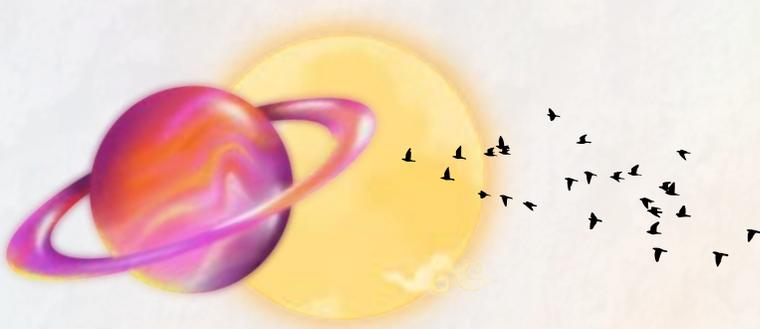
Electability: What We Choose vs. What We Inherit

- Some social identities are elective, meaning we choose them or adopt them voluntarily—such as religious affiliation, political party, or chosen communities. Others are non-elective, meaning we are born into them or assigned them by society, like age, race, or place of birth. These differences shape how much agency we have over our identity, and how much control others assume we have.

Salience: What Feels Most Important in the Moment

- We all carry multiple identities at once, but not all of them feel equally important at all times. This is salience—how strongly an identity stands out to us in a particular situation. For example, being a first-generation college student might feel especially significant during orientation or advising, while religious identity may feel more important during a holiday or conflict. Our sense of salience can shift from moment to moment and environment to environment.





social identity

Here is a breakdown of some common social groups and categories that represent key aspects of who you are in relation to others. They are central to understanding your place in society, and while each of us holds these identities in unique ways, they also connect us to broader social and cultural systems.

Race

- Refers to the social and political meaning assigned to physical traits such as skin color, facial features, and hair texture. While race is not a biological reality, it has real consequences due to systems of racial classification and racism. Racial identity can shape how we are perceived, treated, and positioned in society.

Ethnicity

- Refers to cultural heritage, ancestry, language, traditions, and shared history. Ethnicity is more about culture than physical appearance, and individuals may identify with one or more ethnic groups. Unlike race, ethnicity is not always immediately visible and is often self-defined.

Socioeconomic Status

- Refers to one's access to resources such as income, education, wealth, and social capital. Socioeconomic identity can influence educational and career opportunities, housing, healthcare access, and sense of belonging. It may be inherited, but it can also shift over time.



Gender Identity

- Refers to a person's internal understanding and experience of their gender—which may or may not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. Common identities include *woman*, *man*, *transgender*, *nonbinary*, *genderfluid*, and *agender*. Gender identity is deeply personal and can evolve over time.

Sexual Orientation

- Refers to the emotional, romantic, and/or physical attraction one feels toward others. Common orientations include *heterosexual*, *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, *pansexual*, *asexual*, and *queer*. Sexual orientation is separate from gender identity, and it exists along a broad spectrum.

Age

- Refers to both our chronological age, as well as how society categorizes us based on life stages e.g., *child*, *youth*, *adult*, *elder*. Age can influence power, respect, and perceived competence, and is tied to generational identity as well.

Body

- Encompasses body size, shape, weight, and appearance, as well as how others perceive and judge those features. Body identity also includes how comfortable we feel in our bodies, and it can intersect with societal norms around beauty, health, and worthiness.

National Origin

- Refers to the country where someone was born or where their family is from. It may affect citizenship, cultural traditions, language, and legal status. National origin can influence how individuals are treated or identified, particularly in political or immigration contexts.

First Language

- Refers to the language(s) a person learned first and may feel most fluent or comfortable using. Language shapes how we communicate, think, and connect with culture. Accents, fluency, and linguistic differences can sometimes lead to bias or exclusion.

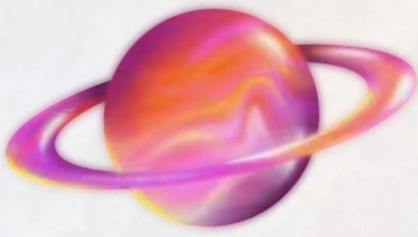
Ability

- Refers to physical, mental, emotional, or cognitive conditions that may impact how someone navigates the world. This includes both visible and invisible disabilities. Ableism—discrimination based on ability status—can shape access to education, space, and opportunity.

Religion/Spiritual Affiliation

- Refers to the beliefs, practices, and communities people are part of based on their spirituality or faith tradition. This could include *Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Indigenous spiritualities*, or no religion at all. Religious identity can influence values, behaviors, and social connections—and may be a source of community, conflict, or exclusion.





social identity mapping

what's in your constellation?

- *How do you identify across each category?*
- *How has it evolved over time and in college?*

Race/Ethnicity

Socioeconomic Status

Gender Identity

Sexual Orientation

Age

Body Size

National Origin

First Language

Development/Ability

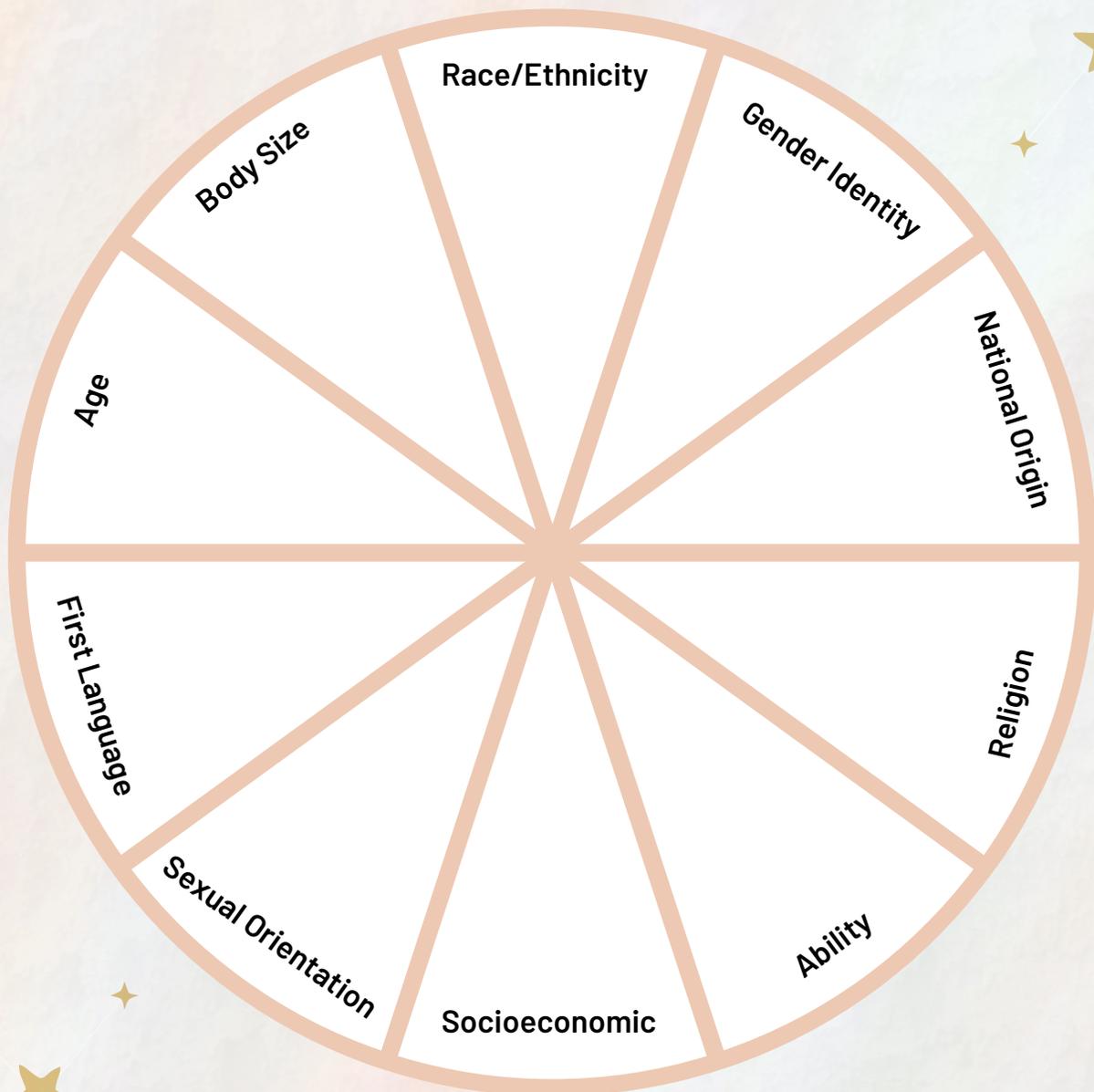
Religion/Spiritual Affiliation



intersectionality

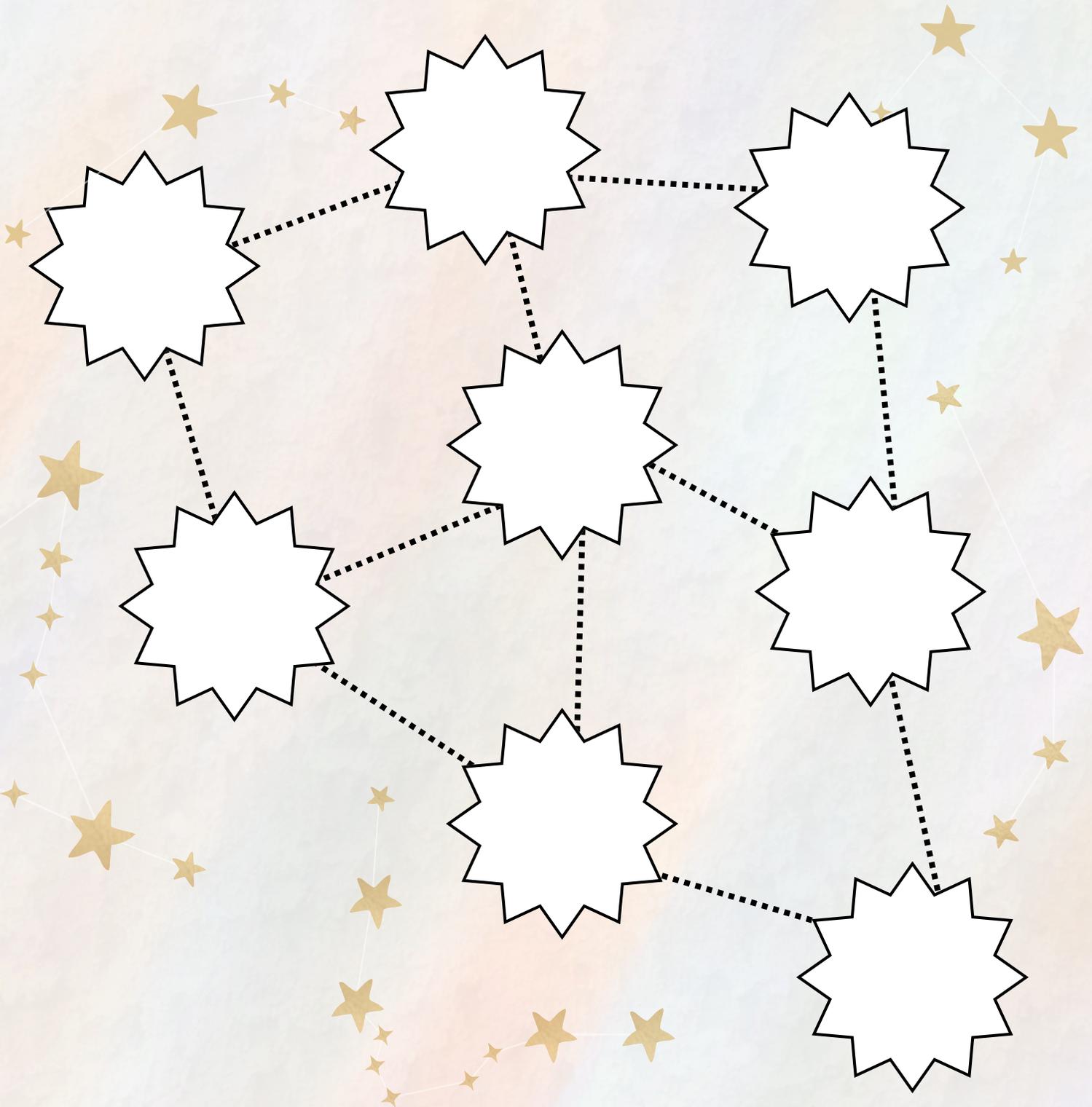
Coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality is the idea that social identities are not isolated—they are **intertwined** and *influence* one another. For example, being a “man with a disability” is a distinct experience from simply being a “man” or a “person with a disability,” because the experiences of these identities often intersect in unique ways. Understanding intersectionality helps us recognize how our identities overlap and compound to shape our *experiences, relationships, and opportunities* as we navigate the world.

- Consider how each identity on the wheel **influences** your other identities (e.g. *first language and national origin, age and ability*)
- Note in each section of the wheel any **connections** you make across identities (e.g. *I speak English because I grew up in a English-speaking country, I am young and therefore less likely to experience a physical disability.*)



your identity constellation

- Review your **personal** identity and **social** identity maps.
- Choose 4 personal identities and 4 social identities that you feel are **most important** to you today.
- Write your answers in the stars below. Try to place identities next to each other that you feel are **connected**.



- Why did you choose to **highlight** these personal and social identities over others when constructing your constellation?



- Which identities are fixed or **fluid**, visible or invisible, and voluntary or involuntary?



- Which identities do you *share* with those closest to you (e.g. family, friends), and which ones are **unique** to you in your social circles?



- Imagine that for some reason, you had to **eliminate** 1-2 identities from your constellation. How would this make you *feel*?



- Which social groups do you readily **associate** with? In which groups are you a *less active* member? Why might this be the case?



- How do others **perceive** your social identities and group membership? Do they place you into social groups you don't always *identify* with?



- Which identities have become more or less **salient** to you over time? Why might this be the case?



- For any identity you hold, what **advantages** and *disadvantages* do you receive, if any, in society? Are they obvious or *more subtle*?



lived experience

Lived experience refers to the personal, **first-hand** knowledge someone gains by moving through the world in their own body. It is the understanding and insights gained from *personally* going through specific life events. Unlike information that comes from books, research studies, or classroom theories, lived experience is grounded in *real-life* participation in everyday situations—whether that’s navigating a college campus, facing bias, working a job, or growing up in a specific community.

It’s not just about what someone has been through—it’s also about how they *feel*, *interpret*, and **make meaning** of those experiences. Emotions, perceptions, memories, values, and personal goals all shape how someone understands the events in their life. Because of this, no two people will experience the same situation in exactly the same way.

In a college setting, and in broader society, lived experience brings **essential** insights that can’t always be captured by data, statistics, or academic expertise alone. It helps us:

- *Understand how systems and policies actually affect people’s day-to-day lives.*
- *Hear the nuance in individual perspectives that might be missing in broader generalizations.*
- *Challenge assumptions and bring forward voices that have historically been overlooked or excluded.*
- *Build empathy and connection across differences.*
- *Create more informed, inclusive, and responsive solutions to complex issues.*



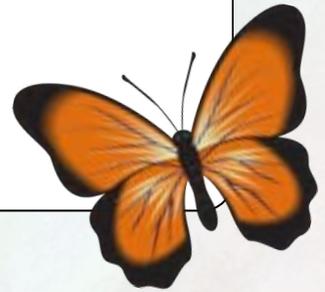


Everyone's lived experience is **valid** and **valuable**. When we listen deeply to others' stories—especially those who experience the world differently from us—we expand our own understanding of the world. And when we reflect on our own lived experience, we can develop tools for growth, resilience, and meaningful engagement with others.

Here is a case of lived experience around first-generation status.

- *Maria, a first-generation college student, arrives on campus for her first semester. Her parents didn't attend college, so she's figuring everything out on her own—how to register for classes, talk to professors, apply for financial aid, and balance work with school. Although she's academically capable, she often feels out of place when classmates casually mention study abroad trips, unpaid internships, or family connections that helped them get ahead.*
- *Maria's lived experience includes not only the concrete challenges she faces (like financial stress or unfamiliarity with campus systems), but also the emotional impact—feelings of isolation, pressure to succeed, and pride in paving her own path. These experiences shape how she sees the college environment, how she relates to her peers, and what kind of support she needs to thrive.*

- **Think about an experience you had that fundamentally CHANGED you.**
- To the best of your memory, describe the experience—*who, what, where, when, how?* Be as descriptive as possible and include sights, smells, sounds, and other sensory information.



- **Which of your personal and social identities were engaged?**
- Who were you before this experience? Who were you after?
- Imagine if you never had this experience. Who would you be today?



i am poem

A type of personal poem in which you describe yourself through a series of prompts. Writing and sharing these are an easy way to express yourself and be seen, and for others to gain insights about you—fostering *perspective-taking*, *empathy*, and *social awareness*.

Complete the sentences

I am _____
I wonder _____
I hear _____
I see _____
I want _____
I am _____

I pretend _____
I feel _____
I touch _____
I worry _____
I cry _____
I am _____

I understand _____
I say _____
I dream _____
I try _____
I hope _____
I am _____

Sample

I am strong and kind
I wonder about the future
I hear children laughing
I see piles of laundry
I want to eat carbs
I am strong and kind

I pretend that I am in control
I feel the weight of responsibility
I touch my child's hair
I worry if it's enough
I cry tears of hope
I am strong and kind

I understand fear
I say "yes" more than "no"
I dream of a simpler life
I try to do my best
I hope it will all work out
I am strong and kind



the deeper you

Beyond the layers of identity lies what many spiritual teachers such as Eckhart Tolle call “the deeper you,” the self that exists **beneath** labels, roles, and constructs.

The deepest level of yourself is your true **consciousness**, which is a state of being beyond your ego and conditioned mind. It is accessed by realizing you are not your thoughts or emotions, but the *still, aware "I"* that underlies them. This “deeper you” is a profound connection to the universal consciousness, a sense of *inner peace*, and the source of *creative action and love*.

While identity work is valuable for understanding how we move through the world, it’s equally important to remember that our essence is **shared**—we are all human, connected by similar emotions, needs, and capacities for growth.

Practices like *grounding, mindfulness, and present-moment awareness* help quiet the ego and soften the grip of external constructs, allowing us to access a deeper, more authentic self that isn’t defined by circumstance or expectation.

In this space of presence, students can experience themselves not merely as a collection of identities but as **whole**, conscious beings—cultivating *clarity, compassion, and conviction* in who they truly are.



thank you!



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