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# Creating Social Connections in the Community College Classroom: A Pedagogy Using Groups that Build into Neo-Tribes to Counter Public College Alienation and Traditional Tribalism in Urban Diversity

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A classic belief of the university as a place of public discourse (Arendt, 1979) without the need for close emotional connections (d'Entrevès, 2019) is being challenged. As American colleges progressively evolve into large pluralistic societies that are interacting in transnational ways (Sweeney, Weaven, & Herington, 2008) across mass diversities of race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and academic prowess (Anderson, 2011), it can cause students to feel overwhelmed as they look for safety in the familiar. They often disengage from the public discussion and the large group discussion in the classroom. This is especially true in public colleges with open admissions wherein there are not the elite qualifications for academia that Arendt and many others assumed that would make the classroom the ideal open learning environment. It can cause students to cloister themselves in tribalism as they try to find small groups of people they can relate to while shying away from difference. This paper introduces an effective pedagogy used in diverse urban (Vertovec, 2007) community college classrooms to overcome this disengagement.

In the turning away from mass urban culture, people cluster into neo-tribes (connections aside from traditional family, ethnic, and religious) finding affinities—new emerging tribes based on similarities and commonalities—in the middle of social alienation (Maffesoli, 1988; Bauman, 1990). They need to be a part of a group to belong. This is especially true in the city where people can feel lost in the diverse crowd and seek people more like themselves (LeBon, 1995). This causes people to stay within

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their own ethnic and cultural enclaves. This matters in community college education because in the aim to bring together students who are different from one another economically, socially, and culturally they get lost in the super diverse environment.

In the author's opinion, I have noticed in the urban community college, commuter students do not spend much time on campus, so close relationships are often off-campus and in their private and parochial lives interacting in traditional tribalism of the family, neighborhood, ethnicity, and religion. The urban campus, then, can be a strange place of loneliness and anonymity (Durkheim, 1995) where people feel disconnected from one another because they never get to know one another beyond the impersonality of traditional education of lecture and discussion. So how does the community college professor overcome the alienation that comes from urban diversity (Vertovec, 2007) and help students make friends? The novel approach in this paper is a possible answer. Since commuter students spend most of their time in the classroom, using learning projects to teach and experience diversity and build relations with colleagues that are different than they are is an important task as collaborative learning increases when students feel more comfortable with one another and can speak more freely. The task, then, is to use the benefit of super diversity to build new forms of connections (neo-tribes) on the community college campus.

## **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this paper was to investigate how diversity-based group assignments (called the diversity project) were an effective pedagogy to incorporate into the real-world classroom using collaborative learning, where students otherwise might not have learning relationships with one another. Each group created a tribal identity that strengthened the social and personal ties between them. Students were to equally share responsibilities in leading the discussions and documenting (scripting) the group work. This helped them not only to overcome urban alienation but make friends and feel more at "home" on the college campus. This was especially true for recent immigrant or international students who had few relationships beyond their cultural enclaves in the International Students Department.

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## Literature Review

### Groups, Tribes, and College Life

A group can be defined in numerous ways, as diverse as the social differences of humans. A tribe is a close-knit relationship more intense than a group, a social space for commuter students to feel more at home in the college environment. In small affinity environments like this people learn trust and how to listen and communicate in more intimate and personal ways (Putnam & Fieldstein, 2003). In this paper the traditional tribe refers to the affinities one has in their private and parochial lives. The most predominant ones are family, ethnicity, neighborhood, and ethnicity. Neo-tribes are the affinities one acquires on campus such as course majors, athletics, eating in the lunch hall together, gaming, friendships, and classroom acquaintances.

Rooted in the social psychology of small groups and collaboration, experiential learning (Easterling, & Rudell, 1997; Robyn, 2000; Ekrich & Voorhees, 2002; Razzouk, Seitz, & Rizkallah, 2003) has emerged in colleges and universities (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2007; Munoz & Huser, 2008; Alam, 2014; Bonet & Walters, 2016) as a successful method to build relationships between students. Learning together brings emotional connections and increases the desire and willingness to learn since a student is not so overcome with social anxiety of feeling alone and alienated on campus and in the classroom. So it shows that the college environment provides a positive space for students to encounter multicultural difference academically and socially (Sweeny, Weaven, & Herington, 2008; Appiah, 2009; Anderson, 2011).

### Tribalism

Tribalism, collaborative learning, networking, group identity, and affinity are social theories through which to understand and analyze this diversity project. A tribe (tribalism being the action for groups to connect into a tribe) is not just a gathering of people, but a more intense relationship. It is not just an ad-hoc classroom group but is more like a family (Robyn, 2000). “The tribe literally tells us who we are” (Logan et al., 2008, p. 277). The tribe, then, is the marker of social inclusion in a diverse world. Human identity is wrapped into rituals, symbols, language, habits, and customs where students in a classroom feel affinity and commonality with certain groups (Robyn, 2000). It determines the behavior of those within it and determines the “other” who is not in the group (Ross, 2018). So, tribalism is positive when it embodies values, beliefs, and behaviors that contribute to the good of the individuals in the group and society as a

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whole. It is negative when those within the group reject and disrespect those who may not match the criteria of the tribe, thereby serving as exclusionary mechanism to ensure outsiders stay as outsiders. Cultural language, both verbal and nonverbal, is a prime way that people separate into tribes. This is nothing new, as Aristotle noted millennia ago.

Cultural language—therefore one’s base tribalism—is based on moral values instilled in the human much earlier than college. In reflecting on Plato’s work, Jaeger (1944) shows how education is formed by the teacher or parent.

Plato did not, as we might expect, abandon the belief that virtue is knowledge, but he moved the beginning of education further and further back. It began fairly early in *The Republic*—but there he was simply trying to start training the child’s intellect young enough. But here he is trying to mold the desires as early as possible, so that the child may begin by learning, as if in play, to love right and hate wrong. No one, he thinks, can get the best out of his own logos unless he has been unconsciously prepared by the logos of someone else, teacher or parent. (p. 227)

The initial formation of the child is the root of one’s tribal values, beliefs, and ethics. The “ethos” holds the tribe together. At its most base form the family, then, is the root. Once in the public sphere these ethical values are to hold together the leader. The depth of influence of this primary relationship cannot be replaced by a short semester-long engagement at a community college. Hannah Arendt rejected this private space as a place of learning. She argued that the public sphere is where the education must take place within open discussion and learning. Indeed, in her own teaching methods she lectured and then questioned with little attempt at intimate relationships between students.

Arendt’s stress on the artificiality of political life is evident in her rejection of all neo-romantic appeals to the *volk* and to ethnic identity as the basis for political community. She maintained that one’s ethnic, religious, or racial identity was irrelevant to one’s identity as a citizen...” (d’Entreves, 2019, p. 6.1)

In stressing “artificiality of political life” as a citizen she views political life and university life as the public space in the free discourse of “collective solutions” (d’Entreves, 2019). She neglects to give credence to the way people have a collective effervescence (Durkheim, 1995) or collective consciousness (Tonnies, 1988) in their most tribal relationships, negating the role of tribal mentoring and influence. In applying this element to this project, it is true that in the classroom there is a collective learning

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in open discussion, but at the community college level new young adults are just as much trying to find their own identity. As much as the university is a free place of public discourse in the Arendt style (Arendt, 1979), in community college, as in other venues, there is a search for belonging (Putnam & Fieldstein, 2003).

Aristotle's rhetorical values provide a structure to understand various stages of language in tribes from lowest to highest: (a) negative tone with and individual focus; (b) negative tone with a group focus; (c) a positive tone with an individual focus; (d) a positive tone with a group focus (Logan et al., 2008). For instance, when a person initially comes into a tribe they are treated with suspicion and skepticism first by individuals in the group, and then the group as a whole. As they continue in the relationship with the others in the tribe, they can grow into positive interactions both individually and the group. Over time, then, a tribal identity is formed between the individuals in a positive relationship. In street gangs, the initiation rite is a platform for the tribe to test the individual whether they have the wherewithal to defend others ("brothers") in the gang. To move to initiation phase requires first gaining the positive trust of the individuals in the gang from negative mistrust. Once initiated, the individual asserts their positive impression in the gang by defending themselves when confronted by the others, ultimately being "made" part of the team (Vice, 2017).

Groups will evolve to the higher stages the more positive interactions they have (Collins, 2005) that garner positive feelings and responses. As the tribe establishes itself individuals will find specific roles within the tribe that holds the group together. It creates a "character armor" that personifies certain characteristics and roles within the tribe (Logan et al., 2008) and protects it from those who otherwise might not conform. Using the gang example noted above (Vice, 2017), a "character armor" of a gang member would be violence as operational mode, brotherly love based on being willing to defend others with violence, and being able to withstand the violence of others as an act of commitment and dedication.

There is, then, a problem of ethnic and social tribalism in the neighborhood and relationships. People will be with people most like themselves because of the affirmation that comes from the tribe. Within diversity it is not unusual to find inclusive small tribes, enclaves, and neighborhoods. When arriving on the college campus, these urban students have little time to forge relationships with those unlike themselves. The tendency is to focus on individual tasks and grades with little engagement in social learning that can take place on a diverse college campus.

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Student struggle to build and sustain certain character traits in a contemporary society that is information-rich and framed by the changing pace of popular culture. Students on the college campus are saturated in a world of choices, categories, and media diversification (Underhill, 1999; Neumeier, 2003; Swartz, 2005; Cooke, 2012). How to find common language and character traits that bring students together is a difficult task.

### **Collaborative Learning**

Collaborative learning is a process where people are brought together to constructively “create authentic visions and strategies” (Chrislip & Larson, 1994) as people must act cooperatively in sharing intellectual, creative, and practical power (Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Robyn, 2000). The concept highlights the refrain that more people working together produces a stronger result than what one individual can achieve. In sharing power amongst one another, the result is stronger engagement to the task at hand (Laverie, Madhavaram, & McDonald, 2008).

However, bringing people together has its own problems as well (Huxham & Vangen, 2000). Trust can be broken if there isn’t a strong honor code and accountability. A sense of unfairness can develop if some group members believe they are doing more than their share of the work while some may be disengaging in the task at hand.

A collective working relationship with others is critical in the task of collaborating if an effective result is to be produced. The successful collaborator is one who is able to network with different specialists and bring them together for a collective task. Becker’s (1982) *Art Worlds and Collective Activity* argues, “all artistic work...involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people” (p. 1). Every art form requires the collaborative efforts of a number of individuals, e.g., from the painter, to the critic, to the marketer, to the audience, to the one whom makes the paintbrushes, to the purchaser who receives a tax break from the government. These represent a “bundle of tasks,” a network of specialists who come together to complete the task. Though the artist might receive the accolades and glory, they are keenly aware of the team nature of art. In a diversity project, there is a networking of every individual’s contribution to make the whole. Indeed, it is a critical tribal task.

This concept of task bundling in a tribal networking relationship (Rainie & Wellman, 2014) is typical in today’s world that requires specialists from various fields to work together to complete a project. It is being applied in creative ways in the interdisciplinary college classroom

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through games and service learning (Easterling & Rudell, 1997; Shadinger & Toomey, 2014; Gonzalez-Padron & Ferguson, 2015).

## **Group Identity and Affinity**

Affinity is the glue that holds the tribe together with a collective conscience (Durkheim, 1995). Several synonymous terms define it, such as relationship, togetherness, similarity, harmony, commonalities, kinship, collectivity, cohesiveness, resemblance, and rapport. Robyn (2000) links group identity to tribalism. She argues that tribes are more intense in the classroom than just groups. On the college campus this would be a group of friends that consistently stay together in extracurricular hours, eat meals together, go out elsewhere, or even might be roommates. Another college tribe would be a sports team. Yet another, a culture or academic club where the same students meet regularly and participate in numerous activities and practices outside of class itself.

A college tribe has common values and expects contributions from all members in the tribe to express and live by those values. This is different than just cohorts or work groups assembled for a class assignment where the relationships do not go any deeper than the task at hand. In a classroom a group does not mean it is a tribe, as students don't truly connect relationally beyond the specific assignments, unless a structure is built where the same students meet together consistently and with defined purposes that force them to engage beyond textbook type work. If the goal in the classroom is intense collaboration and to build relationships beyond just a work project, using assignments that create tribalism is critical to the learning task in "building a sense of mutual responsibility and value among the students" (Robyn, 2000, p. 12). She claims that we move from "building teams" to "building tribes." The word tribe draws people, inspires the imagination, and evokes a sense of belonging" (Robyn, 2000, p. 1).

The foundation of this project was identifying social collectivity and affinity (Bell & Daly, 1984). Brimlow and Heiss (2015) studied how affinity affects the relationship between a tutor and tutee in a college environment. They argue there are variations in the type of educational environment or pedagogy that is used in learning that is successful in affinity learning, and gender and racial difference can affect the level of affinity students might have with one another or the tutor. Universities and colleges these days are very concerned about ensuring their diverse student bodies integrate with one another in the urban pluralistic society. Robyn (2000) argues that building a sense of tribe is critical for the well-being of

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students. With increasing diversity, it is important for student retention that students feel a sense of community. Participation in extracurricular events, clubs, and student activities are certain ways this is being accomplished. Diversity projects are also active in the classroom with various types of experiential learning activities and coursework focusing on helping students to cross social, racial, and ethnic barriers in order to engage friendships and learning (Marullo, 1998).

## **Research Design**

The diversity project blends these theories (tribalism, collaborative learning, affinity, and group identity) into a practical project with a defined outcome. A series of assignments were built around these theories. The research design used an interdisciplinary analysis of group-based learning of  $N = 13$  classes or  $N = 391$  students in multicourses: (business, sociology, and research methods) in New York City (NYC). The Institutional Review Board approval was obtained through the Continuing Education office of the university. Students were tested over a period of three semesters using the diversity project as a pedagogical method based on collaborative learning.

## **Student Population**

The research field for this study was on two urban community college campuses with no dormitory or residential housing (Table 1). Being commuter-based in a vast metropolis, students did not gain the dormitory living closeness and connection that may exist on rural or college-town campuses. Coming from modest and poor backgrounds, many also work at least part-time with several working nearly full-time, over 20 hours a week, while completing classes, so there is little extracurricular time to build social relationships outside the classroom. The ethnic blend of the students was immense with representation from many immigrant groups into the city along with international students on short-term visas.

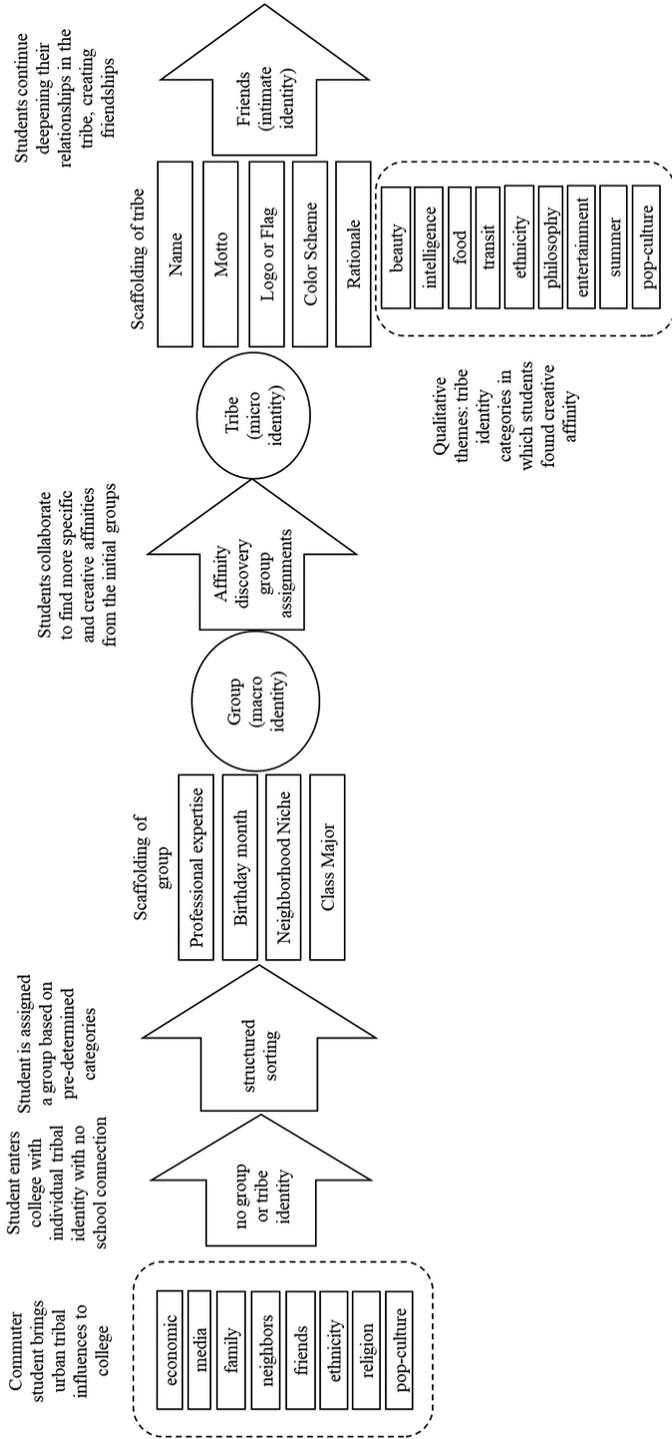
**Table I.** *Comparisons and Contrasts in the Commuter Student Population of the Two Surveyed Campuses and Students Reporting*

Campus	Number	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Income
Campus 1	17,282	38% born outside of U.S. (145 countries represented) 73% report language other than English spoken at home 34% Hispanic 29% Black (non-Hispanic) 20% Asian 10% White (non-Hispanic) 1% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander 1% Other 5% Nonresident (rated the 5th most ethnically diverse campus in the United States)	56% male 44% female	61% less than \$30,000 80% of freshmen receive need-based aid
Campus 2	15,473	30% born outside of U.S. 34% report language other than English spoken at home 30% Hispanic/Latino 25% Black (non-Hispanic) 15% White (non-Hispanic) 29% Asian or Pacific Islander 1% Other	47% male 53% female	More than 50% come from an income of \$25,000 or less (per student). This may or may not represent family income.

## Procedure

The following chart (Figure 1) shows the flow of the project indicating the movement of student engagement from the commuter student first coming on campus, to the conclusion of the project over the period of a semester. The chart is labeled with key components of the procedure used in the diversity project and the timing of the various phases that are shown in Table 2. It describes the process of the diversity project. Indicated within the chart are the two identity processes (Macro/Micro Tribe Identities) and the scaffolding upon which these tribal identities are built.

**Figure 1. Diversity Project Procedure Flow Chart**



With the immense culture and ethnic diversity (with its accompanying social distance between freshmen and sophomore students), a specific type of affinity was used in initially forming the groups, though there was flexibility in allowing the groups to create their own identity based on getting to know one another and discovering commonalities from which to establish a tribe identity. With an average class size of 30, students were divided into 91 affinity groups, meaning five groups per class, consisting of five or six students per group.

The procedure for the diversity project was based on six phases (Table 2) that flowed from the beginning of the course to the end. While the first four phases were key, and are the focus of this study, they build a foundation for group work for the rest of the semester. As such, it was very much built like a curriculum integrated into the rest of the course that had grade value. For the diversity assignment to be successful it was motivated by a significant grade benefit to each student. In the opening class review of the syllabus the importance of the group work was heavily noted. Group assignments were indicated on the syllabus as being worth 20% of the grade. Students met with the same group once a week for about 40 minutes to an hour: one class out of three in a three times/week class, two-thirds of the time in one of the classes in a two times/week class, one-third of a class in a once/week class. They had the same group for the duration of the semester. The room itself was reconfigured into close-knit square or hexagonal clusters where there were moveable desks and chairs, or into a boardroom style where there were tables. It is important that a physical representation of the tribe that must be maintained throughout the semester to continue to forge the collaborative nature of the tribe. Indeed, changing the physical space affects the social relationships. There were six phases in the pedagogy procedure, and they functioned as curriculum for a portion of the course.

**Table 2. Pedagogy Procedure**

Phase	Timing	Activities	Outcomes
I. Initial grouping	Second week of the semester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Divide students into groups of four or five</li> <li>• Use an icebreaker affinity (birthday month, professional skill, neighborhood) *</li> <li>• Demonstrate how to separate desks/tables into collaborative work spaces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General commonality can be found immediately</li> <li>• Establish collegial cohort-based relationships</li> <li>• Signal collaborative work at the onset of the course</li> </ul>

Phase	Timing	Activities	Outcomes
2. Create tribe name	Third week of the semester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a name based on something they all have in common</li> <li>• Incorporate some element of affinity between all of them such as culture, popular tastes (gaming, fashion, sports), names (using their names in acronym), or other commonality.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adapt from a group where they do not know each other into a tribe where they have built the tribe identity based on affinities that are discovered through social interactions</li> <li>• Students move from commuter to community relationships</li> </ul>
3. Create tribe identity	Third through fifth week of the semester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design the tribe identity</li> <li>• Logo</li> <li>• Color scheme</li> <li>• Motto</li> <li>• Rationale for the tribe identity (this can be linked to course materials and textbook readings)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Design thinking</li> <li>• Group leadership</li> <li>• Bundling of individual tasks into a whole</li> </ul>
4. Presentation of tribe identity	Fifth week of the semester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete a digital upload of their materials and present a PowerPoint, Google, or Prezi</li> <li>• Present their digital upload to the rest of the class with every group member participating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative learning</li> <li>• Design thinking using creativity and invention</li> <li>• Telling stories</li> <li>• Public speaking</li> </ul>
5. Continuation of tribe identity	Continuing for the rest of the semester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to model and implement the tribal identity in other assignments</li> <li>• Ongoing accountability to the motto and rationale</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative learning</li> <li>• Design thinking continues</li> <li>• Growth in emotional connection with one another</li> </ul>

Phase	Timing	Activities	Outcomes
6. 360 Assessment of other group members	End of the semester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distribute a grading sheet for students to individually grade the work of their group</li> <li>• Students may note on the sheet of paper the outstanding work of some of their students</li> <li>• Students may note students who were not as active in the group as they should have been</li> <li>• Students may voice their positive or negative opinion of the group work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accountability</li> <li>• Critical analysis of semester's work</li> <li>• Evaluation techniques</li> </ul>

## Room Setup

Different ways to separate students into groups to create instant commonality:

1. Line them up single file in a big circle around the room based on birthday month January, February, March, etc. Then do a head count into fours or fives.
2. Have students initial the neighborhood they live in on a city wall map (drawn onto a whiteboard, for instance). Once all students have initialed the map, circle off initials in groups of four or five based on proximity of the initials on the map.
3. In different sections of the room, have students cluster based on class major and/or career goals.

## Data Collection

The data collection for this research project was qualitative. Prepositive sampling was used with the class rosters in two urban campuses (A and B [Table 1]) consisting predominantly of freshman and sophomore students. For the qualitative data, each group constructed an affinity-based tribe identity that included a group name, motto, rationale, colors, and a logo. The data collection process included each group creating a digital version of their identity in a PowerPoint along with a bitmap or JPEG of their logo. These were documented and collated to determine themes that emerged as noted in Table A1 and Table A2. The results were then analyzed to answer the research question and produce findings based on the social theories.

## Group Formation

Below are the types of groups that were formed and descriptions of the tribe identities completed alongside certain assignments that fit their core identity. Most found a macro identity (a general urban or personal trait) that would evolve into a more specific tribe identity with more detail. These identities made individuals have a personal investment in the group and more dedicated commitment to the task.

**Team Names Based on Professional Expertise (15 Groups × 6 Students) N = 90 Students.** Fifteen groups encompassing 90 students were formed based on professional affinity where they were to self-select their group based on career aspirations, expertise, or skill sets. This was useful in business classes where the defined skill sets were clear. The group assignments they completed are linked to their tribe identity as noted below. This created excellent experiential learning tasks where they used their initial professional affinity to work on assignments they all could relate to.

**Table 3.** Professional Skills Affinity Groups (15 Groups × 6 Students) N = 90 Students

Type	Affinity	Typical Tasks	Outcomes
Writers	Writing and journalistic skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alumni involvement assessment</li> <li>• Face-to-face contacts with the service sites</li> <li>• Phone interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create narrative stories for promotional purposes</li> <li>• Narrative reports for strategic planning purposes</li> </ul>
Techies	Website and technological aptitude and interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social media and website creation</li> <li>• Social medial assessment</li> <li>• Website redesign</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investigate various social media presences</li> <li>• Facebook, Kickstarter, LinkedIn, Crowdfunding, Go Fund Me campaigns and Instagram</li> <li>• Research how to incorporate social media into business projects</li> </ul>
Accountants	Finance and accounting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accounting and finance operations of clients and nonprofits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review creation of assessment rubrics for competitive analysis for different types of organizations</li> <li>• Complete a competitive analysis</li> </ul>

Type	Affinity	Typical Tasks	Outcomes
Predictors	Marketing tactics and strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Core motivation is sales and recruitment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investigate a plethora of methods of tactical marketing: technology, advertising, print, social media, publicity in trade magazines, community and ethnic news</li> <li>• Review and create videos for clients.</li> </ul>
Talkers	Publicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public perception and public profiles of the clients and nonprofits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generate creative promotional strategies for increasing the exposure of various types</li> <li>• Nonprofit organizations</li> <li>• General publicity</li> <li>• Niche markets</li> </ul>

**Team Names Based on Birthday Month.** Another affinity was using the student’s birthday month and/or season. It was the most widely used (38 groups formed) to separate students into initial affinities. To determine groups using birthday month, they were lined up single file around the classroom sequentially, starting and finishing with January and December at the front of the room. They were separated into groups of five or six students. Immediately students had a seasonal affinity, and some used this identity to establish even deeper tribe identity such as *Winterall* or *Springsters* (a play on all women being “sisters born in spring”). This method was used in large classes with significant academic and ethnic diversity where other affinities would be most difficult to determine quickly. However, many groups who were separated using birthdays discovered and used commonalities or identities as their final tribe identity.

**Table 4.** Team Names Based on Birthday Month (38 Groups × 6 Students)  
N = 228 Students

Month	Affinity	Imagery	Sample of Names
December January February	Winter Capricorn zodiac	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cold</li> <li>• Cool people</li> <li>• Ice</li> <li>• Blue, white, silver</li> </ul>	Winterall
March April	Spring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Garden themes</li> <li>• Growth</li> <li>• Earth care</li> <li>• Environmentalism</li> <li>• Rainbows</li> <li>• Green</li> </ul>	Springsters
May June	Warm season	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Warmth</li> </ul>	
July August	Summer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beach</li> <li>• Heat</li> <li>• Sun</li> <li>• Easy life</li> </ul>	Summer Solstice
September October November	Autumn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start fresh</li> <li>• Cool, fresh, and cozy</li> <li>• Orange, brown, red</li> <li>• Leaves, pumpkins, Halloween</li> </ul>	

**Team Names Based on Neighborhood Niche (18 Groups × 6 Students)**  
N = 108 Students. Eighteen groups were formed based on neighborhood niche affinity bringing together students based on where they lived. A map of New York City was projected onto the whiteboard showing various neighborhoods. Students individually came up and placed an X and an initial by the approximate location where they lived in the city. After the class completed this task, clusters of five students who were located nearest to one another were circled. The established macro identity relationships based on the neighborhood they lived in often became core to the group identity. Some groups expanded the discovery of affinities but since urban neighborhoods have such strong identities, this proved to be an excellent starting point for students to relate to one another. This was an ideal tribalism for classes where site-based assignments were necessary.

From this macro affinity, students focused their tribe identities, giving themselves team names based on unique neighborhood geography, common culture, residency, or other features in their neighborhood such as *Uptown Rising* or linking neighborhood location in the borough and ages of those in the group being 18 years old, *Central 18*. Several groups

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**Table 5. Creative Affinities Themes (38 Groups x 6 Students) N = 228 Students**

Creative Affinity Themes	Distinctives	No. of tribe identities	Learning Result
Beauty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Beauty products such as glasses, lashes, jewelry, feminine beauty</li> <li>Intense feeling of their feminine identity</li> <li>The importance of color usage (black and pastels were common)</li> </ul>	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women empowerment beyond external characteristics</li> <li>Beauty as more than appearances</li> <li>Influence of popular culture, advertising, and feminine empowerment</li> </ul>
Intelligence/ Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ambition to succeed in education</li> <li>Increase knowledge</li> <li>Succeed in grades</li> <li>Good classroom "fit"</li> </ul>	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Importance of academic excellence</li> </ul>
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cereal</li> <li>Sweets</li> <li>Coffee</li> <li>Ethnic food</li> <li>New York foodies</li> </ul>	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Food as a cultural activity</li> <li>Food as social inclusion</li> <li>Food taste as a unique neighborhood characteristic of individual preference</li> <li>Food as artistic</li> </ul>
Transit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commuting from various parts of the city to the college</li> <li>Commuting on the buses and trains is an urban necessity</li> </ul>	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Subway lines reflective of neighborhood geography within the metropolis</li> <li>Subway as public shared space</li> <li>Method for bringing people together</li> </ul>
Culture/ Ethnicity/ Nationality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>City of immigrants</li> <li>Most students have immigrant history going back no more than two generations</li> <li>Difference creates unity and commonalities</li> </ul>	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Culture, race, religion, and mores/folkways all combine to create unique and diverse identities</li> <li>Local views come from global perspectives</li> <li>Human beings have purpose together</li> </ul>

Philosophy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ideological concept</li> <li>Religious image</li> <li>Astrological sign</li> <li>Moral idea</li> </ul>	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People of difference can find common moral and ideological beliefs</li> </ul>
Entertainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Media</li> <li>Sports</li> <li>Comic books</li> <li>Movies</li> <li>Leisure activities</li> </ul>	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Popular culture is a way for people who don't know each other to get to know each other</li> <li>Entertainment is a fun way to find commonality</li> </ul>
Summer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Predetermined birthdays in the summer</li> <li>Preference for summer season even if not born in the summer</li> <li>Sun, surf, beaches, warmth, drinks, beach foods</li> </ul>	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summer provides positive feelings of warmth and fun</li> </ul>
Popular Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Media or pop-culture icons</li> <li>Brands</li> <li>Trends</li> <li>Concepts</li> <li>Beauty or entertainment pop culture</li> </ul>	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commonality can be found in pop-culture since it is not exclusive to any specific niche group</li> </ul>

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**continued from p. 83**

expanded this urban neighborhood affinity even further to ethnicity, race, or nationality prevalent in their neighborhoods. For instance, there were *Korebbean Soul* blending Korean and Caribbean members of the group together, *Fresh Islanders* blending students who were all born on different islands.

**Team Names Based on Class Major (6 Groups × 6 Students) N = 36 Students.** Using class majors as a tribe seems to be a natural and simple way to separate student groups as many already will know one another from other classes but this was the least used. This is a fast way to link students if there are enough students in specific majors to connect them but in interdisciplinary classes this is often not possible. Prior to using this method, a review of the class roster was necessary to ensure there were not several students who would be left out. In the case where there might be four or five students who did not link with others, their differences became an affinity, such as with the group *Divergent 5* who had no commonalities but saw themselves as “five points on a star” in coming together. Some samples of this type of affinity are: *City Healers* combining nursing students, *The Bakers* combining culinary arts students, or *Tech 9.0* bringing together computer science students. The helpful element for students here is that they were automatically aligned with others by virtue of having something obvious in common. Thus, their original macro tribe identity was clear, and as the creativity and the discovery of the group continued, they were able to morph in more micro identities that specifically defined their tribe from another that might have a similar major.

### **Creative Affinities**

In several cases, initial groups based on predetermined affinity adapted into other creative tribe identities that had little or nothing to do with the initial predetermined grouping. In some classes the initial affinity groupings served as a starting point for student groups to build a tribe based on a commonality of their choice as they saw fit. The process would take three to four weeks from the initial group coming together with a working name created by the second class, and then adapted over the next two to three weeks as they saw fit. This built various creative results. Common themes that emerged were based on various social elements that students brought from their personal lives into the task such as favorite food, makeup they used, games they played, country of origin, religious beliefs. Interestingly, the most common creative affinity was “diversity” as students recognized the immense cultural and ethnic differences that existed in New York City. This is important as the differences in the

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cosmopolitan urban social mosaic (Anderson, 2011) has potential for racial and ethnic tensions to emerge in the classroom. Qualitative themes from the tribal identities were organized into the following categories in the table below. The names of the groups listed in their categories are listed in Table A2.

Students were asked in qualitative reflective papers to describe the collaborative climate in group work. They found that the collaborative design of the assignments forced them to come together to produce results. This required a cohesive respect of different views while dividing tasks equally. The importance of appreciating diversity of work skills, culture, and social differences created a “getting along well with others” mentality and *modus operandi*. Though there was room for individual expression within the context of the tribe, one could not get a good grade on their own.

When asked how ideas of the tribe changed from the group activities, most of the students amassed an appreciation for work intersections, sharing ideas and tasks, and having “fun” getting to know one another, while being cohesive and structured. Many of the written responses noted that they did not realize the advantages of having a group structure—including shared leadership—until this project. Students believed that when each person had a role, it improved the quality of their work and environment of the group.

Most of the students were able to experience the coherent/cohesive collaborative climate in group work, but two students found the climate in group work tension-filled and were unable to work together due to lack of communication and work division. Similarly, some tribes built strong friend and peer relationships while a small minority remained a pure work cohort where the assignments were completed and intense affinities were not developed. Whether this was by choice or due to introvert personalities, lack of work ethic, or personality conflicts is unknown and worth further research. The researcher suspects variations of these existed both overtly and covertly in some of the groups. Though a collaborative design thinking based project such as this did break down social distance barriers, it was not able to alleviate what for some are deeply embedded cultural worldviews, personalities, and ways of life.

Working in a group project, it was essential not just to input the time, knowledge, ideas, and emotions but also take the output from the project and experience some new information from the collaboration with students and professor. As a result, students defined certain skills they discovered or honed. Some clusters were significant as follows. Nine

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students indicated they specifically learned from working in a group the “importance of communication” alongside “coming together with new ideas and experience.” Another seven students experienced the appreciation of “different thoughts” which is a significant outcome of diverse tribalism. Another seven students found that “sharing responsibilities is essential,” believing that each student is important and has structure and accountability to the assigned tasks. Three students learned the benefits of gaining or increasing certain traits: patience, self-confidence. A true outlier was that in a group self-analysis of who did and did not contribute to the tribe, only four people did not contribute. One group was quite frustrated with this in that two group members did not participate much at all.

The pedagogy helped the students develop the skills that are important in the professional world. In most cases collaborating with the group, the students gained familiarity with other students and felt more comfortable communicating with one another. This was a positive experience, especially to the shy and intimidated students. Also, the group work helped students appreciate their differences through the respect of each other’s thoughts, opinions, and ideas and how they benefit from that by finding commonalities with one another. This is highly important knowing the diversity that commuter students brought into the project.

## **Discussion**

The diversity project demonstrated some successes and failures. Positive collaboration moves a “group” to being a “tribe” as the students (Robyn, 2000) progress from insular to connections as friends and colleagues. The groups were formed with macro identities where everyone had at least some level of connection with the others capitalizing on the many variations of identities and choice urban students have (Swartz, 2005; Cooke, 2012). Important to this was how these micro identities were drawn from various urban commonalities, including pop-culture.

Initially, students came to college with predetermined tribal identities that had been formed over a long period of time in their neighborhood, ethnicity, family, and by attending religious services, going to school, making friends, and being influenced by media and popular culture that were “telling them who they were” (Logan, et al., 2008). Being commuter students, they generally have no preformed connection with the school (except perhaps a relative or friend who might have gone to the school). They do not know anyone on campus and some find it difficult to make direct connection. They have no group nor tribe on campus to call their

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own. In the classroom they are sorted into groups that are predetermined based on a scaffolding of birthday, neighborhood, class major, or professional skill. Aligned with a group of five or six students they have an instant affinity that form a macro identity. Students at this point had something to talk about to one another with no fear or anxiousness where one “fit” in a class or who to “get together with.” In the end, then, there was a new “character armor” (Logan et al., 2008) that the students could lean on as a tribe in the diversity of the college. In this process it saw the movement from a group with minimal social connection to a tribe (Robyn, 2000) that has not only an affinity based on specific and personal alliances but also sets up the potential for a continuing process, in that same tribe, of building deeper friendship. This will increase their commitment to the college and increases retention as the student is more likely to re-register in classes. It is, as Robyn (2000) stated, critical to its survival.

Ross (2018) states that “performing our work forces us to collaborate with people with whom, in our segregated enclaves, we normally don’t interact.” (Ross, p. 2018). The diversity project had several other important results. Students were engaged, empowered, and accountable with one another. The hands-on reality-based approach presented rich and memorable experiences that can be drawn from in the workplace after graduation. Becoming collaboration practitioners, the students became more aware of the diverse world they live in and how a different social identity relates to their own identity. Active student learning took place on both understanding the terms tribe and affinity, but also how they functioned practically. It was successful in that they designed and worked with one another to complete the various assignments while simultaneously finding relationships and concern for one another.

## **Limitations and Challenges**

There were challenges in developing and executing the project. Not all students were equally engaged. Introverts were often shy not speaking out in the group and less apt to contribute, though there was more possibility for interaction in the small group than in the larger classroom. The collaborative nature of this process in helping a group overcome stagnation is revealed in this student comment. “My group is a bit shy and quiet but whenever I come up with an idea, I can freely share it with them. They also try to input some work, I would not say I am working alone in the group.”

Combined grades were a factor to ensure accountability, making a good mix between empathy for one another and accountability to

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complete the project. This student concludes that, “I trust all my team members’ decisions and believe they are in the best interest of the group.” However, trust was not active all the time, or in every instance. From time to time, there were student complaints that someone was not contributing fully to the group, with the hardworking group members concerned that their own grade would go down because others were not doing as well.

In every class there is the possibility of lone wolves who, as one student noted, “hate working in groups.” This is especially challenging if there are extroverts or expressive personalities who want everyone to be friends with one another. For a student that is a lone wolf, it could be the worst possible class scenario. An effective counter to this was putting the lone wolves together through an affinity assignment. The difficult part in doing this at the beginning of the semester is often lone wolves don’t emerge until a few weeks into the semester.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to investigate how diversity-based group assignments (called the diversity project) were an effective pedagogy to incorporate into the real-world classroom, where students otherwise might not have learning relationships with one another. It integrated social theories of tribalism (Maffesoli, 1998; Logan, 2008), urban diversity (Appiah, 2007; Anderson, 2016), collaboration (Stark, 2009; Damon, Heinze, Meuter, & Chapman, 2017) and affinity (Brimlow & Heiss, 2015), into a classroom environment where urban commuter students would come with little connection or ambition to get to know others in the class, or to build social relationships. The project was an experiential learning pedagogy which utilized groups (Graeff, 1997; Easterling & Rudell, 1997; Ekrich & Voorhees, 2002; Laverie, Madhavaram, & McDonald, 2008) that aimed to help students build more intense affinity-based relationships. Creating tribes with distinct identities that were designed by the students working in a collective experience taught them how to learn from one another to overcome social distance (Bell & Daly, 1984; Gilchrist, 2009). By and large, their qualitative reflective paper responses indicated that most students accomplished the purpose that was set forth in the project and was practically demonstrated in a plethora of tribe identities. Thus, this novel approach to overcoming urban commuter student alienation and neighborhood-based tribalism is useful for community college education and retention.

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It has documented the qualitative process towards identifying tribalism through social collaboration through  $N = 77$  tribal groups including  $N = 397$  students. It shows how commuter students sorted into predetermined groups (professional expertise, neighborhood, birthdays, class major) adapted into tribes with more intimate and intentional relationships that carried on throughout the rest of the semester. This was reflected in the types of tribe identities they created that included contributions from each member. Students formed identities around eight general themes: beauty, intelligence, food, transit, philosophy, entertainment, summer, popular culture.

Is “tribalism” a hinderance or benefit to learning? Tribalism in the traditional sense can hinder a student from learning as they alienate themselves from others on the college campus, rejoining their traditional tribes once they get home. There is little integration or interaction with people of difference and collaboration that occur in the super diversity of the urban community college. Learning in the public space of the university requires that students have neo-tribes created from intimate relationships that are unique to their college experience. This does not negate the traditional tribe but enhances a broader social learning beyond one’s traditional tribe. Diversity training, though, has a unique role beyond a tribe that places a student’s learning outside of a tribe and into the public space as per Arendt. The student is able to expand their open preferences and affinities into civic life and learn to interact in a more integrated way with the super-diverse environment.

The interdisciplinary nature of this study showing a method to build strong tribal identity is a unique way to teach that is understandable and familiar to students when they think about it in context of the tribal-type relationships they have in their neighborhoods, at work, and going out with friends. While successful in interdisciplinary courses where the theories are linked to group learning outcomes, using it in more content-heavy courses such as mathematics may be a more difficult endeavor where seeking group grades is not important and there may not be time for intentional group assignments. Implementing a pedagogy such as this that students would be familiar with from their urban neighborhood (especially in the way personal identities are dominating social media), making them comfortable in the process through providing a scaffolding (predetermined group categories, tribe identity assignments) to structure the adaptation from group to tribe, and then linking it to the course material, increases student interest and learning. It builds educational empathy between the learning colleagues and the instructor and college as students find themselves included and not alienated or alone with limited

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or no social connections to others. This will increase student retention. Though this was not directly measured, it was seen anecdotally with the strong enrollment of students in subsequent classes that used the same pedagogy and where student tribes from the class would get involved as a team in voluntary extracurricular activities such as the business competition, the business academy, and special guest professional lectures. They would come to these activities because “they knew someone and they could go with” (student comment). The collective challenge proved to be a worthy exercise to overcome the cultural cloistering that takes place in an urban commuter campus as evidence of them sitting eating casually together in the lunchroom or the courtyard showed.

It has brought collaboration principles common to the business sector into the classroom, providing a valuable work skill that translates into a career. Shown to be successful in business and social science classes in the diverse environment in New York City, it is a valuable tool in bridging differences between students by motivating them to find commonalities with one another. Carrying this deeper in forming positive tribal identities using group assignments based on finding affinity with one another counteracts the tendency of commuter students to stay by themselves and not build intentional relationships on campus.

The diversity project had an emphasis on determining if in creating positive tribal identities it could provide, improve, or enhance one’s teamwork skills such as collaboration and networking. The result was mostly positive. It can be concluded, without certain limitations factored in, that students are able to work effectively in groups if given the structure, work partners, environment, and grade outcome. This positive neo-tribalism overcomes the insular nature of the urban student who lives off campus and has few, if any, initial friend relationships on campus. Though never replacing traditional tribes of family, neighborhood, ethnicity, or religion, students discover new affinities with one another that enhance the traditional ones.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** *Tribal identity chart*

Class topic	No. of classes	No. of groups	No. of students	Type of initial affinity used
Marketing and Business	3	15	75	professional expertise
Race and Ethnic Relations	2	10	51	birthday month
Social Research	2	10	51	neighborhood niche
Aging	1	5	26	birthday month
Introduction to Sociology	3	23	117	birthday month
The Family	1	3	15	birthday month
Urban Sociology	1	6	32	class major
Anthropology	1	8	40	neighborhood niche
<b>totals</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>391</b>	

**Table A2. Identity differentiation chart**

Type of affinity used to form groups in initial class	No. of classes	No. of groups	No. of students	Group identity name samples
Professional expertise	3	15	75	OMG (online marketing group) Fast Cash (accountants) Social Addicts (social media, website) The Investigators (analysts) The PR Pros (promotions) Team Apple (technology) Money Hornets (finance) Tech 9.0 (technology) Financial Nation (finance) Queen of Marketing (marketing) SJK Jaguar (marketing)
Neighborhood niche	3	18	83	18 Central (central part of Brooklyn) Uptown Rising (Bronx) J.A.R.F. (subway routes from South and East Brooklyn) Fresh Islanders (all from the West Indies) Korebban Soul (Korean and Caribbean students)
Birthday month	6	38	193	Winterall (winter birthdays) Springsters (all women with birthdays in spring “sisters of spring”) Leo Girls (zodiac)
Class major	1	5	26	City Healers (nursing) Helping Hands (nursing, human services) The Bakers (culinary arts)

**Table A3.** *Creative thinking by groups*

Other common affinities that were used in the identity-building process	Group name samples and brief explanations
Leisure interest: sports, shopping, video gaming, fashion, pets	<p>Blooming Lines (all-girl group mascara name brand)</p> <p>Gamers (video and sports gaming)</p> <p>Ballers (basketball, football, baseball)</p> <p>PhoMustra (name derived from abbreviations of photography, music, travel)</p> <p>iDogs (All liked their iPhones and dogs)</p> <p>The Looney Tunes (fans of Disney characters and all in the group are “weird”)</p> <p>The Cashiers (all were cashiers in retail)</p> <p>JAB Marketing Team “knockout marketing” (boxing)</p> <p>Lucky 8 Empire (gambling)</p> <p>Triple Sharks (finance and gambling)</p>
Educational motivation	<p>The Graduates (we will all graduate!)</p> <p>A Squad (everyone to get an A)</p> <p>Lions (learn, explore, conquer)</p>
Diversity: commonly used when there were students of various ethnic and religious identities	<p>DiverCity</p> <p>The Dream Rainbow (rainbow represents the differences in colors in the group)</p> <p>Peacemakers</p> <p>D.N.A. (abbreviation for Diverse Nationalities Affiliate)</p> <p>Opposite Connection (all from different nationalities finding connection)</p> <p>Multicultural Crew</p> <p>Student Mix (future leaders of the world)</p>

Other common affinities that were used in the identity-building process	Group name samples and brief explanations
Philosophical concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cross Achievers (all from Christian backgrounds)</li> <li>Open Minds (being open to all ideas)</li> <li>Blue Storm (all face storms and come out ahead)</li> <li>Express Yourself (all have a voice)</li> <li>Black Jaguars (social justice in the vein of the Black Panthers)</li> <li>L.A.P.L.D. (counterplay on LAPD [Los Angeles Police Dept.] acronym for Let All People Live Differently)</li> </ul>
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Bakers (culinary arts students who enjoyed baking)</li> <li>Hot Sauce (everyone liked hot food)</li> <li>Six Pieces of Pizza (pizza lovers)</li> </ul>

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