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CHARMED: UNPACKING A WITCHY PORTRAYAL OF STUDENTS' COLLEGE NAVIGATION EXPERIENCES

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This media review analyzes a contemporary reboot of Charmed (2018). Specifically, we illuminate the show's portrayal of student development, identity, and social and academic life through main character story arcs. While some aspects of the characters' experiences are well-intentioned, the writers often contradict themselves and misrepresent the social dynamics surrounding important issues of identity and self-exploration. Nevertheless, the nuances within season one can underscore opportunities for higher education practitioners to assist students in their college navigation and identity formation processes.

Media portrayals of college and university life are commonplace. In the 1990s, shows like *Saved by the Bell* and *Moesha* depicted the transition from high school to college. Contemporarily, shows like *Greek* and *Grown-ish* tackle today's college experience. One *Grown-ish* review (Williams & Martin, 2019) underscored how and why we should think about media portrayals of college and what they mean for students whose college introductions come via media. Since more than half of all U.S. college students identify as first-generation, and a growing number hold minoritized identities, examining media portrayals of college can help us understand how students with few(er) ties to higher education conceptualize campus environments (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020).

Upon watching a contemporary reboot of *Charmed* (2018), a show based upon a 1998 series of the same name and concept, we wanted to explore students' development, identity, and social and academic life representations. *Charmed*'s (2018) writers underscore the role of co-curricular spaces in helping students understand the fluidity and shifting of one's identity over time (Covington et al., 2018). While often poignant, there are shortcomings to these representations. Namely, the writers contradict themselves in their character framings and discourse around real-world social issues and dynamics. Nevertheless, there are several considerations for student affairs professionals, especially those in campus activities. In the following sections, we review the context of the series, including the cast and characters, and analyze their connections to contemporary theories and practices in student affairs, closing with implications.

CHARMED (2018): CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

The 2018 reboot of the supernatural television *Charmed* follows three (Afro)Latina sisters: Mel Vera (Melonie Diaz), Maggie Vera (Sarah Jeffery), and Macy Vaughn (Madeleine Mantock). The sisters, who discover they are witches destined to fulfill a prophecy to prevent the end of magic as their world knows it, are connected through their maternal lineage and shared campus context. The series begins with the tragic murder of their mother, Marisol Vera (Valerie Cruz). She served as Chair of the Women's Studies Department at Hilltowne University–a campus where the sisters serve as students and employees.

The sisters navigate emerging adulthood, identity development, belonging, and campus involvement throughout season one. The character diversity makes the series interesting to consider through a higher education lens. Maggie is enrolled as an undergraduate student, Mel is enrolled as a graduate student, and Macy serves as a professional in a university research lab. Not only do the characters differ in age and academic interests, but their on-campus involvement also adds a layer of diversity to their campus experiences.

STUDENT AFFAIRS CONNECTIONS

Season one explores several critical areas of student development: moral reasoning, gender and sexuality, and race. There is specific attention to how student involvement and identity development impact a student's sense of belonging and what that means for interpersonal growth. Below we discuss these depictions and their practical implications.

Greek Life Involvement and Belonging

Seeking a sense of belonging on campus, Maggie's character rushes the university's Kappa sorority. This storyline provides an in-depth view of her pledging experience, underscoring how the character can build a relational identity (Vignoles et al., 2011) and sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019; Weiss, 2021) by engaging with others on campus. The show reinforces many negative stereotypes often associated with Greek organizations, such as partying, drinking, rape culture, and cultural appropriation. With this, the writers missed a valuable opportunity to illustrate a more nuanced perspective of Greek Life. Student affairs professionals must often work against negative Greek Life depictions through training, recruitment, and positive association marketing. If the writers had demonstrated Greek Life's value in philanthropy and leadership development (Williams et al., 2022; Tull et al., 2018), viewers might recognize how Greek Life can be additive to the campus context.

Greek Life as a Moral Development Site

That said, viewers witness positives of Greek life through characters' struggles around morality and ethics within the rush process. Kolberg's (1981) theory of moral development is clearly displayed and especially contentious, such as when Maggie and Mel disagree about Greek Life's value. Maggie does not critique the stereotypes of Greek Life, remaining neutral as she pursues a Kappa bid while Mel rails against the problematic dynamics of the rush process.

Mel's inability to sway from her values illustrates stage six of Kohlberg's (1981) moral development theory, where people are guided by universal ethics. Mathes (2019) expands upon moral development theory to include social evolution. Mathes suggests that stage 6 includes a social justice mindset for all humanity. Mel is often shown viewing the world through a social justice lens, whereas Maggie's actions are consistent with the stage of interpersonally normative morality. Gaining the approval of others takes precedence over individual interests, and gaining Kappa acceptance serves as her greater priority (Kolberg, 1981). As Mathe's (2019) study would suggest, Maggie is less concerned with the greater good and focuses on remaining loyal to her friends in Kappa.

Students' Moral Development Through Activism

In contrast to Maggie, Mel prioritizes her passion for women's equality and seemingly ignores the value of social involvement beyond this plight. Mel frequently references problems of victim-blaming, the trivialization of sexual assault, and sexually explicit jokes. Mel's campus involvement is rooted in activism and manifests through her critiques of systemic issues surrounding rape culture and sexual consent. Specifically, she organizes a rally against the reinstatement of a professor accused of sexually assaulting a female student. These portrayals reflect recent increases in student activism over the past two decades in off-screen college life (Stewart & Quaye, 2019; Stewart & Williams, 2019).

With Mel, informal campus involvement through student activism is depicted as equally impactful as formal involvement through student organizations or Greek Life (Ardoin et al., In Press). This is important for contemporary student affairs practitioners to understand as students of color, working-class students, and students at the intersections of both, are more likely to hold informal leadership roles (Ardoin et al., In Press; Williams et al., 2022). Mel and Maggie's contrasting stories reflect student development theory. While Maggie is searching for a

sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019), Mel is challenged to find purpose (Maslow, 1954). Educating others about human rights is central to Mel's values of advocacy. Mel's ability to push against the status quo and challenge Greek culture in collegiate settings is similar to how student activism has erupted from student involvement opportunities that don't consider students' unique identities (Tillepaugh, 2019). Mel's values for her magical heritage and advocacy for others are the most salient parts of her identity; however, she struggles to find a sense of purpose aligning with these identities.

Mel's journey is best reflected in Baxter Magolda's (2001) phases of self-authorship and more recent research on authenticity (Jones, 2016; Jones, et al., 2012). She eventually realizes her academic pursuits are no longer desirable. Mel decides to create her own path by stepping away from her education to study magic and fight against evil full time. Her decision to trust her feelings and change her life's path reflects Magdola's (2001) internal foundation phase. Furthermore, Mel's decision to live authentically involves navigating a world that doesn't recognize her witch identity. Jones (2016) describes this journey towards authenticity as one that involves finding self while navigating away from others' perceptions.

The Student Involvement Tightrope

Depicted differences in needs, involvement, morality, and self-authorship align with current research on college students (Garvey et al., 2019). All students come to higher education with different needs and salient identities. *Charmed* underscores how a student's growth can be reflected in their moral decision-making and progress towards self-actualization and transcendence (Maslow, 1954). The intersections of the sisters' stories remind practitioners why they must listen to students to provide the resources and support that align with their individual values. While it is important to encourage formal and informal campus engagement practices, practitioners must consider the challenges such involvement presents (Williams et al., 2022). The characters face numerous obstacles around time management, self-discovery, and a sense of purpose, underscoring a need for comprehensive student support in campus activities and life.

For instance, Maggie struggles to balance Greek Life and academics. Campus activities professionals know this is a struggle for students, and viewers with similar struggles may feel more connected to the show and Maggie's experience. Maggie finds her balance with the help of others, reflecting the positive role of a robust support system in contemporary campus life (Garvey et al., 2019). Moreover, it speaks to the value of campus professionals creating space for student involvement that is capable of meeting students' varying availability, perceptions of their academic success, identities, and values.

GENDER & RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT:
A BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

The sisters' stories are often framed through racial identity. Specifically, Macy—the darker-skinned of the three sisters—draws on her personal understanding of identity to help Maggie and Mel develop their racial identity. In episode fifteen, Maggie and Macy attended a Kappa sorority Halloween party, where Maggie confronted Macy about the lack of feminine appeal in her Halloween costume. Macy uses this moment to tell Maggie about her own identity struggles growing up:

> I went to boarding school in Connecticut in a class of 100 kids. Two of us weren't white. In that environment, you had to solidify what type of minority you were before they decided for you. I was always the smart, serious one. I played that part for so long, I don't know how to be anyway else (Covington et al., 2018).

Macy understood herself and her identity because she was forced to navigate predominantly white learning environments early on.

Biracial students, particularly students with Black heritage like Macy, often develop an identity and way of being based on others' perceptions (Patton et al., 2016; King, 2008). Macy's story reveals her lack of agency in developing her identity. Collins' (2000) theory of Black Feminist Thought underscores the importance of self-definitions

and agency for Black women. Since Black women often face negative stereotypes that define what it means to be a Black woman, being able to define oneself holds immense value (Collins, 2000). To avoid negative labeling ascribed to many Black women, and given Macy's darker complexion, she decided to define herself solely as a successful student. Student affairs professionals must consider the impact of stereotypes and self-agency on the student experience when facilitating spaces for student engagement.

Maggie and Macy's conversation is an example of dichotomous dialogue within the show. This moment enabled Maggie to learn more about the impact of race and environment on Macy's identity, while Macy began to consider how creating an identity that is true to her rather than reflective of others can help her feel her most authentic self. This learning moment reflects the frustrations of many off-screen realities for students of color (Brown et al., 2021; Linder et al., 2019). How Macy's identity as the darker-skinned sister became a teachable moment for Maggie reflects another way Black people, and generally darker-skinned women, are forced to use their stories and traumas to teach others (Brown et al., 2021). Practitioners must, then, encourage dialogue across differences to expand the perspectives of students and encourage them to speak about complex social problems like race, identity, and privilege. However, the onus of those conversations must not require certain demographics of students to teach about realities like stereotyping and racism alone (Linder et al., 2019).

Anti-Blackness as Pervasive

As practitioner-scholars, we appreciate the show presenting difficult conversations around race and privilege to help viewers deepen their understanding. However, the series frequently fails to fully conceptualize the realities and complexities of race and racialization in the United States. For example, Maggie discovers that the father she grew up with was not her biological father and that she is, in fact, Afro-Latina like Macy, with whom she shares a father. Maggie feels conflicted because she did not grow up immersed in Black culture. This particular identity exploration storyline becomes increasingly problematic when Maggie asks Macy whether it is ethical for her to apply for a scholarship meant for Black students when she only recently learned of her Black heritage.

Using a scholarship to have Maggie contend with her identity is rooted in anti-Blackness, as there is a common misperception among white people and white audiences that Black students have greater access to scholarships due to their race. This false assumption exists despite only about 5% of all scholarships being earmarked for members of a specific racial group (Cabrera, 2018). Furthermore, the story burdens the sister who lacks the privilege of choosing whether she will accept her Black heritage while absolving a sister who can choose when and where her Black heritage enters (Brown et al., 2021). Practitioners must understand how these within-group problems of identity function because doing so will require them to better disaggregate student data and resources within the broader racial hierarchy (Brown et al., 2021).

Maggie decides not to apply for the scholarship, but she joins the Black Student Union to connect more with her racial heritage. This choice exemplifies how student organizations can aid students in developing a stronger sense of self and belonging. In turn, this sense of belonging promotes "positive and or/ prosocial outcomes such as engagement, achievement, wellbeing, happiness, and optimal functioning" (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 22). By portraying the belonging Maggie feels within the Black Student Union, *Charmed* (2018) illustrates the value of spaces that welcome a range of experiences and identities.

Dichotomist Identity Portrayals

The often-dichotomous presentation of race in the show is also evidenced in storylines about gender and conceptions of good versus evil. As both a lesbian and powerful advocate for others, Mel's character embodies numerous gender tropes, specifically the contemporary stereotype of lesbians as *social justice warriors*. Like many supernatural dramas, *Charmed* binarizes elements of good and evil by presenting good as light and bad or evil as darkness—a framing with cultural and social implications (Gray, 1995). As supposedly good witches, the Elders (the leaders of the magical world) wear white and inhabit bright, sunny rooms. The Sarcana (witches who oppose the Elders) dress in black clothing and dwell in dark rooms, signaling they are "bad."

An agent of the elders, the Whitelighter (a trainer and teacher) character also raises questions. Whitelighter Harry (played by Rupert Evans) is a cisgender-presenting, white, heterosexual male whose role is to support the sisters' development. While teachers of any race and gender can effectively foster growth and development, his positioning follows racialized TV tropes wherein women of color are presented as strong but desperately in need of a white savior to guide them (Aronson, 2017). The continuation of this trope furthers discursive (mis)perceptions audience members may hold about the sisters' agency and who/m can engage and lead on their own terms.

Another question at the nexus of race and gender in the show is the absence of definition of Macy and Maggie's father beyond his Blackness. Limiting him to his racial identity and role as a parent reinforces racialized and gendered stereotypes about Black men as absent fathers (Levs, 2015). While the story reveals that his absence is due to a curse placed on Macy, his absence still perpetuates harmful racial stereotypes and ignores an opportunity to highlight another Black character in the series.

While *Charmed* at times offers more than these binaries, the show's symbolism is important for higher education professionals. These depictions require practitioners to consider: What kinds of implicit and explicit bias might they display towards students? How does the pervasive nature of anti-Blackness and sexism impact which students feel most comfortable and confident in campus spaces? Does art imitate life, or does life imitate art when it comes to binarizing people? Researchers have written at length about how identity binaries, specifically for Black and brown people, can have catastrophic impacts on how students engage within the campus environment. Accordingly, practitioners must make these realities part of ongoing inclusion efforts.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Charmed (2018) offers several implications for practice. While there are disconnects between a supernatural television drama and daily practice, *Charmed* offers an understanding of how the writers perceived and decided to portray the college context. There are instances where highly publicized issues from contemporary, real-life campuses are accurately depicted (e.g., rape culture and student activism). Still, these stories are not the sum of the college context. Practitioners can tell a more holistic story of the experiences and issues students navigate in the college environment.

Since student involvement influences student development, *Charmed* requires practitioners to consider how students understand the college involvement landscape and imagine the campus environment. Campus climate surveys can help practitioners understand how students view their campuses and involvement opportunities. Data can inform how the campus needs to evolve to improve campus climate and engagement for students of varying identities.

Furthermore, an awareness of how media socializes new generations of students can help practitioners better support students in expectation setting, campus navigation, and activity selection (Williams & Martin, 2019). Such considerations will help practitioners facilitate greater alignment between students' engagement and their overall goals, perspectives, and ideals. Students entering campuses are older than traditional-aged students, come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and represent minoritized identities (Alexander, 2020; Levine & Van Pelt, 2021). Practitioners should offer resources and involvement opportunities that speak to this new generation of students. If college is one of the first places students can deeply interact across race, class, and gender differences, then practitioners can support them in their understandings of self and connection to others (Ardoin et al., In Press). There is value in helping students expect conflict, like awareness of differences. Practitioners can give students tools, such as the practice of intergroup dialogue, to interact with diverse environments (Adams et al., 2007).

Students' campus connections and sense of belonging are deeply intertwined with (in)formal student activities engagement. By weaving real-life campus issues into its supernatural plotlines, *Charmed* (2018) approaches difficult topics and conveys their significance to the audience. While there are missed opportunities to nuance student activities and space to critique racial stereotypes, the show underscores part of the broader societal conversations around what college is and means. Accordingly, the show is impactful both for students and practitioners.

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