FITCHBURG YOUR STORY: Finding Your Flock - Coaen Blankenship

["Saxifrage" choral music plays, performed by the Fitchburg State University Choirs]

Prof. Kisha Tracy (intro): Welcome to the Fitchburg State University Perseverantia Podcast network. This is the Fitchburg Your Story series in which Fitchburg State students tell the stories that make our city and university unique.

["Saxifrage" fades out]

Coean Blankenship: Have you ever thought about what cultural heritage really means to you? Is it something fixed, handed down from the past, or is it something you discover, shape, and even create throughout your life? Today, we're exploring how understanding our heritage, whether it connects us to the past or helps us forge new identities, is a deeply personal journey, especially during the transformative college years.

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Coean Blankenship (cont'd): In this episode, Finding Your Flock, we'll be looking specifically at Fitchburg and Fitchburg State University, a place often seen as underrepresented because of its smaller size and location, but full of potential for building community and finding yourself. We'll touch on ideas from researchers looking at belonging, purpose, and cultural identity in higher education to understand this journey better. We'll be integrating academic research and an interview with Communications Media faculty member Dr. Kyle Moody. A major theme in which I am passionate about is navigating the college landscape and straying away from transitory experiences, which I will mention later on.

Fitchburg is a city of around 41,500 people in Worcester County with a demographically diverse population with recent estimates showing 57 to 64 % white residents with a large Hispanic or Latino population of about 30 % and 7 % being black or African American residents. The median household income is around 70,000, but the city also faces economic challenges with a poverty rate of around 15.5%. Additionally, Fitchburg State University has a total enrollment of around 6,000 students split approximately 50 % undergraduate and 50 % graduate students, and 60 % of the undergraduate student body is made up of commuter students. So we have this unique setting, a diverse city with an industrial past and ongoing economic challenges, and a regional public university serving many local, diverse, and commuting students. This context makes the individual journey of finding connection and identity even more important. Often we think about heritage as set in stone, but research suggests it's more complex and fluid.

The book *Cultural Heritage in a Changing World*, edited by Karol Borowiecki and others, explains that cultural heritage isn't just monuments or artifacts; it's also living traditions, customs, and values. And importantly, this book notes that this heritage is constantly being reinterpreted and reshaped by society and by us as individuals. For some, heritage isn't

Coean Blankenship (cont'd): something passively received, it's something actively discovered or even constructed based on what resonates personally.

Dr. Moody frames his academic work passing down knowledge from scholars and theorists as part of his own heritage.

Prof. Kyle Moody: I see myself as an academic and a media scholar whose job is built off of working with media and then teaching that to other people. So the works of academic texts, scholars, theorists are then passed down upon others through the work that I do.

Coean Blankenship: Our sense of identity is deeply tied to this heritage, often through our connection to place. Karol Borowiecki and the book's contributors emphasize this link, adding that even place identities are forged and reforged, becoming resources we draw on to understand who we are. This complexity means that navigating our cultural identity, especially when entering a new environment like college, can be challenging. Samuel Museus ·examines this through his article, "How Culturally Engaged in Campus Environments Influence Sense of Belonging in College," and discusses cultural identity theory, which explains that we develop a sense of belonging by connecting with cultural heritage.

When our home culture differs significantly from the campus culture, it can lead to feelings of alienation unless we find ways to bridge that gap. When talking about the importance of cultural heritage, Dr. Moody says this…

Prof. Kyle Moody: It's hard to say how important it is, but I know we carry it with ourselves through our actions. So…it…this is not me always explicitly saying, "As a Southern man, I come in here and want to tell you about this." But I do think that it's difficult to extricate yourself from your past. You are who you are. And so, even if you don't know, you exhibit cultural heritage.

Coean Blankenship: As Dr. Moody notes, it's difficult to extricate yourself from your past, even if you don't consciously think about it. You exhibit your cultural heritage through your actions. Navigating towards college being used as exploration in one's life and honing in on the identity aspect, college years are famously a time of exploration. It's more than just classes, it's a space to figure out who you are and what matters to you.

Heather Mellon's work on engaging purpose in college highlights how college can be crucial for developing purpose or a sense of meaningful direction. She explains it's an environment rich with new perspectives, people, and chances to develop skills that help define not just a career, but a life. Additionally, Ida Salusky, in an article about the formation and role of social belonging, emphasizes that interacting with diverse peers in college is a key learning experience. It pushes us to reflect on our own backgrounds and beliefs. She also found that for many students, especially those from minoritized backgrounds,

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Coean Blankenship (cont'd): College might be the first real opportunity to consciously explore specific parts of their identity, like their race or ethnicity, perhaps connecting with roots they hadn't fully engaged with before. FSU offers many clubs and activities that foster many interests such as Writing Club, Minecraft Club, and something as simple as a game night in the Falcon Hub that can engage you with the community and bring you new insights. Feeling like you belong is an important aspect of identity. Research by Samuel Museus and Ida Salusky links a strong sense of belonging directly to students' intention to stay in school and graduate.

What fosters this belonging? Samuel Museus identifies culturally engaging campus environments. This means campuses where students feel culturally familiar, where their background is validated and seen as valuable. Being part of FSU can change you. Dr. Moody describes feeling part of a community of scholars and connected to a larger mission of engaging with the city through his work on and off campus. This connection provides a strong driver for daily actions. Through putting yourself in positions around campus to engage with the community, positive outcomes are likely.

Something as small as attending a conference or listening to a speaker on campus may help you develop belonging. Engaging with campus may not be the easiest thing to do. Within a smaller college and one that incorporates a large community population, these struggles align with Salusky's research. Salusky found practical challenges like needing to work long hours, commuting, or having significant family responsibilities can limit opportunities for social connection. Added to this are experiences of subtle or overt discrimination or microaggression that can make it harder to form trusting relationships with peers from different backgrounds.

In my experience, the smaller college environment with a lot of commuters sometimes feels like there is no point in engaging in some experiences. Dr. Moody points out external challenges facing the city itself, like the housing shortage and need for better schools. These wider community issues can indirectly impact the student experience and sense of stability. With the housing shortage and other external factors, it may be hard to find positivity and engagement on campus.

Having the skills to overlook some of these things or even trying to help where you can is the important part to find your path and develop belonging. This is why, as Edith Salusky's study found, connecting with peers who share similar identities is so valuable. Affinity groups, cultural centers, these counter spaces provide essential validation, comfort, and support, helping students build the confidence needed to navigate the wider campus.

FSU fosters a supportive community for minority, first-generation, low-income, and LGBTQIA-plus students through its TRIO programs offering individualized academic and financial aid support, along with a center for diversity and inclusiveness, cultivating a welcoming

Coean Blankenship (cont'd): environment with cultural programming and housing multicultural clubs and various student organizations that prioritize underrepresented groups. So cultural heritage isn't just something we inherit, it's something we actively engage with and shape. College, despite its challenges, offers a unique space for this.

The experiences you have, the communities you join, the knowledge you gain, these all contribute to how your cultural identity evolves, as suggested in Karol Borowiecki's work regarding the dynamic nature of heritage. You are actively shaping what your heritage will mean to you and for your future. When asking whether his cultural heritage has changed while being a part of Fitchburg State, Dr. Moody confirms…

Prof. Kyle Moody: Yeah, absolutely. Okay. I've learned how to say bubbler and not hate myself for it, but I think it's also changed. I feel like I'm part of a community of scholars. I have good friends that are here. We hang out. Our kids hang out together. More importantly, I feel like through the work I do here at the university at Fitchburg Access Television, working with different clients, I feel like I'm connected to this mission of getting people to see the city and SEE it and be a part of it and live it knowing that we have a role to play in keeping a community together. And feeling that motivation is a pretty strong driver for my daily actions.

Coean Blankenship: Finding a sense of purpose in college, as Heather Mellon suggests, helps anchor this journey. It moves the experience beyond just getting a degree or having temporary fun towards building a foundation for a meaningful life. This involves finding your place, not just physically, but culturally and socially. And this is where community engagement becomes vital. We encourage you, whether you're an FSU student or a Fitchburg resident, to actively engage. Explore the communities available on campus and in the city. These experiences are invaluable. They can help solidify your identity, broaden your perspectives and help you step away a better, more well-rounded individual.

A common view is that college is just a temporary phase, a stepping stone. For schools like Fitchburg State, sometimes seen as smaller and more commuter focused, this perspective can feel dismissive. Dr. Moody expresses a desire for something more.

Prof. Kyle Moody: There are so many issues that face the city from a housing shortage to the need for better public schools, and then even just being able to navigate. I think that something that's missing is a point of pride. What is the thing that brings us all together? If it's just work, that's work, and I'm glad for it, and I'm really lucky to do the work that I do. But I think that the cultural heritage that we need to feel is a level of interest, of care, of depth that we have. I want to feel like there's actual roots here as opposed to…for students, if they come here, they just say, well, I was here for three, four years and I got my degree and I moved on. That's not what I

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Prof. Kyle Moody (cont'd): want at all. I want people to come back and feel like they have some connection here. Like they mattered because all students do and they want to come back.

Coean Blankenship: Dr. Moody asks, what is the missing point of pride that creates those lasting roots? For me, a first generation college student and commuter, it is easy to go to class and then go home or avoid campus engagement and to treat these years as transitory to just get the degree or get to the end.

But the reality is that active engagement will lead to wanting more and feeling less like I'm in a transitory period of my life. I have to want to be part of the community. This awareness leads to better experiences and outcomes.

With college, ultimately you are paying for a service and getting the most out of that service means embracing the full experience, academic, social, and personal. Our journey through heritage, identity, and belonging shows us these concepts are dynamic, deeply personal, and significantly shaped by our environments, especially places like Fitchburg and Fitchburg State. Finding your place requires exploration, community, and sometimes overcoming challenges. As Dr. Moody suggested, heritage is often shown through our actions. Fostering a stronger sense of pride and connection here, both in the city and at the university, requires a collective effort. It means creating and supporting spaces where all cultures are validated, where students feel they matter, and where everyone feels part of a shared mission. So get involved, explore your own heritage, learn about others, join a club, attend a city event, engage in discussions, build the community you want to be a part of. Because shaping our heritage and identity isn't just an individual task, it's a collective one. Let's work together to build those roots.

[energetic beat fades in as transition]

Coean Blankenship (cont'd): Go Falcons!

[energetic beat fades out]

[Perseverantia Network theme fades in]

Nikki McToggart: You've been listening to Perseverantia, the Fitchburg State Podcast Network.

[Perseverantia Network theme fades out]