

The Dilemma of Dual Identity: Conflict Between Cultural Capital and Identity Among Professional Undergraduate Students in Higher Education

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Abstract: Based on theories of cultural capital and identity, this paper explores the identity conflicts encountered by vocational undergraduate students within the college context. These students simultaneously possess the dual identity attributes of “undergraduate” and “vocational student,” which can easily lead to internal conflict. The study finds that such conflicts are mainly manifested in three aspects: first, insufficiently clear self-positioning; second, greater susceptibility to embarrassment and stress in interpersonal interactions; and third, a higher likelihood of encountering institutional recognition barriers and restricted access to opportunities. The primary reasons include three factors: an imbalance in cultural capital, the negative stigma associated with vocational education, and a lack of institutional-level recognition. To alleviate these problems, a multifaceted approach is necessary. This can involve improving teaching and training methods, refining social support systems, and guiding students to more actively enhance their capabilities and self-confidence. The ultimate goal is to foster a more supportive campus and institutional environment, thereby helping vocational undergraduate students establish a more stable sense of identity.

Keywords: Vocational Undergraduate Education; Dual Identity; Cultural Capital; Identity; Vocational Education

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1.Introduction

Since China launched the pilot program for undergraduate vocational education in 2019, vocational undergraduate education has developed rapidly and become an important part of the modern vocational education system. By 2025, there will be 87 vocational undergraduate colleges nationwide, and enrollment is also increasing, with the goal of cultivating high-level technical and skilled talents. However, in this round of reform, vocational undergraduate students have encountered a distinct “dual identity” dilemma: on the one hand, they are “undergraduates” in higher education; on the other hand, they are often perceived as “vocational students” with a vocational education background. The overlap of these two identities not only leads to differences in resources and competencies but may also trigger deeper issues of identity.

In the university environment, vocational undergraduate students often feel a sense of not belonging due to differences in their theoretical foundations, learning methods, and academic habits compared to their peers. Simultaneously, they must contend with external prejudice against vocational education. This combination of internal discomfort and external pressure leads to

difficulties in three key areas: self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and fair evaluation within institutional systems. Studies further indicate that some vocational undergraduate students experience self-doubt and competence anxiety in the face of educational digital transformation. They also report a blurring of career aspirations and a lack of adequate emotional support. Compounded by the reality of “stratification” within the education system, it becomes even more challenging for them to cross this invisible threshold.

From the perspectives of cultural capital theory and identity theory, this paper analyzes the manifestations, causes, and potential solutions to the dual-identity dilemma faced by vocational undergraduate students. Through this research, we aim to provide a foundation for more targeted psychological support and campus integration initiatives, thereby helping these students establish a more positive and stable professional identity and achieve better personal development.

2.Theoretical Framework: An Interwoven Perspective of Cultural Capital and Identity

2.1 Cultural Capital Theory and Its Manifestation in the Educational Field

Bourdieu conceptualized cultural capital as an individual’s capacity to possess and utilize specific cultural resources, which are not equally accessible to everyone. Cultural capital primarily exists in three forms: embodied state (cultural competence), objectified state (cultural goods), and institutionalized state (academic qualifications). Within the educational field, cultural capital influences individuals’ social positions and determines who holds greater symbolic authority or power to define legitimate knowledge.^{[1][2]}

1) Cultural ability:

Embodied cultural capital (or cultural competence), which includes language expression, ways of thinking, and behavioral habits, refers to long-formed dispositions that individuals “carry with them.” Traditional higher education places greater emphasis on theoretical foundations, academic thinking, and scientific research capabilities—areas in which vocational undergraduate students are often less proficient, thus making them more prone to experiencing a sense of discomfort or inadequacy.

2) Cultural products:

Objectified cultural capital (or cultural goods), such as academic certificates, published theses, and competition awards, constitutes relatively “visible” forms of attainment. While vocational undergraduate students may accumulate considerable achievements in practical skills, these accomplishments are often accorded less value within a predominantly academic evaluation framework.

3) Cultural system:

Institutionalized cultural capital refers to the process through which cultural capital gains formal “legitimacy” and security via institutional arrangements, such as degree certifications and professional qualifications. As the academic credentials and social recognition associated with vocational undergraduate education are still being established, its institutionalized cultural capital remains relatively weak.

The theory of cultural capital helps reveal the implicit hierarchies and disparities present within the university environment. Differences in the cultural capital possessed by vocational undergraduate students can significantly affect their sense of integration in the academic community and the formation of their identity.^[3]

2.2 Identity Theory and Its Explanatory Power for Vocational Undergraduate Students

Identity theory focuses on how individuals define themselves through their relationships with social groups, encompassing dimensions such as personal identity, group identity, organizational identity, and social identity. For vocational undergraduate students, identity crises stem from the dilemma of defining “who I am”—whether to emphasize their identity as “undergraduate students” or their attribute as “vocational trainees.”^[4]

Social Identity Theory further posits that individuals construct their identity through the processes of social categorization, social comparison, and positive distinctiveness.^{[5][6]} In their academic environment, vocational undergraduate (or non-four-year) students often unconsciously compare themselves with their counterparts in traditional four-year programs. Prevailing societal stereotypes about vocational education may lead such comparisons to yield unfavorable results, thereby hindering the formation of a positive self-concept.^[7] When vocational undergraduate education is perceived as a product of the Matthew

Effect, students' self-esteem and group identity face significant challenges.

2.3 An Interwoven Perspective: The Superimposed Effects of the Dual Dilemma

Cultural capital and identity are not separate entities; they interact and mutually reinforce each other. Greater disparities in cultural capital increase the likelihood of identity confusion. The more unstable a student's identity, the harder it becomes for them to focus on their studies and engage fully, thereby hindering further accumulation of cultural capital. This superposition of issues places vocational undergraduate students in a more complex predicament within the university environment.

From the perspective of their "mutual influence," this paper analyzes the identity dilemma faced by vocational undergraduate students and seeks to propose more effective solutions.

3. The Multidimensional Manifestation of Dual-Identity Tension

The dual-identity dilemma faced by vocational undergraduate students is not a one-dimensional phenomenon; rather, it permeates all aspects of their academic, personal, and social lives. Specifically, this tension manifests in three dimensions: self-perception, social interaction, and institutional recognition.

3.1 Ambiguity and Conflict in Self-Perception

In terms of self-awareness, many vocational undergraduate students experience unclear identity and self-doubt regarding their value. As vocational undergraduate education is a relatively new development within higher education, these students often struggle to find a stable position between the identities of "undergraduate" and "vocational trainee."

Research indicates that some students in jointly-run vocational programs face several related issues: they do not fully identify with their student identity and lack a sense of belonging to the institution; they feel ambivalent about their intended role and have unclear personal ideals and goals; and they are uncertain about the future, resulting in confused career planning. Many students repeatedly ask themselves, "What kind of person do I want to become?"—whether someone following an academic path oriented toward theory, or someone pursuing a technical path focused on application. This internal conflict further complicates their learning objectives and career decision-making.^[8]

3.2 Identity Embarrassment and Stigma Coping in Social Interactions

Socially, vocational undergraduate students often face external doubts and prejudices. In important scenarios such as job hunting, postgraduate entrance examinations, and civil service exams, their identity as "vocational undergraduates" is easily called into question.

What is more common yet less obvious is the differential treatment they encounter in daily interactions. For example, they may feel uneasy when asked about their school during family gatherings, or perceive social stratification based on academic qualifications at alumni reunions. Although such incidents might seem insignificant in isolation, these accumulated experiences constantly remind students that they are "different from others." Consequently, some students choose to conceal their educational background, which further hinders the development of a positive self-identity.

3.3 Barriers in Institutional Accreditation and Social Evaluation Systems

In terms of institutional accreditation, vocational undergraduate students face numerous systemic barriers. Although policies stipulate that vocational undergraduate degrees are equivalent to ordinary academic undergraduate degrees, implementation in practice often reveals many obstacles that hinder this parity.

1) Professional Codes in Public Examinations: The major titles and codes for many vocational undergraduate programs differ from those of ordinary academic programs. This discrepancy creates barriers for students applying for civil service positions or public institution recruitment exams. For instance, some students have encountered situations where their major, such as "Software Engineering Technology" — which includes the word "Technology" and carries a different code compared to the ordinary undergraduate "Software Engineering" — leads to repeated rejections during provincial civil service exam registration.

2) Degree Recognition and Thresholds for Further Education: The recognition of vocational undergraduate degrees remains unstable when students pursue further studies, such as postgraduate entrance exams or studying abroad. Some universities exercise greater caution in admitting vocational undergraduate students to master's programs, often due to concerns about their academic preparedness.

3) Inertia in Social Perception: The societal bias of “valuing academic education over vocational training” remains deeply ingrained. Many still regard vocational education as a “second-choice” or less prestigious path. Such entrenched perceptions are difficult to change and place vocational undergraduate students at a disadvantage in the context of social stratification. Consequently, it becomes more challenging for them to build confidence in their educational identity.

Table 1: Multidimensional Manifestations of Identity Dilemmas Among Vocational Undergraduate Students

Dimension	Key Manifestations	Impacts
Self-Perception	Vague Identity Positioning, Self-Worth Doubt, Role Conflict	Lack of Learning Motivation, Career Planning Confusion
Social Interaction	Identity Embarrassment, Stigma Coping, Experience of Microaggressions	Social Avoidance, Identity Concealment
Institutional Accreditation	Barriers in Civil Service/Public Institution Exams, Uncertainty in Degree Recognition, Social Evaluation Bias	Limited Development Pathways, Legitimacy Crisis of Identity

These three levels of tension are intertwined, collectively shaping the complex dual-identity dilemma faced by vocational undergraduate students. Only by fully understanding these manifestations can we propose targeted solutions.

4. The Source of Conflict: Dual Pressure from Cultural Capital Disparities and External Labeling

The identity conflict among vocational undergraduate students is not an accidental phenomenon, but a product of multiple factors. It is rooted in the triple pressures of cultural capital disparity, external labeling, and inadequate institutional recognition.

4.1 Imbalance of Cultural Capital and Field Adaptation Dilemma

There exists a set of “game rules” and evaluation criteria in the educational environment, which are predominantly established by more advantaged groups. For vocational undergraduate students, the cultural capital imbalance they encounter primarily manifests in the following ways.

First, in terms of cultural competency:

Many vocational undergraduates come from a background that emphasizes practical learning. Their strengths lie in applied abilities and technical skills, rather than in traditional academic training. However, as higher education institutions have long prioritized academic culture, the prevailing evaluation system tends to be theory- and research-oriented. This makes it difficult for their practical strengths to be recognized. As one teacher noted, “Some students may not excel in lectures, but they have strong hands-on capabilities. If you let them do it, they can master the task quickly.” Yet, in an environment that values publishing papers and academic research, such practical competence often fails to become a “recognized advantage.”

Second, in terms of cultural products:

Vocational undergraduates tend to produce more practical outcomes—such as technical innovations and project portfolios—than traditional academic outputs like research papers and patents. Within the existing evaluation framework, these practical achievements are frequently overlooked. For instance, a highly skilled student may be disadvantaged in award evaluations simply due to a lack of published papers.

Third, in terms of the cultural-institutional dimension:

The credential recognition and qualification system for vocational undergraduate education is still under development, resulting in relatively weak institutional-level cultural capital. Although policies have legally affirmed the status of vocational undergraduates, invisible barriers and institutional gaps persist in practical scenarios such as corporate recruitment and civil service examinations. As one vocational undergraduate student remarked, “It has been six years since the first pilot programs were launched, but there is still a gap between policy enactment and its full implementation.”

The imbalance in these forms of cultural capital makes it easier for vocational undergraduates to feel marginalised within the academic environment and harder for them to find a clear position and developmental trajectory.

4.2 The Stigma of Vocational Education: Labeling and Social Comparison Pressure

The long-standing social perception of vocational education as an “inferior” alternative is another key source of the identity crisis among vocational undergraduate students. This stigma is further reinforced through social comparison.

Social identity theory suggests that individuals derive self-esteem from intergroup comparisons. When the group to which they belong is stigmatized, individuals experience identity threat. Vocational undergraduates often unconsciously compare themselves with their peers in traditional academic programs, typically using criteria such as academic performance and postgraduate admission rates—metrics that often place them at a disadvantage. Research indicates that a persistent social atmosphere, which glorifies elite education while disparaging vocational training, has eroded students’ willingness to even consider vocational undergraduate education as a viable option.^[9]

More seriously, this stigma has been internalized, leading to self-denial among students. Some students bluntly state, “For jobs with high technical requirements, it seems to require tremendous effort to achieve anything. It’s better to avoid making a ‘wrong first step’.” Such negative self-perception reflects a utilitarian, confused, and helpless mindset among students. This trend raises concerns about the prospects of vocational undergraduate education, whose goal is to cultivate high-skilled, occupation-oriented professionals.

4.3 Insufficient Industry-Education Integration and Lack of Institutional Recognition

In theory, vocational undergraduate education should closely integrate theoretical coursework with practical training. In reality, however, many institutions suffer from insufficient integration between industry and education, which directly undermines students’ institutional identification.

On the one hand, the teaching staff at many vocational colleges face clear challenges. Some instructors come from traditional academic backgrounds and emphasize theory, yet lack familiarity with hands-on teaching. Others possess strong technical skills and practical experience, but struggle to systematize that experience into structured curricular content. As one student remarked, it is difficult for faculty at their school to deliver truly integrated “theory + training” instruction: “Many senior teachers are not familiar with simulation software or practical training modules,” while newly hired skilled masters find it hard to “explain theory while conducting training.”

On the other hand, school-enterprise cooperation often remains superficial and fails to achieve in-depth collaboration. Some students noted that the internships arranged by their schools merely involve tasks like “tightening screws” on factory assembly lines—work that anyone could do. They simply cannot see how the knowledge they have acquired applies to such positions. This kind of shallow practical experience makes it difficult for students to develop a sense of professional value. Instead, it may lead people to equate “vocation” with “low-end labor,” thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes.

Table 2: Analysis of the Causes of Professional Undergraduate Students’ Identity Conflict

Category of Causes	Manifestations	Identity Impact
Imbalance of Cultural Capital	Inadequate Academic Competence, Undervaluation of Cultural Products, Weak Institutional Accreditation	Sense of Field Incongruity, Self-Worth Doubt
Stigmatization of Vocational Education	Societal Devaluation of Vocational Education, Internalized Self-Denial, Unfavorable Social Comparison	Identity Threat, Impaired Self-Esteem
Inadequate Integration Between Industry and Education	Contradictions in Faculty Structure, Superficial School-Enterprise Cooperation, Shallow Practical Teaching	Reduced Professional Value Recognition, Negative Learning Experience

In summary, the identity conflict among vocational undergraduate students stems from multiple factors. Only by thoroughly analyzing these root causes can we identify effective solutions to address the issue.

5. Discussion

To establish a more stable identity, vocational undergraduate students require broader social support and a more favorable public opinion environment. At the policy level, the requirement for “equal status” for vocational undergraduates should be further specified, with more effective implementation. The media should also take the initiative to highlight the characteristics and value of vocational undergraduate programs, thereby reducing the prejudice of “overemphasizing academic education

while undervaluing vocational training”. By reporting more on the successful experiences and professional achievements of vocational undergraduates, the public can better recognize their role in technological advancement, innovation, and industrial upgrading. Such positive examples deserve wider dissemination, which would not only enhance the social image of vocational undergraduates but also provide students with a more supportive environment for identity formation.

In addition, it is crucial to establish more in-depth cooperation with employers to build stable and sustained school-enterprise partnerships. Vocational colleges and universities can develop long-term collaborations with leading enterprises in the industry, jointly formulate training standards, design curricula, and establish training bases. Enterprises should also be involved earlier in the teaching process, integrating their equipment, technical standards, and work methods into education. Such in-depth cooperation enhances the quality of talent cultivation, facilitates students’ access to suitable employment, and ultimately strengthens their sense of professional identity.

6. Conclusion

The dual identity dilemma faced by vocational undergraduate students is a common phenomenon during the current educational transformation in China. This dilemma manifests itself in three aspects: an unclear self-perception, susceptibility to external influences in social interactions, and frequent obstacles in obtaining institutional certification. Its causes are multifaceted, encompassing disparities in cultural capital, negative external labeling, and insufficient integration between industry and education.

To address this challenge, a multi-faceted approach is needed, including the improvement of teaching and training methods, as well as the enhancement of social support and public opinion environments. It is insufficient to merely expect students to rely on their own efforts; moreover, allowing them to cope by merely “feigning acceptance” of their situation is not a viable solution.

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