POST-SECONDARY PROGRAMS, POLICIES AND PARTNERSHIPS: THE CASE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY OF NEWFOUNDLAND

Sonja Knutson has been employed at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) since 1999. She holds a B.Ed. in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) from Concordia University (1999) and an M.Ed. in Post-Secondary Education from Memorial University (2001). She is currently the manager of the International Student Advising Office and Acting Director of the International Center. She has overseen the growth and development of services and programs for the international student population over the past decade.

ABSTRACT

The increase in international student enrolment at Memorial University of Newfoundland, accompanied by overall demographic decline in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, has allowed for the creation of collaborative and innovative programs aimed at improving international student retention post-graduation. This article will highlight the cooperative efforts of the province and the university as well as current future research directions for the stakeholders.

In recent years, the internationalization of universities and colleges in Canada has gained increasing commitment from the leadership of post-secondary institutions, along with provincial and federal government. There are many factors that have contributed to this trend; most commonly referenced in public policy goals is the competition for talent and for skilled labour (Guhr, 2010). While university international strategies most frequently cite educational goals as the rationale for internationalization (Association of Universities and Colleges Canada, 2008), national and provincial concerns are more focused on demographic decline and a growing knowledge-based economy (Human Resources, Labour and Employment, 2007). It is interesting to note that while the motivations may differ, Canada has seen an unprecedented (as compared to most other western nations) convergence of strategic objectives between post-secondary institutions and government policy (McBride, 2010). At the federal level, policy changes on work permits and immigration streams are allowing for greater numbers of international students to remain in Canada post-graduation (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2010). In Newfoundland and Labrador, the provincial government has adapted both the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) and the publicly funded Medical Care Program (MCP) eligibility requirements to improve retention rates of new international graduates from the provinces' post-secondary institutions. Furthermore, through the existing campus student services for international students, the provincial government is supporting inclusion and integration programs and services. Programs designed specifically for international students are engaging stakeholders inside and outside of the campus.

The International Student Advising Office of Memorial University of Newfoundland has collaborated on a number of initiatives with the Office of Immigration and Multiculturalism of the Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Human Resources, Labour and Employment. These initiatives are aimed at facilitating increased rates of international student retention post-graduation. In 2007, the provincial immigration strategy identified international students as a pool of potential immigrants, given their high level of language skills, Canadian academic credentials, familiarity with the local community and local work experience (Human Resources, Labour and Employment, 2007). Memorial University is also increasing its capacity to attract foreign students, showing steady growth through the past several years (Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2009) to the current 2010-11 enrolments of more than 1400 international students (International Student Advising Office, 2010).

TARGETED UNIVERSITY SUPPORT PROGRAMS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Increasing numbers of international students have benefited from programs at Memorial University of Newfoundland and the PNP to stay in the province post-graduation. While in the first year of the PNP International Graduate Category, only six new graduates applied for permanent residency, the number has increased to over 100, when taking spouses and children of new graduates into account (Islam, 2010; Sullivan, 2009). The province has funded programs for international students at both Memorial University and the College of the North Atlantic that facilitate the settlement and integration of students and their families, acknowledging that students accompanied by their spouse and children will be better able to focus on their studies and research knowing that the well-being of their families is important to the community. The Family Integration Support Program at Memorial serves over 80 families of international students, many of whom have young children (International Student Advising Office, 2010). The recognition that the province can play a significant liaison role between employers and highly skilled international students at Memorial has allowed for the successful launch of several programs that target specific needs of international students and potential employers to ease the transition from student to worker. Programs facilitating the job search and placement of international students are increasing the awareness of employers of this pool of well-educated young people. In 2008, the province launched a Multiculturalism policy and made grants available to the International Student Advising Office for events and activities related to the policy mandate to "support multicultural initiatives in their community, to share cross-cultural experiences and to foster partnerships that increase understanding and knowledge of one another" (Human Resources, Labour and Employment, 2008). This collaborative approach to meeting the needs of newcomers is a model that has undoubtedly contributed to the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, leading the country in the match between immigrant training and career placement (Zietsma, 2010).

ADDRESSING INTERCULTURAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY

Besides the initiatives and support of the province, Memorial University itself has taken the challenges faced by newcomers in terms of integration and settlement seriously. There is recognition that newly arriving international students face many challenges as they attempt to navigate the cultural transition to our campus, community and province. Thus, in addition to the wide variety of international student support programs and services addressing the pragmatic issues of arrival – housing, immigration, health insurance and health care, income tax filing, part-time jobs and cross-cultural understanding – Memorial has invested in developing the intercultural skills of their staff and student leaders through both in-house sessions and support of off-site professional development. A significant number of staff and domestic students have taken part in sessions designed to increase awareness of cross-cultural issues and improve their communication skills across cultures. The province has been a willing and supportive partner in the delivery of sessions aimed at improving awareness of intercultural issues, especially when activities can be promoted within the local community. The university also partners as a host to provincial information sessions on-campus for students that are interested in permanent residency. The programs at Memorial for international student settlement and integration, as well as the sessions designed to improve cross-cultural skills of staff and students consistently receive positive evaluation by participants (Whelan, 2010).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Student Affairs and Services at Memorial University remains committed to moving beyond the evaluation of our programs and services on a simple satisfaction scale. Several research questions which the International Student Advising Office intends to address in the future revolve around two main questions. The first question addresses whether our investment in international student services and programs has led to the improvement of social capital outcomes for our students. The second question looks at the broader issue of the campus community by examining whether our domestic and international students have actually improved their intercultural competencies through their interactions, and are thus better positioned to have the necessary skills to contribute to the provincial prosperity agenda. The results of research into the first question should help inform our current relationship to the provincial government immigration strategy objectives, since the link between social capital and social inclusion within a community is well-substantiated (Caidi & Allard, 2005; Duncan, 2003). The second question is directly tied to the objectives of student outcomes. If post-secondary institutions are tasked with preparing students for success in an increasingly mobile and globalized context, then presumably, the place for students to gain the necessary intercultural skills for future career demands will be through both the curricular and extra-curricular activities available to them through the years they spend acquiring the academic credentials that will launch their careers.

The International Student Advising office is currently working on the selection of measurement scales by which we can move forward in evaluating the areas we have targeted. Clark (2009) argues for using the social inclusion indicators outlined by the Laidlaw Foundation (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003), and is currently developing a set of evaluation items based on the indicators which can be used to inform our understanding of the process of new international student integration to the campus. Even though it would be expected that a campus would yield great opportunity for social capital acquisition, initial literature reviews of research on international student experiences reveal ongoing issues around language barriers, classroom barriers (cultural assumptions), organizational bias, forming social networks and job readiness (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2009).

Recent research into the intercultural competence of students prior to and following the exposure to other cultures shows that in the absence of meaningful engagement, little if any improvement in intercultural competence is possible (Vande Berg, 2010). The Intercultural Development Inventory has been selected as a measurement tool, and a pilot project is underway to evaluate the pre-program and post-program intercultural development of students involved in a new mentorship program on the Memorial University campus. The expectation is that students involved in meaningful opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue will be able to simply move from a framework of ethno-centrism to one of ethno-relativism, and therefore have a greater capacity for effective intercultural interactions.

The ongoing review of the literature and research available on both social capital acquisition and intercultural development will inform our own contextualized evaluation of our programs and services to both international and domestic populations on our campus. Our purpose is to better inform our goals and objectives within the wider context of the institution and the province and ensure a match between the programs we undertake and in which we engage our stakeholders.

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