CREATING WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Evidence suggests that the mere presence of international students on Canadian campuses is not sufficient for meaningful cross-cultural interaction to occur. For the full benefits of internationalization to be realized, a shared sense of responsibility for creating a welcoming and inclusive community needs to be combined with action on the part of individuals and institutions. The entire range of university policies and practices should reflect awareness of the importance of promoting interaction between international and domestic students. Institutions play an important role in creating an environment that fosters inclusiveness and promotes cross-cultural interaction.

As Canadian universities continue to actively pursue internationalization, it is important to consider the responsibility that institutions have and the roles that university communities can play in creating welcoming and inclusive environments. University documents frequently refer to the advantages of internationalization and acknowledge the mutual benefits to be gained through interaction between international and domestic students. Such interaction carries the potential to broaden students' outlook, resulting in greater intercultural understanding. But questions remain regarding how well international students are being integrated into campus life at Canadian universities and the degree to which the benefits of internationalization are being fully realized.

A key component of internationalization strategies has been to actively recruit and admit large numbers of international students. Based on figures from Statistics Canada, the number of international students has grown over the past decade. Furthermore, this group is increasingly recognized as an important source of new immigrants to Canada, which means that international students can no longer be considered entirely as temporary sojourners.

But even as the number of international students has been increasing, research from several countries has documented the lack of integration of international students and indicated that these students frequently experience loneliness (e.g., Sawir et al. 2007), a decline in well-being (e.g., Cemalcilar and Falbo 2008), and a greater sense of alienation than domestic students (e.g., Schram and Lauver 1988). Factors that may partially account for this situation include leaving behind family and friends, limited English language proficiency, and the need for cultural adjustment. While it is important to consider the role that these and other factors play in the experiences of international students, it is essential not to overlook factors external to the international student. For example, as cultural and linguistic insiders, domestic students can either facilitate or hinder international students' attempts at participation. Furthermore, the inherently joint nature of social interaction means that it cannot be fully understood if only the perspective of the international student is taken into account. It is also important to consider other perspectives and the role of the university in encouraging and supporting cross-cultural interaction.

In an effort to better understand the social inclusion and exclusion of international students, we carried out a study to investigate interaction between domestic and international students, taking into account the structural context in which this interaction occurs. The research objective was to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of informal social interactions between international undergraduate university students who are

non-native speakers of English and domestic undergraduates who are native speakers of English. We considered the perspectives of both international and domestic students and how their perspectives interrelate. Importantly, we also took into account the role of social structures and other contextual factors that shape cross-cultural interactions on university campuses.

The research was conducted at two Canadian universities, one in Ontario and one in Alberta. We interviewed 60 international and domestic students, as well as 20 university faculty and staff members. The interview approach allowed us to gather in-depth information about participants' experiences and perspectives and to gain insight into how the level of interpersonal interaction is affected by institutional structures.

SEPARATE CIRCLES

Overall, our findings suggest that the mere presence of international students at Canadian universities is often not enough, in and of itself, to lead to cross-cultural interaction that could result in the kinds of benefits espoused in university discourse on internationalization. We found evidence that some international students experience loneliness even well beyond their initial months on campus. We also found that even when international and domestic students live in close proximity, they often exist in "separate circles".

It is commonly pointed out that international students form groups with other international students from the same cultural background. For example, the controversial "Too Asian" article in the November 10, 2010 issue of Maclean's magazine referred to cultural and linguistic separation on Canadian campuses. This form of separation is often attributed to choice, without giving adequate attention to the degree to which these separate groups might be the result of gate-keeping practices. Our research suggests that in some instances, the formation of separate circles may have as much to do with Canadian students as with international students. For example, one international student that we interviewed stated, "They say that international students have a circle and don't interact with others, but I say that Canadian students have circles too." Comments from domestic students offered evidence of the role that Canadian students play in the formation of separate circles on university campuses. For example, one domestic student stated, "Because I am Canadian and most of my friends are Canadian too, their friends are Canadian as well. So in that case I don't really get the chance to meet international students. So that's really why the opportunity never really presents itself because you know we're sort of in these closed circles."

Thus, both domestic and international students expressed awareness of these separate circles, and in some cases they also indicated a desire to transcend them. They shared strategies for attaining cross-cultural interaction that began with self reflection, empathy and assuming responsibility to initiate interaction. They pointed out that their efforts at interaction were facilitated by friendly gestures, patience, and suspending judgement. While these steps seem to emphasize action at the individual level, the findings also suggest that awareness and action are influenced by the broader structural and institutional context. For example, universities can play an important role in shaping attitudes toward cross-cultural understanding and inclusiveness. In our study, participants noted that universities can model cross-cultural understanding and respect through policy direction promoting the integration of international students and practices such as observing cultural and religious celebrations and traditions. Universities also play a key role in creating an environment that brings international and domestic students together in a way that fosters engagement and cross-cultural interaction.

ACCESSING THE INFORMAL THROUGH THE FORMAL

Formal institutional structures including programs, events, and practices can provide opportunities for students to access informal interaction and create possibilities for relationships to develop. Both international and domestic students described the difficulty of meeting the other and initiating interaction in the absence of formal opportunities created by the university. Some of the formal avenues to informal interaction that were identified included international student support programs (e.g., peer mentoring, discussion groups, excursions to Canadian landmarks), student housing that promotes integration, policy direction regarding the integration of international students in courses (e.g., through course assignments and class activities), physical spaces (e.g., residence, cafeteria, library, student centre), and overall student programming (e.g., orientation events, clubs and organizations, volunteer opportunities). For example, international student support programs offer important opportunities for international and domestic student social interaction, particularly in instances where domestic students play a central role in program delivery, as with peer mentors and orientation activities. We found that both international and domestic students described the value of these opportunities for bringing students together. The activities served as an initial step, offering possibilities for ongoing contact and, in some cases, the development of friendships. Furthermore, once such interactions between international and domestic students occur, they serve as opportunities to meet other

students through social networks. This points to the important role that students play as gateways for each other.

Despite the benefits of student support programs, some challenges remain to be addressed. Language and cultural differences, such as attitudes related to the use of alcohol, can perpetuate the situation of separate circles even in contexts that aim to bring international and domestic students together. Furthermore, we heard from several students that there are not enough domestic students who are willing to serve as peer mentors and program volunteers.

University classrooms are another formal venue that can play a role in fostering interaction between international and domestic students. Shared classes can provide an important source of commonality for the development of relationships. For example, one domestic student stated, "If you know that the person is taking the same class as you, then you have something to discuss." Interaction initiated in classes has the potential to develop further outside of class, although we found evidence that this potential might not be fully realized without effort on the part of the institution. For example, an international student described how in-class interaction does not always extend beyond the classroom by stating that her interaction with domestic students was "just a little bit just within class, because after that everyone just go home or be with friends." To maximize interaction both in and out of class, specific actions are required such as organizing classroom activities and course assignments in ways that bring students together. Group work, group assignments, and small class sizes were all mentioned as means of helping to facilitate interaction. Furthermore, one faculty member recommended that there should be policy direction from university administration regarding internationalization within classrooms and developing intercultural awareness and training for members of university communities.

Implications of these findings are that universities should continue to offer programs, activities and events that specifically aim to create opportunities for international and domestic students to come together and engage with one another. Moreover, a greater number of domestic students should be encouraged to become involved in international student programming. However, attention also needs to be devoted to ensuring that all aspects of campus life are welcoming and inclusive. This could be accomplished in part through education and awareness-raising related to transcending cultural and linguistic differences. Including these elements across the entire range of campus programs, activities and events might help to encourage more cross-cultural interaction and create more movement between the separate circles that continue to exist in universities.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY IN WORKING TOWARD INCLUSIVE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITIES

Educational settings such as universities are important contexts in which relationships and friendships are formed; and yet, students do not always benefit from the full range of possibilities for social interaction, given that social contact between international and domestic students can be limited. Consequently, the potential benefits of internationalization remain partially unrealized. In seeking to address barriers to more inclusive university communities, it is important to understand that the responsibility for creating welcoming environments must be shared among community members as well as institutions. Simple explanations that serve to absolve oneself of any responsibility, such as "international students prefer to associate with other international students who share their language and culture," may be partially based on observable campus realities, but they do not address the root causes or reasons for the situation. Nor do such explanations acknowledge the part that Canadians, as the host community, play in creating institutions and structures that do not always foster or facilitate greater cross-cultural interaction and inclusiveness. While groups of co-nationals certainly do develop and often play an important role of providing familiarity, comfort and support, notions that limited interaction can be explained simply as a choice do not adequately explain why many of the international students that we interviewed reported a desire for greater interaction with Canadians.

Related to these rationalizations based on choice is an overemphasis on an individual's ability to exercise full control over his or her level of social inclusion. Such an emphasis risks blaming people for their own marginalization. As Sin and Yan point out: "… the notion of inclusion becomes problematic, particularly if the transformative agenda only focuses on enhancing the individual's own capacity instead of tackling the structural barriers that confine individuals" (2003, 30). Similarly, using the concept of social inclusion without a critical lens can "lead us to a focus on socially excluded groups rather than socially excluding structures and practices" (Labonte 2004, 253). Instead, it is essential to use the concept of inclusive and welcoming communities in a way that brings attention to the structural root causes of the social exclusion of international students, while respecting their diversity and choices regarding levels of participation. A structural approach is essential given that interpersonal interactions occur within, and are influenced by, the broader institutional context. Such an approach can bring into focus the important role that institutions play in establishing a standpoint of inclusiveness and creating opportunities for cross-cultural interaction to take place.

Universities, as well as individual members of university communities, express inclusive ideals but experience challenges in living up to the ideals. Creating welcoming communities "requires investments and action to bring about the conditions of inclusion. We know that inclusion does not "just happen" (Freiler 2001, 2). The experiences of many of the international and domestic students who contributed to our study reveal that proximity is not enough to bring about inclusion. Rather, welcoming communities are formed when a collective sense of responsibility is combined with action that is shared among individuals and institutions.

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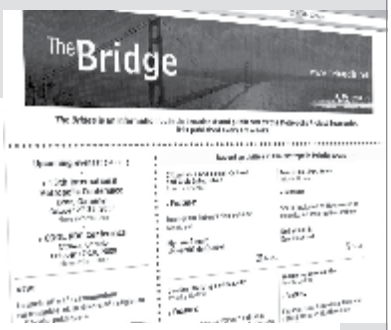

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