

Foreign Students and Tolerance – I

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Neo-racism toward international students, such as the recent incidents at Michigan State and Ohio State Universities, highlights the challenges higher education leaders face in creating a positive campus climate for international students. Many international students live in a parallel social world, shut off from friendships with American peers. When a neo-racist act occurs, international students – and all students, except for a few – look to campus administrators and faculty for ethical academic leadership. Even if no major incident has occurred, campus leaders are responsible for creating a positive climate for the burgeoning number of international students arriving at their institutions.

While there is no "one size fits all" approach, we offer for consideration three "educational encounters" that make a positive difference in the lives of international students. Our recommendations are primarily based on analysis of the results from the Global Perspective Inventory (GPI), a multi-university survey that examines the relationship between educational experiences and global learning of over 70,000 U.S. undergraduates, including almost 3,000 international students. We are both involved in this research project. Drawing on key findings from our research, we propose three educational encounters that campus leaders may consider to create more inclusive campus climates for international students.

1. Educational encounters that involve discussion and dialogue enhance international students' positive perceptions of campus climate. Of the 12 high-impact educational practices we have examined, courses that include opportunities for dialogue are the most strongly associated with positive perceptions of the campus climate for international students. International students who have taken courses that involve dialogue among students with different backgrounds and beliefs report a greater sense of connection to their host institution, higher grade-point-averages, and are more likely to form relationships with cross-cultural peers outside the classroom.

Comprehensive internationalization efforts must consider how "encounters with difference that make a difference" may become more pervasive in the classroom. We know a significant number of students -- both domestic and international students -- never meaningfully engage in cross-cultural dialogue in the classroom. Such encounters evoke cognitive dissonance; alter existing ideas, views, and sense of self; and encourage new forms of interaction with others who are different from oneself. They invite students to interact with others across cultural, social, economic, and religious divides; and to reflect, share, and build on their experiences, as a means of dealing with cognitive dissonance. All kinds of courses may incorporate dialogue. For example, an advanced-level business course where students discuss diverse perspectives on leadership can be just as meaningful for international students as a discussion-based course addressing issues of race, ethnicity, gender, class, or religion. Group work involving student-to-student discussion outside the classroom may not have the same benefits as facilitated classroom

dialogue, however. Out-of-class group projects, if not well designed, can exacerbate language and cultural issues between students, leaving international students feeling more isolated and dejected.

2. Educational encounters that provide a secure base of support for cross-cultural exploration enhance international students' positive perceptions of campus climate.

International students' perceptions of campus climate do not solely result from their interactions with American students; their perceptions also reflect whether they connect with peers who share their cultural heritage. International students who engage in activities reflecting their cultural background view their campus more positively and report an enhanced sense of well-being. Additionally, friendships with other international students play a critical role in staving off depression, improving academic performance, and increasing student satisfaction with their college experience. A strong social network of international student peers provides a secure base to begin exploring friendships with American students; international students tap into each other's social networks to make new American and international friends. International students who regularly participate in organizations reflecting their own culture are more likely to participate in activities reflecting another culture, as well as to feel both challenged and supported by their college or university.

3. Educational encounters that involve partnerships among international student offices, counseling centers, and other student support services enhance international students' positive perceptions of campus climate.

Mental health issues, such as depression, loneliness, and anxiety, are well-documented in research on international students. Needless to say, discriminatory experiences adversely affect international students' perceptions of their campus. According to our research, international students who experience discrimination are two-thirds less likely to discuss feelings and share problems with peers. Faculty, peer mentors, and international educators, therefore, must be the first line of support for observing if an international student appears distressed. Communication and coordination between leaders in international student offices, counseling centers, faculty development offices, and student support services is essential for comprehensive support. Partnering units can work to connect existing efforts by co-sponsoring programs, offering faculty development opportunities, and organizing campus-wide conversations on diversity issues. Partnering not only better-serves international students, it invites educators across campus to learn how they might adapt their existing services to become more responsive to international students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Time For Action

Some may argue that cash-strapped colleges and universities have rushed into international student recruitment, driven by tuition dollars, without fully considering its implications for student support services, residence life, or undergraduate education. Regardless of the various motivations for expanding international student enrollment, this much is clear: international recruitment must be matched with real institutional change. If the rise in the number of

international students studying in the U.S. is to strengthen teaching and learning, leaders must identify the types of educational experiences that contribute to international students' positive perceptions of their campus' climate and their learning and development.

Many campus leaders want to act, yet have little research to guide conversations about the kinds of interventions that will make a meaningful difference. We believe focusing on experiences that contribute to international students' positive perceptions of their campuses offers one entry point for catalyzing conversations about comprehensive internationalization. The growing presence of international students, while introducing new challenges, also creates new opportunities to strengthen higher education's academic mission, where international students contribute to the learning and development of all students.