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Cross-Cultural Engagement: Is it happening?

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Abstract

This study examines the cross-cultural engagement between international and domestic undergraduate engineering students at a private, Midwestern university. It uncovers the situations in which international and domestic students are engaging and explores the components which help or hinder the cross-cultural interaction between these students. This study informs higher education professionals endeavoring to provide undergraduate engineering students a greater ability to function in a global world. Data was collected through the use of one-on-one interviews with current international and domestic undergraduate engineering students. The study revealed that while international and domestic engineering students are engaging, the frequency remains low and there continues to be barriers to this engagement which should be addressed.

Research Questions

1. How do domestic and international engineering students engage on campus?
2. What are the components that affect the engagement of international and domestic engineering students?

Method

Maximum variation, a purposeful sampling method, was used to choose participants for this research. Upon the recommendations of key informants within the School of Engineering, the researcher emailed select students to request participation in this study. A heterogeneous group consisting of nine undergraduate engineering students, two females (one international and one domestic) and seven males (three international and four domestic), were recruited to participate. Qualitative phenomenological research was conducted using one-on-one interviews with the intent of understanding the participants' experiences in engagement with their cross-cultural peers.

Demographics of Interview Participants

Name	Gender	Class Status	Age	Admission
Alan	Male	Senior	22	International
Blake	Male	Senior	23	Domestic
Cheryl	Female	Junior	21	International
Aaron	Male	Senior	21	Domestic
John	Male	Senior	23	Domestic
Alex	Male	Senior	27	International
Zach	Male	Sophomore	20	International
Robert	Male	Junior	21	Domestic
Paige	Female	Junior	21	Domestic

Findings

Types of Engagement

Academic



"My field [of study] is one that is heavily populated with international students . . . so I would say in class. [I] interact with them every day." (Blake)

"Usually classrooms, [but] my favorite is group projects." (Alan)

"This semester I had an international student in my materials lab group." (Paige)

Residential



"I got assigned a random roommate from China." (John)

"I live in the Global Learning and Living Community [where international and domestic students] engage in discussion." (Zach)

"My first experience . . . was in the dorm freshman year. I had a . . . room in Marycrest." (Cheryl)

Social

"I make pancakes on Saturday morning so I have invited international students over for that." (Aaron)

"We would hang out on weekends. Doing sports most of the time." (Alex)



Work

"The big one for me is working in the library. There are a number [of students] who are international [working in my department]." (Robert)

"I . . . worked in catering so I worked with a couple of international students." (Paige)



Components that Affect Engagement

Language



"They know your English is not that good so they don't trust you in writing papers and reports." (Zach)

"Personally, I believe [language] is why people try and shy away from being in a group with an international student." (Robert)

"Students who struggle with the English language are a lot harder to communicate with." (Blake)

Culture



"[I] have all these pre-judgements . . . but I get surprised every time I talk with someone who is [from a different culture]." (Cheryl)

"People instinctively feel more comfortable around people like them." (Robert)

"From the perspective of my religion, I can't drink. It is a little bit harder to go to a party where everyone is drinking." (Alan)

Effort/Benefit

"If you get involved [in the Global Learning and Living Community] it is [a] pretty good [experience]." (Zach)

"I am not willing to go out of my way [to socially interact with international students]." (John)

Students feel a risk of the unknown if they choose to work on a diverse team. "I don't know how it will turn out [so] I will go the easy route." (Aaron)



Disinterest

"If we hang out [with domestic students] it is a coincidence." (Alex)

"International and domestic students kind of stick to themselves." (Aaron)

There was academic disinterest on the part of the international student as "[he didn't] show up for class . . . or do the work." (John)



Conclusion

- Engagement is occurring between international and domestic students at minimal levels. More frequently, in involuntary versus voluntary situations.
- There are barriers to cross-cultural engagement which must be addressed to in order to increase the occurrence of engagement between international and domestic students.

Implications

- Better understanding the dynamics of cross-cultural interaction enables higher education professionals to help students grow in their cultural competency.
- Higher education professionals need to continue to seek out ways to encourage interaction between domestic and international students.
- Further research focusing on specific populations or a public institution could be conducted to see if similar findings are revealed.

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