



Top Tips for Supporting Incoming International Students: Campus Climate and Identity

As international educators, how do we work with inbound international & exchange students to facilitate meaningful global exchanges across the full range of diverse perspectives represented on our campuses in the US? To this end, we must consider the intersection of diversity & inclusion in global education in our efforts to support incoming international students in their transition to our US campuses. Utilizing an intersectional approach, these tips provide a starting point for facilitation of conversations around campus climate and US perceptions related to systematically marginalized social identities

1

Social Identities Around the World: Social identity refers to the idea that part of our sense of who we are as individuals comes from the groups we identify with -- religious community, organizations, ethnic and language groups, etc. There is also a dynamic between the identities an individual identifies as belonging to and the identities that others ascribe to the individual. International students, like others navigating more than one culture, can experience incongruence between these two. When students leave their country to study in another, it might be the first time that the ascribed identity they experience is being viewed as from the country ("that's the student from Ghana") and then the generalizations, stereotypes, information, and misinformation that others have about the country become part of the interplay in potentially every encounter. In addition, key aspects of the student's social identities may feel invisible while others are uncharacteristically highlighted (such as skin color). This is all further complicated by the fact that those ascribing it don't always have experience navigating the interactions successfully and respectfully. As educators, how are we preparing students for a potential shift in social identities when they come to the United States?

- What conversation do we have about identity and the challenges of being viewed from a new social identity (such as only viewed as from your country, or only as an international student)?
- What happens when the social identity also changes the dynamic from having been in the majority to in the minority (see #3 below)?
- What challenges (changing sense of self) and potential benefits might also be experienced in the change of social identity?
- What strategies do fellow international students advise in navigating changing social identities?

Resources:

Punteney, Katherine (2017). "Social Psychology in Intercultural Contexts." In *Learning Across Cultures: Locally and Globally, Third Edition*, eds. Barbara Kappler Mikk and Inge Ellen Steglitz. Washington, D.C.: NAFSA: Association of International Educators, pp. 63-86.

Chang, Shanton & Catherine Gomes (2017). "International Student Identity and the Digital Environment." In *Learning Across Cultures: Locally and Globally, Third Edition*, eds. Barbara Kappler Mikk and Inge Ellen Steglitz. Washington, D.C.: NAFSA: Association of International Educators, pp. 39-62.

2

Social Identities in the US: Membership in social identity groups can and do instill conscious and unconscious meaning in social interactions whether it be a student club meeting or first-year orientation event. How do you and/or your campus create safe opportunities for international students to explore and discuss identity issues? We encourage educators to provide vocabulary for international students around the role that social identity plays in a US context, and more specifically at their host institution. Equipping international students with this language can be the first step in providing them a voice on the college campus; allowing the celebration of their narratives, as well as, the voicing of their oppressions.

Prior to sharing this language with students, educators must first have these conversations within departments, as well as, on an institutional level. Our social identities are also at play in how we show up in the workplace and with students. Attached to this tips sheet are definitions to the “BIG 8” social identities and other terminology to start a conversation with colleagues and students. Not every campus will frame this conversation the same nor will every campus use the same language. Instead, view the vocabulary attached as an introduction to complicating your understanding of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, age, ability, and religion.

3

Majority vs Minority Culture: Once in the United States, It is important for international students to understand the context surrounding perceptions associated with different social identities. The intersectionality of certain identities can warrant both favorable and unfavorable experiences in the context of US society, one that is constantly grappling with a culture that is influenced by ethnocentric ideology. While it appears that the United States has collectively advanced its understanding of social identities, particularly within higher education, like any country with such growing diversity, rethinking our understanding of social identities is a cultural experience in itself.

While in the US, international students may be surprised by the perceived identities ascribed to them. This is not an experience unique to international students. US students experience similar dynamics while living in the US and abroad. International Students, too, will have opportunities to ascribe identities to people they interact with based on the way they are socialized. As international students become socialized and immersed in US culture, it's important to acknowledge that the United States is made up of states that have various cultural differences and identities that might influence how others perceive them. Ascribed social identities and experiences shared by international students studying in the United States can often be attributed to at least two factors: exposure or the lack thereof; and the geographical location in which one is positioned.

For Example: An international student from Columbia or another South American country who is studying in rural North Carolina may be perceived as a Mexican by local residents given the local experience with immigrant communities. However, that same student changing their geographical location to New York, Miami, or Chicago likely will be appropriately identified as Columbian as opposed to Mexican. Unfortunately, in cities and states where Spanish may be widely spoken predominantly by one particular group, anyone speaking the Spanish language and sharing similar visible identities (skin color, hair, attire) might automatically be perceived as a member of the majority group speaking the said language, despite the cultural differences that may exist. This is not uncommon. People tend to associate identities with people based on exposure and location. Sadly, Mexicans have been the focal point in many talks centered around immigration issues and the path of US citizenship. Subsequently, these talks are greatly responsible for US public opinion of Mexicans and other people that are perceived as Mexicans.

4

Entering into the Conversation: Understanding Positionally: International students may not be fully aware of their position in the conversation based on the campus and the local community. It is often not clear to many of these students how they can engage in these conversations that they are seeing in the media.

A few examples might be helpful

- What stories have been in the local and national news that might affect incoming international students?
 - For example: Has there been any press coverage regarding immigration or DACA in your local community? Community members may mistakenly assume international students on your campus from Spain are “illegal immigrants” from Mexico.
- What discrimination exists against ethnic groups in your community?
 - For example: If the Mexican-American community in your area faces discrimination, any Spanish-speaking international students on your campus may face discrimination regardless of their ethnicity or country of origin.
- What are the media messages we’ve received that may impact our interactions, and expectations for these interactions? What is the general sentiment in your community surrounding issues in the media that may directly affect international students?
 - For example: Is your community at large supportive of DACA? Is your community a sanctuary city?
- How do we help each other break through our assumptions?
 - What conversations can be had on campus with faculty, staff, and students and also with the community at large about these social issues, their portrayal in the media, and how they may affect international students in your community? .

5

Takeaways for International Educators: International advising professionals must ensure that international students are prepared for the many forms and issues surrounding “diversity” that they will encounter in the U.S. Advisors must have a direct and in-depth understanding of the cultural factors at play when international students come to the U.S. in order to provide effective and meaningful support to students.

Often that starts with self-knowledge and understanding. Improving one’s cultural competency and awareness should be a goal of every advisor. Learn the meaning of concepts such as the various forms of racism, the many ways bias and implicit bias occurs, the role power and privilege play in daily life, what it means to be “inside the box” vs. “outside”, and what it means to be part of a majority vs. minority group. Learn what is involved in moving from a monocultural mindset to an intercultural mindset, or from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. Educate oneself by listening to the diverse perspectives of those whose identities match and do not match one’s own. Discover how people may think about and react to cultural differences. Assess your own awareness and responses to cultural difference, and develop plans to improve.

- Webinars and workshops through organizations such as [Diversity Abroad Network](#) and [NAFSA: Association of International Educators](#)
- National Coalition Building Institute - <http://ncbi.org/>
- Intercultural Development Inventory - <https://idiinventory.com/>
- Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory - <https://icsinventory.com/>
- The Intercultural Communication Institute - <http://intercultural.org/>
- Continue to look for new and updated ways to hone and improve your own intercultural skills and awareness.

Significant Vocabulary:

Below is a brief introductory list of living language, terms and definitions related to various social identities and social systems. It is important to highlight that language is ever evolving and terms provided below are a part of a living language.

Ability: Having the physically, emotionally and/or mentally capacity to navigate everyday life without accessibility concerns

Age: The advancement and rest of power or capacity during life

Agent Identity: Members of dominant social groups who by birth or acquisition knowingly or unknowingly benefit from privileges and/or advantage not provided by over members of the target groups

Ethnicity: The state of belonging to a social group that has a common national, geographical or cultural tradition

Gender Identity: One's internal sense of being a "man", a "woman", neither of these, both, a combination of genders, or having no gender at all, regardless of external appearance

Identity: An individual's or community's conception and expression; socially and historically constructed and often linked to issues of power, value, and ideology

Intersectionality & Complexities of identity:

Inclusion of social identities (race/ethnicity, gender expression, socio-economic status, sexual identity, ability, age)

Multiple social identities add layered lenses to an individual (spirituality, education, cultural context, political affiliation)

Macroaggression/Microaggression: Subtle or not so subtle everyday verbal, non-verbal, insults, actions, or behavior, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages directed towards person(s) based upon their marginalized group membership

Oppression: The social, systemic and institutional/systematic manner in which certain groups are provided advantages or disadvantaged because of aspects of their social identity(ies) resulting in a condition of privilege for the agent group at the expense of the target group; oppression also includes individual personal bias, bigotry, discrimination and prejudice

Person(s) of Color (POC): A collective term encompassing (but not limited to) folks that identify as Black, African-American, Latino/a, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, multiracial or mixed race; A political identity for anyone who doesn't identify as monoracial white

Privilege: A set of unearned benefits or advantage available only to a particular person or group of based on social identities

Pink-washing: When a country exploits a queer-friendly agenda in a way that increases favorability from tourists and ignores other social/political/economic problems and discriminations like racism; This is a rather new and controversial term

Significant Vocabulary (Contd.):

Race: Groups of people who have differences and similarities in biological traits deemed by society to be socially significant

Religion: A system of beliefs, usually spiritual or faith-based, often connected to a formal, organized denomination such as Christianity, Judaism, Hindu

Sexual Orientation: One's own desire, emotional, sexual, spiritual, and romantic attraction to others

Socio-Economic Status: The social standing or class of an individual or group of people often measured as a combination of formal education, occupation, and income

Structural Oppression: The pervasive ways in which history, culture, ideology, public policies, institutional practices, and personal behaviors and beliefs interact to maintain a hierarchy – based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and/or other group identities

Target Identity: Members of social identity groups who are disenfranchised, exploited, and victimized in a variety of ways by agents of oppression and the agent's systems or institutions

Acknowledgements:

In August 2018 - January 2018, Diversity Abroad convened International Student & Scholar Services colleagues to provide guidance in developing resources & tools for professionals working with inbound international students to facilitate meaningful global exchanges across the full range of diverse perspectives represented on our campuses in the US and abroad.

Diversity Abroad Working Group Members

- Duwon Clark - Fisk University
- Elizabeth Coder - Carnegie Mellon University-Qatar
- Barbara Kappler, PhD - University of MN - Twin Cities
- Lee Seedorff - University of Iowa
- Carrie Trimble - Millikin University
- Jacquis Watters - Stevens Institute of Technology
- Claire Witko - Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities (AGB)