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Shaping the future of a globalized world

A qualitative study of how undergraduate international students' everyday cross-cultural experiences were impacted by university diversity initiatives

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to understand how everyday cross-cultural interactions affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students attending a private university in the northeastern United States of America.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected primarily through interviews with nine international students and observations at "Eastern University". Students were purposively selected to balance gender and world regions. Analysis used constant comparison until findings emerged, which were member-checked with study participants (Merriam, 2009).

Findings – Findings show that the impact of university diversity initiatives for promoting everyday cross-cultural interactions is described as creating an us/them divide, promoting solidarity and establishing a cultural presence. It is concluded that formal university events foster recognition of the campus diversity international students help provide, but their impact on everyday cross-cultural interactions is both positive and negative. Additionally, the mode by which undergraduate international students are introduced to their US campus affects their integration and future interaction patterns.

Research limitations/implications – Further research is needed to explore higher education institutions (HEIs)' connection to human resource development (HRD) for shaping the future global arena. Studies that address the continuum from higher education to the workforce are needed to prepare the next generation of professionals for a global world. This study is limited due to small sample size. Findings are not generalizable in a statistical sense, but HRD professionals in HEIs may compare the details in this study with their own institutions.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the discussion of national HRD by addressing international students and their insights into how diversity programs impact adjustment in an American setting. Additionally, organizational and faculty development initiatives in academic institutions can be improved by understanding the insights found in this study.

Keywords Globalization, Cross-cultural interactions, Intergroup contact, International higher education, National HRD, Student adjustment

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Globalization has shaped business, non-governmental organizations and institutions of higher education in recent years. Human resource development (HRD) must deal with the "reality and challenges of a highly heterogeneous society" (Lynham and

Cunningham, 2006, p. 117) in which globalization brings both positive and negative consequences (Marquardt and Berger, 2003). This calls for the field of HRD to reflect deeply on cultural issues related to globalization (Ruona *et al.*, 2003). The international community is struggling with increasingly interdependent economies in which national tensions and cultural conflict are readily apparent. Increasingly, discussion of national HRD (Cho and McLean, 2004; Lynham and Cunningham, 2006; McLean, 2001) focuses the field on education systems as a means to improve intellectual and cultural capital in the global economy. There is no one definition of national HRD, but it includes general knowledge and employment skills that are often part of how higher education prepares students for the workforce. Indeed, some have cautioned that there is an overlap between national HRD and human development (Wang, 2008). National HRD draws attention to what has been termed the higher education to workforce development continuum (Bennett *et al.*, 2012), especially given the express expectation of employers that a bachelor's degree in the USA is important preparation for many professional jobs. The continuum is important for preparing young adults for professional careers and to thrive in a global economy; this includes addressing cross-cultural issues.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) play an important role in an increasingly global world. They recruit and matriculate international students with the intention to promote cultural exchanges that benefit both foreign and domestic students, and the community at large, by providing opportunities for cross-cultural interaction. Cross-cultural interaction, used interchangeably with "intercultural interaction", is defined as a reciprocal experience or communication exchange with someone deemed by an interactant to be of a different ethnicity. Ethnicity refers to one's belonging to a social group that shares a common national or cultural tradition.

Faculty development, a special form of HRD, must also address skills for integrating international students in class and in the campus community, and campuses must adapt programs and services to ensure beneficial outcomes outweigh potential for cultural conflict. Campus environment is critical for cultural exchange because of the potential for frequent, quality interactions (Hurtado, 2005) among international and domestic students; the organizational structures that oversee such exchanges must be continually developed to foster orientation, integration, diversity and growth of international students in campus life. A key to developing HEIs' diversity missions is to understand the experiences of international students who help bring the globalized world to the domestic community.

Too often, HEIs focus on structural diversity, or the makeup of a student body; a "structurally diverse" campus comprises culturally, racially, ethnically and/or nationally diverse students. Structural diversity, however, does not ensure campus integration and high quality cross-cultural interactions for both international and domestic students. HEIs also often attend to the performance of their formal diversity programs (e.g. international food fairs, music and dance shows, symposia), but they may not know how these initiatives affect the daily lives of international students *in practice* (Rose-Redwood, 2010) or *in the everyday*. Little literature addresses the gap between what HEIs think stimulates cross-cultural interactions and international students' actual experiences, and few studies explore the social experiences of international students studying at universities in the USA; yet, such knowledge is important for bridging the divide between structural diversity and ideal diversity initiatives that effectively engage international students in frequent, quality (Hurtado, 2005)

cross-cultural interactions (Rose-Redwood, 2010) that affect adjustment to life at US universities.

Learning more about the perspectives of international students helps inform faculty and administrators about the nature and quality of everyday interactions that are presumed to be beneficial to the campus community. More insight into the connections between formal diversity programs and successful campus adjustment may help HEIs develop policies and interventions that improve knowledge and outcomes for both international and domestic students and, ultimately, may benefit the workforce.

The purpose of this article is to report the findings from a qualitative study that focused on understanding how everyday cross-cultural interactions affected the adjustment of undergraduate international students attending a private research university in the northeastern USA. This article focuses on the aspect of everyday cross-cultural experiences that involved campus diversity initiatives aimed to help international students adjust to campus life. For the purposes of this study, adjustment was defined as the process through which students acclimate socially and emotionally to life in a new environment (the university) and culture (domestic culture in which the campus is located). This paper will first present the conceptual framework, describe the study design, present findings, address implications for HRD research and practice and offer recommendations for future research.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework that informed this study was a convergence of elements of Dixon *et al.*'s (2005) social psychological perspective of intercultural contact and Russell and Petrie's (1992) adjustment model, which emerged from the field of counseling psychology. Dixon *et al.*'s (2005) perspective served as a lens for exploring the everyday cross-cultural interactions of undergraduate international students, including the meanings and constructs they used to make sense of these interactions. Russell and Petrie's (1992) adjustment model provided a framework by which formal institutional intervention programs – in the case of this study, university diversity initiatives – were understood and assessed. Diversity initiatives were defined as programs and/or policies created by an HEI to encourage cross-cultural, cross-national and/or cross-racial interactions. Given that adjustment and persistence are critical to international students' success, this conceptual framework facilitated an understanding of how participants constructed meaning from their everyday cross-cultural interactions. It also guided an exploration of how social and/or environmental factors and institutional interventions may have affected both cross-cultural interactions and adjustment.

Dixon et al.*'s (2005) perspective of intercultural contact*

Allport's (1954) seminal contact hypothesis provided a prescriptive set of optimal conditions in which intergroup contact ideally occurs to maximize tolerance; however, in the context of today's highly globalized HEI campus environments, such a model is insufficient. To promote research that improves interventions that apply to an increasingly globalized world, this study was framed by Dixon *et al.*'s (2005) perspective of intercultural contact.

The significance of the "everyday". Dixon *et al.* (2005) argued that the traditional contact theory (Allport, 1954) might lead researchers to ignore everyday exchanges as meaningless or peripheral to ideal contact conditions. By focusing on ideal conditions or

ways to socially interact, a holistic view of how, when and why social interactions occur and what can be done to encourage frequent, positive interactions is not achieved. Thus, Dixon *et al.* (2005, p. 703) advocated research "on the mundane, seemingly unimportant encounters that constitute the overwhelming majority of everyday contact experiences". "Mundane encounters" was used to describe interactions that occur in an everyday context and may seem, on the surface, to be unremarkable, uneventful or non-ideal. Awareness of such interactions may help designers of university diversity initiatives understand the varying social exchanges occurring between groups, their contexts, the communication processes of participants and barriers and motivators to interaction. Such knowledge may be useful for knowing what situations and contexts might be most conducive to successful interventions.

Personal constructions of interactions. Dixon *et al.* (2005, p. 704) challenged the field to move beyond formal classifications of contact by considering personal constructions of interactions with others. This study defined personal constructions as the practices and interpretive frameworks used by people who are attempting to make sense of their everyday cross-cultural interactions. In day-to-day life, contact may take on many meanings and occur within a wide range of social dynamics and practices. The authors charged that academic research has "defined, measured, and operationalized" contact by creating a finite set of general, optimal conditions. Dixon *et al.* (2005) argued that this methodological approach may not align with the practices and interpretive frameworks used by people who are attempting to make sense of their everyday interactions. Thus, Dixon *et al.* (2005, p. 704) presented a new framework:

> […] that proceeds not from a top-down imposition of pregiven categories but from a detailed, bottom-up analysis of participants' own frameworks of meaning as they are applied within particular social contexts.

This alternative framework did not attempt to nullify Allport's (1954) model; rather, it presented a supplement to existing contact research to achieve a more holistic view of contact situations.

Russell and Petrie's (1992) adjustment model
In selecting a conceptual framework to guide an investigation of how to help students facing issues such as depression (Beck, 1983), grief (Tochkov *et al.*, 2010) and homesickness (Fisher, 1989), it was critical to identify a model that included the role of institutions in understanding social and environmental issues and creating effective interventions to help students adjust. To help students persevere, interventions ideally occur proactively to assist students during their initial community integration, *before* they become homesick, bewildered and lonely (Lee and Rice, 2007; Anderson *et al.*, 2009). Thus, the model that seemed most applicable to this study was Russell and Petrie's (1992) adjustment model.

Russell and Petrie (1992) presented an organizing model of factors that influence the academic adjustment process and success of university students. For the purposes of this study, "success" was defined as persistence. All of the elements included in this model were recognized to be significant to student adjustment; however, this study focused on social and environmental factors, as they related to social adjustment.

Figure 1 visually illustrates Russell and Petrie's (1992) adjustment model and highlights, in gray, the focus of this study.

Figure 1.
Academic
adjustment and
success organizing
model
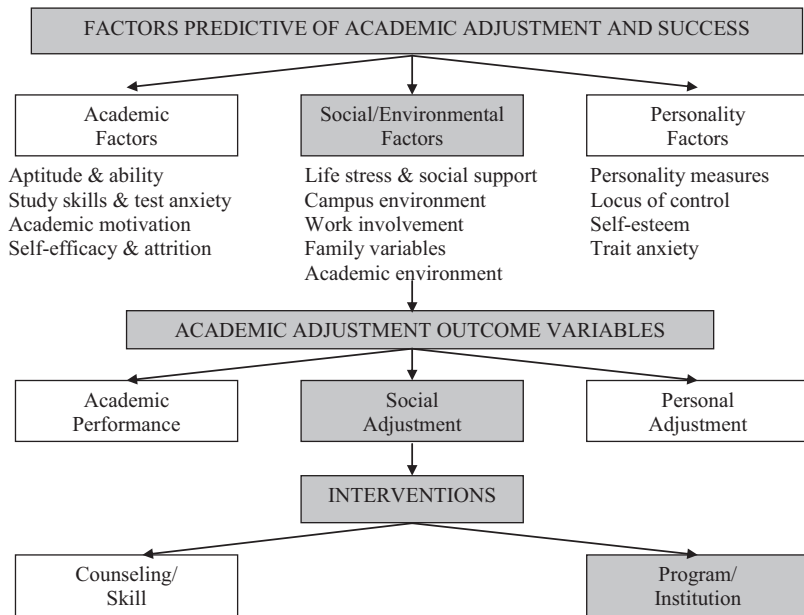
Source: Adapted from Russell and Petrie (1992, p. 487)

Together, elements of Dixon *et al.*'s (2005) perspective of intercultural contact and Russell and Petrie's (1992) adjustment model facilitated an understanding of what cross-cultural interactions both promoted and inhibited adjustment from the perspective of international students. Figure 1 highlights the role of university programs and interventions to promote social adjustment, and, thus, everyday cross-cultural interactions. Moreover, the model helped guide an exploration of personal constructions of successful adjustment. How campus diversity initiatives affect international students is an important aspect of adjustment that needs to be addressed through research.

Research question and methods
This article reports the findings for the research question: *How do undergraduate international students describe the impact of university diversity initiatives for promoting everyday cross-cultural interactions?* The study used a basic qualitative approach (Thomas, 2006; Merriam, 2009) that sought reflection (Maxwell, 2005; Seidman, 2006) and depth of insight (Merriam, 2009). A basic qualitative study is interpretive, inductive and comparative, and findings are presented through rich description (Merriam, 2009). This study was designed within the philosophical perspective of intepretivism, which recognizes that people interpret and make meaning of their experiences in the context of their personal perspectives (Williams, 2000). Because international students' descriptions of diversity initiatives were of interest, the primary sources of data came

from semi-structured in-depth interviews that were audio-recorded and transcribed. Additional sources of data included campus observations and relevant documents.

IRB-approved human subjects methods were used, including assigning pseudonyms to both participants and site to protect confidentiality. The site for this study was "Eastern University", a private research university located in the northeast of the USA. Students were selected from one university because they were likely to have had similar experiences with campus diversity initiatives in an everyday context.

Nine students were purposely selected to represent a range of demographics representative of international students at the University. The range included gender, variety of first languages and world region of origin (Europe, Middle East, Asia, South America and Africa). Participants had to have been at Eastern University for at least one year to ensure a basic level of adjustment experiences; thus, no freshmen were included.

A recruitment letter and questionnaire were emailed to all undergraduate international students at Eastern with a valid email address on file with the University's Office of Intercultural Affairs (OIA). Because the overall study aimed to address successful adjustment, participants were selected based on responses to the question, "On the following [5-point] scale, how adjusted do you feel you are at this university?" Students who reported four (well-adjusted) or five (very well-adjusted) were included in the selection pool. All participants were between 18 and 24 years of age.

Table I presents a visual representation of key demographic characteristics of international students for this study, which helped ensure range and variation (Merriam, 2009) of participants selected.

After participating in the informed consent process, participants were asked several questions that asked about different facets of their experiences; primary and follow-up questions were designed to elicit deep, elaborative responses as opposed to "yes" or "no" answers (Butin, 2010). Interviews lasted for approximately 1 hour. Notes were taken during interviews to record observable behaviors not communicable via transcriptions. Reflective memos were written after each interview to document overall thoughts and impressions; these memos included an audit trail (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Informal observations were conducted before and after interviews at campus locations frequented by diverse university students, domestic and/or international, on a day-to-day basis: weekly Association of International Students (AIS) meeting, campus cafe and library common area. Interactions were observed in these average, everyday contexts. Field notes were taken, documenting details about the location/environment, observed behaviors, visible emotions, facial expressions, gestures and other relevant social and contextual factors as interactions did or did not occur. Finally, relevant documents, including advertisements and program materials for the international music and dance show (FETE), emails from participants and University administrators and information (statistical and descriptive) found on the University's Web site, were analyzed to further triangulate the data collection process. All data were de-identified to protect confidentiality.

Data were analyzed using general inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006) and constant comparison (Merriam, 2009). Data were open-coded using both *in vivo* and descriptive codes (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; Saldana, 2009). Findings emerged as codes were grouped into categories through second-cycle or axial coding (Saldana, 2009) based on patterns in the data. The outcome of this analysis was thematic categories that were

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Name	Gender	Region of origin	Race, ethnicity or nationality	Year of study	First language	Adjustment level reported
Soufiane	Male	North Africa	Arab/Berber	Sophomore	Arabic	4
Reema	Female	South Asia	Indian	Senior	Hindi	5
Lena	Female	South America	Hispanic	Junior	Spanish	5
Assane	Male	West Africa	Black African/Wolof	Senior	French	4
Cora	Female	Southeast Asia	Chinese	Senior	English	5
Asif	Male	South Asia	Pakistani	Sophomore	Urdu	4
Alex	Male	Central Europe	White	Sophomore	French and Persian	5
Michelle	Female	East Asia	Asian	Sophomore	Japanese	5
Monica	Female	Southeast Asia	Indian and Malaysian	Junior	English and Tamil	4

Table I.
Participants' key
demographics

defined and described through a narrative using excerpts of quotes and other sources of data.

Validity and reliability

Measures were taken to ensure validity and reliability. To minimize "response effect bias" (Butin, 2010, p. 97), in which interviewees may tell an interviewer what he/she wants to hear to please the interviewer or provide more socially acceptable answers, an interview guide was carefully constructed to include neutrally phrased, open-ended questions and prompts (Butin, 2010; Merriam, 2009). A pilot interview was conducted to check the interview guide; the guide was revised to ensure clarity and minimize bias. As a human instrument, the interviewer was mindful of personal body language, expressions and tone; adaptive and responsive to participants; attentive to nonverbal and verbal communication; and able to process and clarify information immediately. Interviews were recorded, professionally transcribed and compared to audio recordings to verify accuracy. Participants were emailed a summary of findings for review; member-checking supported researchers' interpretations (Merriam, 2009). Finally, a research audit was conducted; this included a comparison of research findings/researchers' interpretations with original data.

This study was limited due to small number of participants. The findings are not generalizable in a statistical sense, but HRD professionals in HEIs may compare the details in this study with their own institutions.

Findings

In answer of the research question, the study found three thematic categories for how undergraduate international students described the impact of university diversity initiatives for promoting everyday cross-cultural interactions. These were:

(1) creating an us/them divide;

(2) promoting solidarity; and

(3) establishing a cultural presence.

Creating an us/them divide

First, *creating an us/them divide* demonstrates that formal diversity initiatives such as campus orientation and cultural sharing exchanges established and emphasized two distinct student groups:

(1) international students; and

(2) domestic students.

The very programs meant to acclimatize international students were more likely to bond international students with each other rather than promote relationships with international and domestic students. We found that this divide was established during first-year students' initial introduction to the Eastern community; undergraduate international students arrived for their freshman orientation three days before domestic students. Reema and Michelle contended that during these three days, participants formed "comfort groups" with students who were all experiencing the same abrupt loss of propinquity to family, friends, familiar cultures and home nations. By the time American students arrived for orientation, these safe, comfortable groups presented a

potential barrier to interactions among international and domestic students. Soufiane's perspective on his orientation experience was typical of participants and is as follows:

[International students show] up to Eastern University three days before everyone else for International orientation […]. By the time all the Americans showed up, I already had a group of like ten friends. At that point, you're already in your comfort zone […]. When you put us all together for a few days and then you add 300 per cent more students that are all not international, it really sets a barrier, because by the time they show up, they're friends and then it's us and we are already friends because we're all international students. We've been together already […]. I think it's a shame to completely separate Americans from internationals, because that makes the barrier even more solid.

Reema argued that because she already formed a comfort group of international students during the three-day international student orientation (ISO), she never ventured out to meet Americans. In fact, she believed that ISO prevented her from getting close to her American roommate:

I already had my group of friends that I felt comfortable with already. I guess I would have been much closer with my roommate if that hadn't happened, because she came in later. She was American.

Reema described already having a dinner or lunch partner by the time her American roommate arrived, which forced her roommate to find her own friends with whom to eat. Reema reflected, "You would expect roommates to at least go out for dinner".

Participants described an unintended sense of exclusivity that transmitted to American students when they arrived at orientation. Michelle explained that international students spent three days getting comfortable and bonding with each other, but "it doesn't mean we're being exclusive". She acknowledged that American students got this feeling, however, and "They feel like it's hard for them to get into those groups and make connections". Likewise, Monica contended that international students "see it as 'us versus them' We're international and you're not". She argued that this perspective stemmed from the feeling that American students could not understand what it was like to be so far from home, speak other languages and eat other food. We found that this view was exacerbated from the start by intentionally separate orientations for international and domestic students.

After orientation, other diversity initiatives were shown to have continued to contribute to the the us/them divide. For example, AIS was the largest club at Eastern. Participants argued that American students viewed AIS as a highly exclusive club for international students who did not want to "hang out" with American students; in fact, AIS membership was open to all students at the University. The name "Association of International Students", however, did not communicate this inclusivity. Moreover, the initial divide established at orientation was found to have promoted this ongoing sense of exclusivity among international undergraduates.

Another event put on by AIS, which was referred to as "International FETE", celebrated Eastern's international diversity via music and dance performances. It was Eastern's largest student-run event, and with an average audience of over 2,000 people, it was the most widely attended cultural event of the year. Participation was open to all students at the University; however, because the event was put on by AIS, Michelle argued that international students had an advantage over American students in this regard. For example, each dance team was required to include at least one student from

the represented nation, and, according to Michelle, "You kind of have to know people to get into the dances, and a lot of the time it's very competitive". This suggests that American students who were influenced by the us/them divide since their first week at Eastern were less likely to know international students in a familiar-enough capacity to be invited to participate. Again, Michelle supported this suggestion:

> As a first-year international student, I think it was a lot easier for me to get involved in [FETE] and international events that were on campus because I knew more people who were international and were already involved in those things. As opposed to my [American] roommate, who didn't really know other upper classmen who were involved in those international things so it was hard, therefore, for her to join.

Michelle's statement illustrated how American students may have been at a disadvantage when it came to participating in FETE. The event was designed to celebrate Eastern's international diversity; American students contributed to this diversity. Thus, the us/them divide may actually have been preventing FETE from being a true celebration of Eastern's diversity; it may not have been as inclusive in practice as it was designed to be. For example, according to a promotional letter that was emailed to faculty, the event began "in 2002 to bring together [Eastern's] community to celebrate the diversity it represents". This diverse community included culturally diverse American students. As Soufiane and Assane noted, the term "international" does not mean everyone *except* Americans.

Rehearsals for FETE occurred throughout spring semester; thus, regular interactions among students who were participating in the performance increased during this time. Monica shared that heightened involvement with her international friends during this period strained relationships with her American suite mates. She pointed out that there was no tension with her American friends when she spent more time with her dance troupe (unrelated to FETE) before they had major performances; she believed this was so because the majority of people in the dance troupe were American, not international. Monica explained that relationships with her American suite mates became tense during preparation for FETE "because I am not just hanging out with *other friends*, but I'm hanging out with *international students*". Her description clearly illustrated an "us vs. them" mentality.

Finally, we found that professors, particularly those who had low numbers of international students in their classes, often unintentionally contributed to the us/them divide. For example, participants shared that professors at Eastern were generally very good at creating culturally respectful atmospheres and typically tried to include diverse cultural perspectives in their courses. However, according to participants, singling out an international student in an attempt to bring his/her unique perspective into class discussion actually draws attention to the student's difference from the rest of the group. Michelle noted that she often felt pressure to represent her culture in class and became uncomfortable when she was unsure of an answer when put on the spot as the "resident East Asian" in the class. We found that although the professors' intentions may have been to be culturally inclusive, singling out an international student based on his/her culture exacerbated the us/them divide.

Promoting solidarity
Promoting solidarity expresses the theme of togetherness within the international student community, fostered by cultural events such as international FETE. Where the

first theme demonstrates a divide that excludes domestic students, this theme focuses on the relationships that were formed through cross-cultural interactions with international students from diverse backgrounds. The same cultural events that created the us/them divide also contributed to this feeling among international students who were all experiencing the same challenges as they transitioned to life here and who were working toward a common goal. For example, participants who were involved in producing FETE during each spring semester developed strong bonds as they prepared for the show. In that this event was produced by AIS, primarily international students were involved. Monica shared that although her best friends were Americans who were not in AIS, her involvement in FETE made her realize that AIS "was going to be my family away from home". She opined that spending a significant amount of time together rehearsing and then watching their efforts come to fruition "was probably the moment I was like, 'Eastern is where I'm meant to be, and these are the people I am meant to be with'".

By having international freshmen arrive at Eastern three days before American freshman, international freshmen were afforded the opportunity to identify common ground and bond among themselves in a small group setting. Reema stated:

> When I came in I found the international students […] no matter where they were from, going through the same thing initially as me, as compared to the rest of the American students. There was this initial affiliation amongst international students.

In fact, the majority of participants stated that the close friends they had at time of interview were people they met during ISO. Two students, Cora and Monica, shared that they were still friends with students they met at ISO, but were close friends or even roommates with American students they met during the whole-class orientation following ISO. These two participants were the only two native English speakers in the interview group. This suggests that their comfort with the English language played a major role in their ability to achieve solidarity and build relationships with American freshmen in addition to international freshmen.

After the initial three-day ISO, American students arrived for a whole-class orientation. Freshmen were placed in groups of approximately 12 culturally diverse students and assigned a peer advisor for each group. Peer advisors were upperclassmen who participated in a training program to help new students through their orientation process; in addition to answering questions, helping students register for classes and navigate Eastern's campus, they conducted "ice-breakers" and other activities in an attempt to generate interaction and a feeling of togetherness among each group. Asif stated, "Peer-advisors basically held the group together. Plus, they were confident, they were jolly, they were enthusiastic definitely". Assane enjoyed the opportunity to share information about his culture with American students. He remarked that the icebreakers "were very affective at promoting cross-cultural interactions because they allow people to know more about each other. I still talk to almost everyone who was in that group". We found that composing groups of culturally diverse freshmen during whole-class orientation was important, but the role of peer advisors in creating a feeling of solidarity as freshmen who were all embarking on a new collegiate experience was crucial. Peer advisors were significant not just to fostering intercultural interactions among international and domestic students during orientation but also to facilitating the development of lasting friendships among them. Both domestic and international

students stand to benefit from diverse interactions and relationships potentially resulting from them.

Finally, we found that first-year housing placements strongly influenced with whom a feeling of lasting solidarity was formed. In other words, propinquity was key. Cora shared that she still had the same friends she made during her freshman year, and that closeness in the dorm was a huge influence on with whom she chose to develop relationships: "All but one friend were placed right around me my freshman year". All of the students she spoke of were American. Contrarily, Soufiane, who was in his second year at Eastern, stated, "I live in the dorms with five other international students. We all lived in the same area our first semester here, so we were all put together somehow". Such statements were typical among participants. This suggests that the students one lived with or near during the initial integration into their university community – international and/or domestic – were the students with whom they were likely to be friends, if not roommates, throughout their years of study.

Establishing a cultural presence
Establishing a cultural presence captures the theme showing how participants felt they became recognizable, legitimate parts of the campus community by way of culturally authentic events. Although the events themselves occurred only on an intermittent or annual basis, they were found to have impacted participants' everyday interactions in several ways. For example, Cora and Alex described the OIA's efforts to organize celebrations of different cultures that coincided with the Asian New Year and Muslim New Year (Eid). Both participants noted that these events drew diverse international and American students. Alex observed, "Everyone, like American students were coming. They were having a good time. They were getting to know what the celebration was about, the different culture that celebrates these festivities". Alex made a point to note that American students attended these events, suggesting that to him, the measure of a successful cultural event was whether it drew American students. Cora echoed Alex's story and remarked that the monetary and time investments made by OIA demonstrated a value of international students: "Just showing that they are willing to spend the time and money to put on an event like this to appreciate people of different cultures means a lot". In addition to being afforded opportunities to cross-culturally interact at the events, participants contended that feeling valued on campus translated into increased pride and confidence, which, in turn, was found to make them more open to intercultural interactions outside the context of the event.

The largest cultural event at Eastern was International FETE. All nine participants described this event – at length – as an exciting, culturally authentic function that established a strong, positive international student presence on campus. Soufiane described the show as follows:

> The dance [show] really is just an explosion of cultures. You know 100 per cent that you're going to get an accurate representation of what the country is like, at least culturally, through their music, through the dancing [...] how authentic the show is, that's the one thing that really keeps it going [...] there's nothing generic about the show.

One of the researchers attended International FETE and was struck by the high caliber and cultural authenticity of this 3-hour show. It was obvious that a significant amount of time and money was invested in its production, and participants in the event exuded enthusiasm and confidence. Moreover, many attendees were American students who

cheered, "Go, Vietnam!" or "Costa Rica! Costa Rica!" when national teams were announced. Many attendees arrived in cultural attire to support specific national teams and celebrate their own cultural heritages. What the researcher witnessed – and felt a part of – at this show suggests that it has implications for everyday intercultural interactions beyond its once-per-year occurrence.

Eastern was a small university; thus, it was not possible for some nations to have a dance team that included only students from that nation. Michelle noted that as a result, international students from underrepresented nations had to recruit people of other cultures to dance with them for the show. She argued that this made the event more inclusive of other cultures and contributed to establishing a cultural presence among people who might not have known much about the show otherwise. To maintain cultural authenticity, each team had to include at least one student from the nation being represented; these students sought students of other cultures if needed, who were typically people they knew. This suggests that although Michelle's argument of inclusivity and establishment of cultural presence is valid, one must still have known an international student participating in the event in a familiar-enough capacity for him/her to have been invited to participate.

Being an international student at Eastern was found to be a source of pride for participants. Assane articulated his experience as an international student in relation to cultural events like International FETE:

> It is a huge thing to be international on a campus. We have this whole [music and dance] performance of students from different countries. Every time it happens it makes me realize […] it's a good thing to be a minority sometimes because people will get to appreciate you more. You don't get boring.

This statement illustrated Assane's confidence as a result of the event; he felt appreciated and special, in contrast to the negative connotations commonly associated with being a minority. Monica contended that FETE was an opportunity for international students to showcase pride in where they were from; however, she did not believe that cultural events like FETE were designed specifically to get people to interact cross-culturally. She argued that because Eastern was so diverse, intercultural interactions were assumed to happen by default: "I think [these events are more for] awareness and discussion around it, but not necessarily with the sole purpose of getting people to interact". We found, though, that students did not find it necessary or ideal to have diversity initiatives that tried to force or artificially induce interactions with students of other cultures. Participants shared that in addition to being a part of a structurally diverse campus community, knowing one was recognized, respected and valued created an atmosphere conducive to cross-cultural interactions that occurred naturally in everyday contexts.

Summary of findings
Findings demonstrate that university diversity initiatives impacted everyday cross-cultural interactions in the following ways:

- creating an us/them divide;
- promoting solidarity; and
- establishing a cultural presence.

Findings show that diversity initiatives targeting undergraduate international students during their first week at the University had lasting implications for their future cross-cultural interactions. Professors also played a central role in either helping integrate international students into culturally diverse classrooms or contributing to the us/them divide. This divide was found to be particularly profound in classes with low numbers of international students. Finally, cultural events that showcase Eastern's international diversity were shown to have positively impacted international students' day-to-day intercultural interactions by bolstering their confidence and establishing an authentic cultural presence on campus. These events were also found to contribute to creating the us/them divide and promoting solidarity.

Discussion

The first conclusion of this study is that formal university initiatives at Eastern fostered recognition of international students, but their impact on everyday cross-cultural interactions was both positive and negative. The intention of cultural events was to promote cultural awareness and appreciation; they were not specifically designed to promote everyday intercultural interactions. However, Eastern was a structurally diverse campus, and the by-product of contributing to a campus culture that values and respects this diversity is an atmosphere conducive to diverse intercultural interactions in the everyday. When asked what programs or events the University had to promote communication among people of other cultures, participants' responses centered on formal university events that were designed to occur on a single day and/or on an annual basis, not programs designed to encourage interactions in an everyday context. Participants described a sense of pride and confidence in their cultural backgrounds because they felt valued as a result of the events; this value stemmed from investments made by the university in the form of time and money. Everyday intercultural interactions did not necessarily result from an event itself; rather, they were shown to result, in part, from the increased sense of cultural authenticity, confidence and familiarity the events helped provide among internationally diverse students. When asked how they would design an ideal program for encouraging cross-cultural interactions in an everyday context, participants' suggestions focused on events based on shared interests or goals (e.g. sports, food, dialogue sessions, event planning).

Existing literature shows that campus environment is critical to influencing frequent, quality interactions, which, in turn, generate benefits (Chang *et al.*, 2006) such as social and academic development (Gurin *et al.*, 2002). Evidence also shows that comprising a racially/ethnically diverse campus is connected with higher frequencies of cross-racial interactions among college students (Chang *et al.*, 2004; Engberg, 2007). Heightened engagement is, however, relative to perceptions of a positive racial climate (Jayakumar, 2008). Participants described cultural events at Eastern as having fostered a culture that appreciates and respects diversity; thus, it makes sense that heightened intercultural engagement would result. This conclusion is contrary to findings in Rose-Redwood's (2010) study, which showed that from a student's perspective, formal cultural events may be viewed as superficial facades, in which a university does not know how to actually encourage interactions, but wants to present an appearance of diversity initiatives. In addition to focusing efforts on creating a structurally diverse campus, Eastern appeared to recognize what intergroup contact researchers (Allport,

1954; Dixon *et al.*, 2005; Pettigrew, 1998) maintain: dividends increase when intergroup contact occurs in a context of shared interests or goals.

International FETE was the cultural event participants most widely discussed; it was a formal University event, but was produced by the AIS. Participants described planning and rehearsing throughout the spring semester as excitement built toward the day of the event. During this time, intercultural interactions occurred almost daily among culturally diverse international students who were involved. Although American students were involved as well, their number was far fewer. According to Michelle, American students had to know an international student to participate, and the competition was quite stiff. As Monica reflected on her day-to-day involvement in producing FETE, she described an extreme bonding experience in which she realized that members of AIS were her family at Eastern. However, she also described her everyday involvement in the event as having negatively affected relationships with her American roommates. Her American friends were keenly aware that she was not simply spending time with other friends; it was significant to them that these friends were international students. This implies that in addition to celebrating diversity, the event drew attention to international students as a separate group, whose members were somehow different than American students.

This study's conclusion that cultural events affect cross-cultural interactions both positively and negatively is supported by the literature. For example, international students in Rose-Redwood's (2010) study voiced concern that although affinity clubs based on nationality offered support to international students, they may have also isolated students by having encouraged social segregation. In contrast, Harper and Quaye (2007) argued that ethnic student organizations are essential milieus for social involvement, racial and cultural identity development and self-expression. Findings of the current study support both contentions; participants described an us/them divide and a feeling of solidarity that stemmed from their involvement in cultural events.

The conceptual framework that guided this study includes the role of diversity initiatives in facilitating student adjustment (Russell and Petrie, 1992), exploring the significance of everyday interactions and recovering students' personal, individual constructions of interactions (Dixon *et al.*, 2005). This framework facilitated an understanding of how students experienced diversity initiatives in different ways (Engberg and Hurtado, 2011). By having solicited participants' personal perspectives within the context of the event (e.g. FETE), we were able to consider participants' everyday experiences as they related – or did not relate – to others (Connolly, 2000). In other words, only by asking participants about their experiences within the context of FETE were we able to uncover both positive and negative effects of the event on everyday intercultural interactions and adjustment.

A second conclusion for this study is that the mode by which undergraduate international students were introduced to their US campus affected their integration and future interaction patterns. By having participated in a segregated orientation, participants were forced to find immediate comfort in fellow international students, rather than having had the opportunity to bond with domestic students who arrived two weeks later. Participants recounted their initial introduction to campus as an important time to have bonded with fellow international students during ISO; they articulated a feeling of solidarity among international students as the only other people who could understand what they were going through as foreign students so far from home.

Participants described the arrival of American students in terms of having invaded their private transition experience. They discussed an us/them divide that was created between the two student groups:

(1) international; and

(2) domestic.

In other words, their initial introduction to campus helped them integrate well with fellow international freshmen, but not nearly as well with fellow American freshmen. Participants shared that the connections established during this initial introduction to campus remained strong throughout their experience at Eastern. In fact, at the time of the interview, all participants were living and/or close friends with people of other cultures whom they met during orientation.

Research shows that the absence, presence and frequency of cross-cultural interactions have notable influence on students and their potential for success, including establishing diverse social networks and healthy student adjustment. Diversity initiatives play a crucial role in this regard, as they may serve as interventions to facilitate success (Russell and Petrie, 1992). University initiatives are particularly potent when they commence early in students' transition to US campus life (Anderson *et al.*, 2009; Lee and Rice, 2007; Scherer and Wygant, 1982), as evidenced by the current study's findings. Abrupt loss of propinquity to friends and family is argued to be the primary reason for stress and homesickness among international students during the transitional period from home to new environments (Fisher, 1989). According to Okun *et al.* (1988), social support from peers positively affects psychological and physical health. Consequently, it makes sense that the connections established during participants' initial introduction to Eastern – when they had experienced abrupt loss of nearness to familiar culture, family and friends – were bonds that lasted throughout their time here. Moreover, for international students to form connections with American students, physical proximity before what the current study calls the "social support void" has been filled is essential.

Dixon *et al.* (2005) argued that "ideal" or "artificial" conditions do not typically reflect everyday life and may be less effective at stimulating powerful interactions than everyday contacts. ISO exemplified this contention. By having introduced international students to Eastern via a segregated orientation, participants were forced to find immediate comfort in fellow international students. These initial contacts were shown to provide a foundation for segregated everyday social interaction patterns. However, this initial segregated environment only lasted three days; it did not reflect what life would be like at Eastern in a daily context. Research demonstrates that providing opportunities for students to interact with diverse peers contributes to numerous long-term advantages, including increased motivation, self-confidence and cultural awareness (Chang *et al.*, 2006; Gurin *et al.*, 2002).

Chang *et al.* (2005, p. 13) asserted that a significant opportunity exists for American colleges and universities to capitalize on the "benefits of diversity" and consider what is and is not making international diversity effective *in practice*. To maximize the potential benefits a diverse environment can provide, HEIs must facilitate engagement (Anderson *et al.*, 2009) by fostering meaningful relationships among internationally diverse students. An institutional intervention that generated the idea of two distinct groups – international and domestic – from students' first days at the University and fostered the

development of segregated social interaction patterns in students' everyday lives did not, arguably, capitalize on the benefits of Eastern's diversity.

Implications for HRD

Diversity initiatives are an important area of concern in HRD, as are other programs that support healthy cross-cultural exchanges. This study provided insight into how international students experienced the impact of diversity initiatives, which is important for designing future programs and setting organizational policy at HEIs. It is important for HRD professionals to recognize that programs often make trade-offs. For example, the ISO process allowed international students from diverse backgrounds to bond with each other, but created a divide with domestic students that set communication patterns early. This practice may prohibit future exchanges between international and domestic students, which would undermine benefits of recruiting international students. HRD professionals in educational institutions should consider how programs impact the immediate integration of students (or employees) and also long-term impact to determine the right balance in a trade-off. This study demonstrated that satisfaction with an event does not necessarily equate to meeting all of the goals of cultural exchange necessary for building culturally competent graduates.

This study contributes to the discussion of national HRD by focusing on educational facets of HRD (Cho and McLean, 2004; Lynham and Cunningham, 2006; McLean, 2001), including how universities are preparing students to work with people of diverse backgrounds and cultures. In a higher education to workforce development continuum (Bennett *et al.*, 2012), this might be considered "pre-HRD" for globalization as international students adjust to various campus and local cultures, as well as share their own cultures in return. Additionally, organizational and faculty development initiatives in academic institutions can be analyzed to see how well faculty, general employees and organizational policies foster high-quality cross-cultural interactions. For example, HRD professionals can help address the relationship between formal programs and informal interactions in the everyday.

In terms of practice in a globalized world, it is important to understand and value everyday experiences that make up cross-cultural interactions, recognizing complexity and authenticity. This idea is relevant in educational settings, but could potentially be applied to the orientation and integration of culturally diverse employees. HRD professionals are encouraged to look beyond the results of formal orientation to see whether expectations are matched in everyday life. Programs that promote a mismatch between training and the daily reality of work within a given organizational culture could foster disillusionment. Valuing everyday experiences helps HRD practitioners understand the impact of diversity programs they design. Whether an HRD professional is developing an HEI to promote cultural awareness and international diversity or an employee orientation program with international participants, it is important to facilitate cultural exchange and to recognize unintended consequences of cultural exchange. Second, as HRD further develops its approach to national HRD, professionals should focus on supporting quality education systems (McLean, 2001) that embrace multiculturalism, social responsibility and global leadership development and resist dehumanizing forces (Marquardt and Berger, 2003).

Recommendations for future research

Future research is needed to extend the findings from this study. A replication study at a state- or government-supported university could bring additional insight from a different context with a new mix of diversity programs. This could be done in the USA or in another country with HEIs that recruit a variety of international students. While this study focused on students who had successfully adjusted, a future study could focus on the process of adjustment or on cross-cultural factors and experiences that prevented successful adjustment. This could potentially reveal moments of bias, cultural conflict or personal factors that HEIs and HRD professionals can help address. Finally, more research is needed on the continuum between higher education and the workforce. Interesting questions include:

Q1. How do cross-cultural skills learned in college transfer to the workforce?

Q2. How do college experiences with cross-cultural interactions affect future business decision making in transnational companies?

Additionally, governmental priorities and direction to HEIs with regard to international students may affect diversity programs, especially if national security interests and research funding are at stake.

Understanding everyday cross-cultural experiences across many settings may help HRD shape the future global arena and promote productive cross-cultural exchanges that reduce the chance of tensions and conflict. Conflict may be apparent in a traditional, face-to-face educational environment, but it could also manifest within online education. Paying attention to the connection between HEIs and national HRD may improve the continuum from higher education to the workforce, which is needed to prepare the next generation of professionals in an optimal way for an increasingly global world.

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