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The Gap in the Curtain: Seeing Pieces of a Residential Community's Future

By David M. Johnstone

As our culture vacillates between the celebration and angst of globalization, it is fascinating to watch how it ripples from the world community to the local college community. If one aspect of globalization is the blurring of national, commercial and intellectual borders, then higher education may be at the center of this movement. Those of us in higher education must acknowledge that, "Universities ... form a system of interdependent links involving sovereign states and economic institutions in the exchange of students, professors, ideas, technology, and money" (Carpenter, 2008, p. 357). We are at the center of globalization.

How does this exchange affect the Christian college campus? Further, how does it shape and impact the student community? In light of these questions, I find myself reflecting on my past years in student affairs. In graduate school, I was extensively trained in student development theory. As a new professional, I was mentored and provided with many strong professional development experiences.

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Looking into the future, I realize that many of the models, theories, and skills I learned as a student and new professional are now of limited value in this age of growing globalization. Similarly, but also unlike a decade ago, this generation is increasingly aware of the world; they value communication in a myriad of sophisticated ways, but aren't sure how to process all the information they receive and are just a little unsure about their own stability and security.

This sense of uncertainty is tied to the changes in both the familiar and the unusual.

Some of these changes are related to the hundreds of thousands of international students and scholars who choose to study in the United States each year (Phillips, 2002). For our campus, these changes began in earnest three years ago when we intentionally began to draw students from Southeast Asia. The growth has been steady and the impact surprising. Besides students from other regions, by the fall of 2010, 8% of our undergraduate population will be from mainland China. While the university started a new recruiting field, the original intent was also to provide additional educational value and cultural exposure for our domestic students.

The changes have been vast and rapid. We anticipated questions and developed strategies. We made plans for welcoming these students into the community. However, we soon realized there were scenarios and questions we had not even anticipated. Some were tied to learning styles, and others to basic living patterns. Issues of loneliness, hygiene, conflict, and communication are familiar to those in Residence Life. However, adding a cul-

tural spin provided a whole different set of dynamics to these concerns.

We have sought to be thoughtful in evaluating procedures and daily "business". We have tried to be flexible, patient and thorough. As I anticipate the future facing residence life in light of these changes, I would like to make some observations and suggestions. I do not believe our campus is alone in these dynamics of welcoming increasing numbers of international students into their communities.

Observations

These incoming students are understandably very proud of their rich heritage and history. They are thrilled when others demonstrate some interest and knowledge of their country. But when domestic students ask about the restrictions on freedom of speech and religion they become perplexed and sometimes defensive. They love the freedoms they encounter here, but often bristle at criticism or questions about the policies of their government. Criticism of their government is perceived as criticism of themselves.

In an attempt to assist international students to understand America, they are extensively briefed, prepared, and oriented. Even with all of this preparation, challenges to a smooth transition still arise. The differences in culture are immense. The complexities of faith, media, and even traffic laws can often become overwhelming; particularly concerning is when this sensory overload leads to mental paralysis.

One of the major challenges that can spark feelings of being overwhelmed is the basic need to establish relational connections. Many of our students face the double challenge of unfamiliar culture and unfamiliar language. While many are taking language lessons, it is exhausting for them to try to develop significant relationships in a language other than their own. Invariably, this exhaustion leads to easier relationships with Chinese speakers. Unfortunately, by this choice, they begin to isolate themselves. A treacherous cycle begins which limits international students from fully engaging with the culture they seek to understand.

Recommendations

In responding to some of the general challenges we have observed, here are some thoughts. One of the roles which student leaders take is to assist, coach, and navigate their peers through resolving conflict. With differing cultural groups there are differing styles which need to be consid-

ered. Helping our resident assistants identify their own style and understand how they respond personally to conflict is the first step in equipping them to assist their peers. Conflict will arise, but if the student leaders are able to discern how styles are shaped by culture and heritage, they will be better able to react and initiate responses with wisdom and insight.

Helping student leaders understand the profound impact they can have is critical. Assisting them in understanding the intricacies and subtleties of their peers' various cultures will enable more intentional and hospitable care. From the training perspective, it is important to draw diverse professional staff and students to assist in creatively coaching student leaders in how to be welcoming to their entire community. For student leaders to realize that their hospitality can affect perceptions of their faith—not just as individuals, but also that of their institution and even their nation—is a profound “kingdom of God” dynamic.

At the same time, trying to provide venues and opportunities for domestic

and international students to interact, play, and study is important. This involves professionals asking about recreation, faith, fears, and felt needs. All the conversations that normally happen must be expanded and broadened. Our domestic students are not always prepared to interact wisely with international students. In contrast, international students usually receive a thorough orientation. Our current approach to equipping our domestic students to befriend their international peers has been haphazard. I believe this can be creatively changed. Further, I believe that this change could naturally start within residence life.

Final Thoughts

Our campus communities will keep changing. The demographics and the needs will keep shifting. One of the hallmarks of residence life has been its flexibility in responding to the myriad of circumstances, conditions, and crises it encounters. Many of our experiences and training have served us well. With the changes we will most likely encounter over the next decade, we will

have to create new ways of responding to both how the world impacts our campuses and how changing cultural demographics affect our student populations. I see this as potentially making our communities more robust and fascinating. I am also reminded that it is not unusual for the Spirit of God to bring the world to our campuses. This is the lens by which I choose to view this future. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

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Added insight from Tami Ankeny, Area Coordinator, and Erin Macy, Assistant Director for International Student Recruitment at George Fox University.

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Submitting for Publication in Koinonia

Each issue of Koinonia is open for members of ACS D and others associated with higher education to submit pieces for publication. Some issues are themed while other issues may be quite general in nature. The Editor of Koinonia reserves the right to edit each submitted piece and select the best combination of articles received for each issue. The next issue will examine “The Future of Student Affairs”, however, articles on other topics are welcome and needed. The deadline for submission is September 1st, 2009.

General Guidelines

- 1) **Submit feature articles, original research, reviews, interviews, reflection pieces, and other creative pieces that are timely and thoughtfully engage and inform our ACS D readership.**
- 2) **Submit pieces in APA style and documentation, in Microsoft Word format, and on or before submission deadlines for each issue.**
- 3) **Limit submissions to suggested lengths: feature articles, original research, interviews, and reflective and creative pieces (800–2,500 words) and resource reviews (700 1,200 words).**
- 4) **Articles should be submitted to the Koinonia Editor via e-mail at staustin@taylor.edu.**

Writing for Koinonia is a great way to process and share what you are learning, encourage and challenge others, and stay involved in ongoing higher education professional development. We hope you will consider writing and submitting a piece in the future.