INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCY: A CRITICAL DEMAND IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Due to the advancement of global economy, information, technology, and education, higher education services are the melting pots of diverse community, knowledge, and cultural aspects. Adequate intercultural communication competency in many shapes and forms including conversations, meetings, interviews, emails, pictures, and/or videos is critical for the students, faculty, and staff's to succeed. This paper presents the primary analysis based on some of the professional and social interactions in the student affairs field of higher education services including a) student engagement enhancement programs b) emotional-spiritual-intellectual support and c) intergroup dialogue facilitation. As a result it examines: a) the importance of intercultural communication skill in higher education field b) how intercultural communication can be a social and professional tools for advancement c) methods of learning how to shape the skills: instructivism versus constructivism. "There is an idea that intercultural communication always has something to do with people from different ethnicities" (Scollon, Ronald, and Suzanne B. K. Scollon, 1995). As the cultural and society makeup becomes so diverse, the intercultural communication can bridge the understanding among differences. This paper, therefore, also indicates that in intercultural communication, there is cognitive element of intentional practice that needs to take place without ignoring affective and procedural factors of communication.

Field of research: *Intercultural communication; intercultural competency; higher education; student affairs.*

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1. Introduction

This assessment is based on observation and discussion involving staff and students from diverse cultural and linguistically background in the student affairs division of higher education, where English is the medium of instruction and communication outside the international language classes such as Italian, Spanish, French, Chinese, Japanese, German, Arabic, Portuguese, etc. The methodology used is by a qualitative survey and interview, and critical observation with the procedures as the following: a) Group discussions by various student organizations b) Brown bag events by administrators c) Open mic for both students, faculty, and staff d) Critical reflections by students, faculty, and staff.

When it comes to intercultural communication, many believe that it is in the delivery that influences what results one can achieve. Others believe that it is in the understanding of the basic essence of diversity in which "communication process involves people from difference cultures" is taking place (Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel, 2006, p. 1). In the area of student affairs, one's competency in "human interaction between cultures" (Asante, 2008, p. 47) that consists of these two skills are critical. Competency in such areas, in addition to the intercultural awareness, becomes a requirement to grow academically and professionally.

This article reports on an observation into staff and student perceptions of the role of Intercultural communication in student affairs: how the appropriate understanding and practice, including the role of dialogue, enable or hinder one's growth professionally and personally.

2. Literature and Statistical Review

2.1. Intercultural Awareness

There are various theories for why intercultural communication is critical in higher education these days. As for some of many of diversity enthusiasm, it was believed that the set of behaviors, one of them we call language is a subset of a larger set of meaningful behaviors that help to define a culture in which all of its practices work as how words do (Hooker, 2003, p. 5). Higher education institutions find themselves increasingly confronted with the forces of globalization and intercultural awareness due to the increasing international students attending their programs. Faculty and staff actively apply different strategies to create their best integration programs to make sure all students and staff, both domestic and international, can "demonstrate the ability to enact a cultural identity in a mutually appropriate and effective manner" (Samovar and Porter, 1994) including through a channel of appropriate communication both verbal and nonverbal. Intergroup Dialogue, International Student Panels, Open Mic, Faculty and Staff of Color mixer, and Faculty Speaker Series are a few of them. Through these events, many students and staff from different countries and cultural background have the opportunities to be under the diversity leadership spot lights. Many faculty and student affairs leaders will spot opportunities to add values to students' experiences and to remove barriers to international multicultural student success.

Leaderships in higher education need to become globalized through intercultural awareness and competency. Therefore, practitioners need to demonstrate "the ability to enact a cultural identity in a mutually appropriate and effective manner" (Samovar and Porter, 1994) especially in integrating professional and personal behavior in the workplace. One of the simple ways to do this, one of them by starting some meetings by an introduction of the participants with their personal gender pronounce. For example: My name is Esther Rosbrook. I am an Asian. Many times, depending on the context of the event, participants also describe their preferred gender pronounce, for example in my case is she, her, and hers. The goal is that by knowing one's background, the message delivered can be more understood and that people are more sensitive of differences. Finally, people will utilize these aspects and information to increase the process of knowledge sharing.

The concept of intercultural awareness has grown from the willingness to the ability to understand the increasing need of different cultural groups. In intercultural communication it means that there is a variable of being careful and considerate for what massage and how it is delivered. Korzilius, Hooft and Planken (2007) suggested a definition of intercultural awareness as following:

> "Intercultural awareness is the ability to emphasize and decentre. More specifically, in a communication situation, it is the ability to take on the perspective of a conversational partner from another culture or with another nationality, and of their cultural background and thus, to be able to understand and take into consideration interlocutors' different perspectives simultaneously."

In student affairs, it is believed that the nature of our daily lives means that the context of our practice is at once local, national, and international (Barr, McClellan, and Sandeed, 2014). The reality is that it is more important now than ever for we all have to be most sensitive in applying our knowledge and theory for the good for students with different cultural or other identity background. It is more common now that both international students and staff are asked to and/or voluntarily participate in interactive discussion to discuss cultural awareness related topics, one is called brownbag: a discussion or intellectual event where food is provided. The events are also to highlight

different stories and aspects of cultural background that have brought people to the position they are right now. Unfortunately, the history shows that a special group predominantly institution, awareness is still harder to achieve due to the strong influence by the power relationship between people with different cultural background or the painful past history combined with the failure concept of meritocracy. This has created challenges for a better practice of intercultural awareness and finally, intercultural communication. Sleeter and Encarnacion (2013) described:

> *Social identity of subjects is constructed, valued, complex, and historic. What appears at the level of ideas and emotion is cultural in its content. The social identity of individuals and groups is constructed by contrasting social relationships that occur between members of a collective, and others. It is not given in advance, nor is it essential, but people acknowledge that they share identity with someone else by establishing distinctive contrast with other whom they consider different from themselves. Now, the interesting point about these identifications and distinctions is that they are valued, thus creating negative identities (to be stigmatized) and positive identities (worthy of prestige). So, each cultural element that serves as a sign of identification may have a positive or a negative value (p. 49-50).*

Student affairs programs should reflect a variety of approaches for supporting intercultural awareness and communication on campus. Since there is usually very little self-reported bias related cases, a proactive program from the Dean of Student or College or Student Affairs office including discussion or dialogue events during various heritage months, preferably followed by an awareness assessment or survey, can be positive initiatives. Blimling (2013) described that student affairs is mostly willing to embrace assessment when they can see how the results can improve both students and staff experiences.

Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, states that "dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (Freire, 1972, p. 76). Dialogue becomes the means to educate those who colonialized the mind with unjust cultural actions and ways of thinking. Dialogue challenges the oppressing mind. Dialogue allows people to learn from each other and from direct or firsthand experiences rather than from stories that have been retold by other people many times. It also welcomes honest feedback that both sides of participants can use to enhance their understanding of "the other." Freire argues (1972):

> *As we attempt to analyze dialogue as human phenomenon, we discover something which is the essence of dialogue itself, the word. But the word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constitutive elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed – even in part- the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world (p. 87).*

2.2. Statistical Background: International Students
When we discuss about intercultural communication, we are always referred to the international students or members of community. Many international students decide to stay in the US to continue as professional staff. They will carry their past experiences that shape who they are.

Higher Education Sector Information

| 2015/16 | 2014/15 | 2013/14 | 2010/11 | 2009/10 | 2008/09 | 2007/08 | 2006/07 | 2005/06 |

Higher Education Students	Total	Percent of Total
Domestic higher education students	19,220,161	94.8%
International higher education students	1,043,839	5.2%
All higher education students (both domestic and international)	20,264,000	

International Students in the United States

| 2015/16 | 2014/15 | 2013/14 | 2011-12 | 2010/11 | 2009/10 | 2008/09 | 2007/08 | 2006/07 | 2005/06 |

Total international student enrollment: **1,043,839**

Do these counts of international students reflect both public and private institutions? **Yes**

Top 10 sending places of origin and percentage of total international student enrollment:

Rank	Place of Origin	Number of Students	Percent of Total
1	China	328,547	31.5%
2	India	165,918	15.9%
3	Saudi Arabia	61,287	5.9%
4	South Korea	61,007	5.8%
5	Canada	26,973	2.6%
6	Vietnam	21,403	2.1%
7	Taiwan	21,127	2.0%
8	Brazil	19,370	1.9%
9	Japan	19,060	1.8%
10	Mexico	16,733	1.6%

Total number of international students from all places of origin by field of study:

Rank	Field of Study	Number of Students	Percent of Total
1	Business and Management	200,312	19.2%
2	Engineering	216,932	20.8%
3	Other/Unspecified Subject Areas	185,107	17.7%
4	Mathematics and Computer Sciences	141,651	13.6%
5	Social Sciences	81,304	7.8%
6	Physical and Life Sciences	75,385	7.2%
7	Humanities	17,664	1.7%
8	Fine and Applied Arts	59,736	5.7%
9	Health Professions	33,947	3.3%
10	Education	19,483	1.9%
11	Agriculture	12,318	1.2%

Data time reference: Fall 2015

Source: IIE

International Students in the United States

2015/16   2014/15   2013/14   2011-12   2010/11   2009/10   2008/09   2007/08   2006/07   2005/06

Total international student enrollment: **974,926**

Do these counts of international students reflect both public and private institutions?**Yes**

Top 10 sending places of origin and percentage of total international student enrollment:

Rank	Place of Origin	Number of Students	Percent of Total
1	China	304,040	31.2%
2	India	132,888	13.6%
3	South Korea	63,710	6.5%
4	Saudi Arabia	59,945	6.1%
5	Canada	27,240	2.8%
6	Brazil	23,675	2.4%
7	Taiwan	20,993	2.2%
8	Japan	19,064	2.0%
9	Vietnam	18,722	1.9%
10	Mexico	17,052	1.7%

Total number of international students from all places of origin by field of study:

Rank	Field of Study	Number of Students	Percent of Total
1	Business and Management	197,258	20.2%
2	Engineering	196,750	20.2%
3	Other/Unspecified Subject Areas	131,332	13.5%
4	Mathematics and Computer Sciences	112,950	11.6%
5	Social Sciences	75,951	7.8%
6	Physical and Life Sciences	73,838	7.6%
7	Humanities	66,737	6.8%
8	Fine and Applied Arts	56,758	5.8%
9	Health Professions	33,399	3.4%
10	Education	17,675	1.8%
11	Agriculture	12,278	1.3%

Source: Institute of International Education, *Open Doors Report*

2.3. Statistical Background: Foreign-born Staff

Many middle level management positions are held by international staff who finally receive their permanent resident card or change their citizenship into Americans. Rosnenau (1997) defined globalization as a process that is changing humankind's preoccupation with territoriality and the traditional arrangements of the state system. In Higher Education, workplace is not a homogenous place anymore. In Colgate University, a Liberal Arts University, student affairs division consists of many very skillful members not only from all over states, but also from various countries including Jamaica, Japan, Greece, Ghana, and Indonesia. Such diversity brings another level of richness in handling the different issues that our students and staff are facing. At this university, students from different states in America together with other students from over seventy countries try to gain their best academic and social experiences by living together on campus. We believe that each member's unique cultural and social background are wrapped in their unique potential.

United States Department of Labor released the information that shows that "foreign-born workers represented 16.1 percent of the U.S. labor force in 2012."

In 2012, there were 25 million foreign-born persons age 16 years and older in the U.S. labor force, representing 16.1 percent of the total. About 130 million workers were native born, making up the remaining 83.9 percent of the total U.S. labor force. About 38 percent (9.5 million workers) of the foreign born were from Mexico and Central America, and 28 percent (7 million workers) were from Asia (including the Middle East). The share of foreign–born workers from Europe and the Caribbean was about 10 percent for each. (Bureau Labor of Statistic, 2012).

Percent of the foreign born by region of origin, 2012 annual averages

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Percent of the foreign born by region of origin, 2012 annual averages
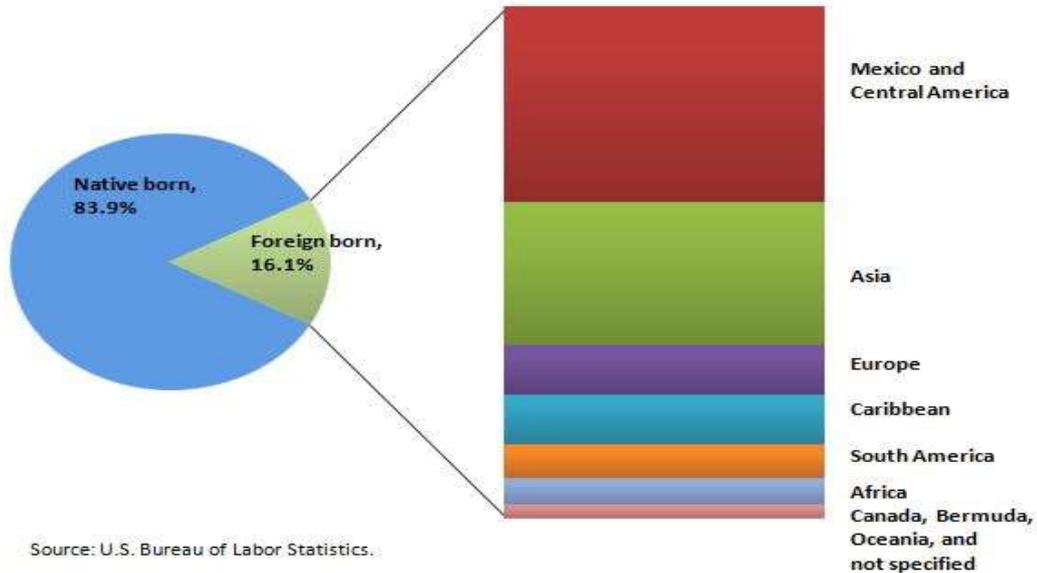
Characteristic	Number	Percent
Native born	129,940,000	83.9
Foreign born	25,025,000	16.1
Mexico and Central America	9,549,000	38.2
Asia, including the Middle East	7,023,000	28.1
Europe	2,497,000	9.9
Caribbean	2,425,000	9.7
South America	1,679,000	6.7
Africa	1,232,000	4.9
Canada, Bermuda, Oceania, and not specified	654,000	2.6

The charts above show that higher education in USA consists of members of international and multicultural community.

3. Discussion

3.1. Let's communicate

It is completely understood that both domestic and international students/staff prefer to work with people who have similar background for the reason of "cultural-emotional connectedness (Volet and Ang, 1998, p. 27). With regard to the attitude that international student's or staff attitudes towards interaction with different members of the other groups outside their cultural bubble, it is very important that people are appropriately educated when it comes to communicate and interact with diverse members of community. This definitely is not to create the concept of othering. Moore and Hampton (2015) described that the concept of othering has been represented as a group phenomenon which serves to support the social cohesion of ingroups (Palfreyman, 2005). Furthermore, he adds that as such, challenging stereotypical perceptions is neither a simple nor impossible undertaking (Peng, 2010).

Many process of communication are affected by or rely on the perceptions the communicators have internalized from their culture (Novinger, 2001, p. 59). A specific gestures including eye contact, facial expression, haptics (touches), posture, or even smell can be translated differently among different members of the intercultural groups. In order to engage in successful intercultural communication and interaction experiences, "it is crucial to explore the perspectives of

those who engage in both positive and negative experiences" (Moore and Hampton, 2015, p. 404). This may lead to a broader goals of internationalization and globalization of any institutions through an open mindedness.

Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective   --- Martin Luther King, Jr.

Mark Twain stated that, "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug." In student affairs practice, it is a huge stake to think that it is enough to say the almost the right word. The impact can be utterly disturbing especially when we all know that one of our main goals in student affairs is to support other emotionally and intellectually: communicate with the right words at the right time. Intercultural communication occurs when the differences between two people's cultural apparatus become apparent to them (Redder and Rehbein, 1987: 18 in Matsumoto, 2010). These differences can lie in how communication can actually impact the process of the knowledge absorption inside (and outside) the classroom. In higher education, all types of communication are as important as one's social behavior or nonverbal process (Novinger, 2001, p. 54).

It is described by Novinger that Literate people who were concerned with the production of words proposed the early concept of communication. Students feel that good communication in general is "as an unadulterated message entering the ear of the receiver and going through a clean pipe into an uncontaminated brain" (p. 53-54). Please be reminded that nonverbal intercultural communication process across culture can be very complex. Novinger described, "Not only do nonverbal behaviors act equally with verbal behavior to accomplish numerous communication functions, they also operate independently to achieve key communication goals" (p. 54). Words can be replaced by a glance or a stroke on the hand or even a hug. Different cultures may appreciate each of these actions differently.

Many students choose to go to their peer to share and consult their feelings. When trust is built, many students will also share their feelings and stories with some of the staff in the student affairs division. They prefer to do so first before they go to the counseling center for their emotional support and many do the opposite. There is definitely a need to have more staff who can communicate with and understand these students. Students feels that there are definitely opportunities for faculty and staff to learn better about different cultural differences. "Please talk to us. Please ask and not assume," a student from Vietnam said. "Students need to speak up more and be proactive in letting the professor knows about what the impact of what is said during the class," said a student from Pakistan. Furthermore, this students admits that by doing so, he has not had any serious mis-intercultural-communication issue as what had happened to her.

"Intercultural competencies involve the individuals' ability to conduct dialogue with others, which is another important element for intercultural dialogue that can be relied upon as long as it is accompanied by a supportive political environment" (Besley and Peters, 2012, p. 301). This is when the student affairs practitioners see the opportunity to address issue by fostering collaborative programs involving different departments and diverse array of partners and participants on campus. The goal is to show a solid commitment to create a shared understanding, offering a venue of feedback, and connect the intercultural cross path. When necessary, organizing a march (not a protest) to gather solidarity towards a common purpose is an indication of student affairs active involvement in student's life.

3.2. Professional growth by intercultural competency improvement.

"Intercultural competence should be a part of citizenship and human rights education" (Besley and Peters, 2012, p. 308). Because only with such understanding, ones can welcome differences and take advantage of it for his own growth, thus create a harmonious society. "Student affairs administrators sometimes may be hesitant to initiate changes because they fear they may not be successful" (Barr, McClelland, and Sandeen, 2014, p. 59). However, the staff who find and utilize the right resources serve as change agents that will benefit the student and their professional growth. Those resources can be a) institutional funding to attend intercultural and diversity conferences b) participation in "changing patterns of institutional governance" (Barr, McClelland, and Sandeen, 2014, p. 55) and c) involving oneself in creating more face-to-face communication and dialogue.

How do student affairs practitioners grow their career that will make them professionals with great characters? Some would make decision based on information that they have read, received, seen and told by and others would decide based on what is just available out there. For instance, it was found that staff frequently mention direct and vicarious exposure to work experiences as shaping their expected choices (Lent et al., 2002). Students and/or staff focused communication that facilitate growth will be beneficial to examine and acknowledge what they need to start thinking about their future. Only with such communication, the institution will help to match one's interests, potentials and opportunities, rather than what they want to do or be. Intergroup dialogue will allow one's honest perspectives to show for the administrators to understand one's interests and his/her potentials to become the institutional asset.

O'Toole (1995) emphasizes that student affairs practitioners have to go beyond the intellectual commitment to change. They have to demonstrate to others that their heart is in it, with integrity and vision (Barr, McClelland, and Sandeen, 2014). Furthermore, the staff and administrators have to create trust and perform consistent positive behavior. To create positive educational and behavioral experiences, the following chart represents the steps a dialogue can enhance one's intercultural understanding that will impact one's commitment towards initiating changes.

Intercultural approach in higher education attempts to address issues of cultural diversity that is in the parallel imperative to the globalization of higher education. In achieving this, a dialogue to create the understanding of being a good national and global citizen is required and becoming critical. Below is one of the suggestions of creating a new positive and understanding behavior through dialogue would be ideally created. The following concept of intercultural communication through a dilogue is to capture a better knowledge in a set of rules to for the higher education practitioner to work across cultures effectively and harmoniously. With the following concept, people are enabled to express themselves without feeling being judged and misunderstood. This also works to empower people to participate fully in having the responsibility of welcoming the differences through specific practices.

Prior knowledge of one's cultural and historical background: personal approach to flexible the mind

⬇

Removing one's subjectivities and stereotyping

⬇

Modify one's understanding, structure the message to present the symbols and meanings

⬇

The delivery: effective intercultural communication

⬇

Creating new behavior

The successful dialogue will result in a behavior that is more understanding towards diversity. This outcomes will play as an essential role to extensively influence the other aspects of one's community for adopting the appropriate understanding.

Students in general are perceived as one of the most critical advising instruments for the higher education administration. While direct supervisors continue to review their staff performance on daily, monthly, semester, and/or annual based, many higher administration seek direct input from many of the multicultural and international students about how the effectiveness and efficiency in certain department. The Deans or Directors of the institutions, even the Board of Trustee members arrange different meetings to seek these students' inputs about the effectiveness of a faculty, staff, or program. Not only once or twice, students may get a special invitation to a dinner or other social meetings where they can directly build connection and conversation with the higher education administration. As an impact, many hiring strategies can be based on the output of these conversation.

4. Conclusion and Future Recommendation
Although the findings showed the importance of intercultural communication competency and there is a significant agreement that the student affairs staff need to go through in-depth intercultural or diversity related training, more detail investigation is recommended to seek and better clarify other variables similar to this study. This includes in-depth exploration of what specific areas needed to be covered and how often related trainings need to be mandatory participated. The findings provide the student affair administrator and staff as well as those who provides the service to members with unique cultural background, equip the community members with some professional insights to move up. Though observation may appear to be a powerful predictor of the importance of intercultural communication competency in higher education field, future research is needed to uncover more urgent needs and tools for professionals to use to enhance academic and professional experiences.

Furthermore, ways to promotes intercultural understanding and awareness are by promoting programs that will improve the engagement across cultural and social divides as well as those that can cultivate an ethos of social responsibility. They include but not limited to having more intercommunication and intercultural related brown bags, inviting more diversity related speakers, sending community members to related conferences, open mic events, incorporating intergroup dialogue in the syllabus, etc. In addition, the methods of addressing power relations or problem solving to foster self and collective awareness and social justice commitments include but not limited to educate all Colgate community members by actively listening to one another, sharing personal experiences and views, and explore the social context in which they live to produce socially and culturally appropriate forms of communication. In the future, an institutional effort is needed to better record the measurement of intercultural competency and diversity awareness initiatives on campus.

Through better understanding and practice of intercultural communication, the college will be able to communicate its mission and vision to support and prepare its students and staff to succeed in their Colgate life and beyond. However, with such believe, there are so many issues occurred and caused from intercultural miscommunication.

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