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Moving out of the Margins:

Mattering and the International Student Experience

Kristin D. Phillips

Deeply personal challenges confront all new students when they arrive at their college or university. Some of their core questions include: "Are we part of things; do we belong; are we central or marginal? Do we make a difference; do others care about us and make us feel we matter?" (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 6). For international students who may be marginalized by race, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic background or language, these questions can be particularly painful. This article recommends a new foundation for working with international students: mattering. It provides a theoretical background for the constructs of marginalization and mattering, examines their relevancy in the context of the experiences of international students, and begins to define strategies for colleges and universities to make international students feel that they do indeed matter.

"I'm from Ghana, West Africa. And I live in Akkra, which is the capital city of 3 million people." Vivian has told her story, in her rich Ghanaian-British accent, many times. Vivian is twenty-six. She is a tall African woman. She arrived for the interview wrapped in bright colors and style, her hair in braids. While Vivian was born in Ghana, her mother's work with the United Nations led her parents around the world. She grew up in London, until she and her sisters and brother returned to go to boarding school in Ghana while her parents lived in Liberia and Sierra Leone. One sister went off to college in London, another to Smith in Massachusetts, and Vivian, who began medical college in Ghana, eventually decided to go out and see more of the world herself. She spent four years at the University of Vermont, graduating with a nursing degree and many awards for her service and leadership. She now works with autistic children in a small Vermont town.

Vivian was one of five research participants in a qualitative pilot study I conducted in the fall of 2000 on the experience of international students at the University of Vermont (UVM). Her story and experience are far from representative of the other 490,933 international students who were studying in the United States in 1999 and who came to prepare for a profession, learn or improve their English, be near loved ones, or engage in cross-cultural exchange. Yet I find that her unique and inspiring story offers many opportunities for the illustration of two constructs important in the international student experience: marginality and mattering.

Deeply personal challenges confront all students new to a college or university. Some of their core questions include: "Are we part of things; do we belong; are we central or marginal? Do we make a difference; do others care about us and make us feel we matter?" (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 6). For international students like Vivian who are marginalized by race, nationality, and culture, and yet others who face differences in socioeconomic status, language and educational experience, these questions can be particularly painful. With these challenges in mind, this article recommends a new foundation for working with international students: mattering. It provides a theoretical background for the constructs of marginalization and mattering, examines their relevancy in the context of the experiences of international students, and recommends ways in which colleges and universities can make international students feel that they do indeed matter.

Lives in Transition: The Marginality of International Students

One unique and inevitable challenge to choosing international students as a research population in student affairs is that their one commonality is, ironically, their diversity of background, culture and expectations. With these differences, it is safe to conclude that international students are more different than alike. However, since they share the common experience of leaving their home country behind to study in the United States, it is also possible to identify a number of themes and similarities in their stories.

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Transitions

Upon an international student's arrival in the United States, s/he must assume new roles, submerge herself/himself in a foreign culture, learn to recognize, understand and function in a set of new social norms, experience a further independence from family and friends, and perhaps even communicate in another language. In other words, s/he is in transition.

Nancy Schlossberg (1989) defines transitions as "events or nonevents that alter our lives" (p. 6). In her work with adult students who were returning to school, she began to notice that people in transition often feel marginal and do not feel that they matter. "Every time an individual changes roles or experiences a transition, the potential for feeling marginal arises. The larger the difference between the former role and the new role the more marginal the person may feel, especially if there are no norms for the new roles" (p. 7). In the following section the concept of marginality is explored and the ways in which international students experience transition is further discussed.

Marginality

Schlossberg (1989) asserted that marginality can describe a personality type, a permanent condition, or a temporary condition during a transition. An individual with a marginal personality is

one who is living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples, never quite willing to break, even if permitted to do so, with past and traditions, and not quite accepted, because of prejudice, in the new society in which the individual seeks to find a place. (Park, 1928, p. 892)

A bicultural person lives on the border of two different cultures, and therefore experiences marginality as a permanent condition. First-year college students on the other hand may experience marginality as a temporary condition during their first weeks at school as they leave old roles behind, fear they will not "fit in," and search for a place for themselves in their new surroundings.

A person who experiences the feeling of being marginal feels "pride and shame, love and hate, and other contradictory sentiments....Such individuals are constantly aware of their status and turn their attention upon themselves to an excessive degree: thus increased sensitiveness, self-consciousness, and indefinable malaise, inferiority and various compensatory mechanisms, are common traits. (Stonequist, 1935, p. 16)

Most people have experienced a degree of these feelings at some point in their lives – whether upon beginning college, moving to a new city, or adjusting to a new role in their profession. Yet, the degree to which one must endure such feelings varies with the individual experience, one's self-esteem, and the degree of the transition.

Marginality in International Students

Student affairs, counseling, and psychology literature teem with examples of how marginalization affects international students. Klineberg and Hull (1979) found that feelings of alienation from university life have been significantly more severe for international students than for students from the United States. Becker (1971) found that international students who remained in the United States over two years grew less patriotic toward their home countries and more favorable toward the United States, but often seemed hostile to both countries. She suggests that these students may become "marginal" in rejecting both their home culture and their host culture (as cited in Spaulding & Flack, 1976). Du Bois (1956) describes the behavior of marginalized international students with low self-esteem:

They may react with depression and withdrawal. Or, they may indulge in compensatory strivings and often an inappropriate redoubling of effort...or they may react with openly expressed hostility that involves the rejection of the host nation and a compensatory chauvinism. Another type of defensive reaction may be over-identification, as when students become more American than the Americans. (p. 72)

The marginality these students experience can be attributed to the countless transitions they undergo upon their arrival at their host institution, a few of which are described here.

Support network. One of the most difficult transitions that occurs for international students is that they lose the support network of family, friends, professors, co-workers, or advisers they had in their home country. These familiar people have played a crucial, though sometimes previously unnoticeable, part in validating the young person. They also provide “emotional and social support in culturally patterned ways” (Pedersen, 1991, p. 12). International students are suddenly deprived of these support systems. The cultural patterns of supportive relationships in the United States can vary immensely from that of the home culture, and the student may find it extremely difficult to forge new bonds due to their unfamiliarity with the new patterns. For example, “a society that prizes friendship expressed in terms of long, intimate, and self-revealing confidences will ill-prepare an individual for the casual, superficial and extroverted types of friendship so often found in American college life” (Du Bois, 1956, p. 94).

With parents who traveled extensively and education at boarding schools, Vivian had long lived independently from her parents when she arrived at UVM at the age of twenty-one. Although her parents had long been preparing her for the trials she would face as a black, African woman, nothing prepared her for the shock she felt upon entering her first classroom and staring at the sea of white faces, staring back at her. Her parents and friends with whom she shared similar cultural experiences could not support her in the same way across the distance. She would later find new systems of support in friendships with peers, her “host family,” and mentors.

Role adjustment. When international students arrive on college campuses in the United States, they are suddenly confronted with the need to fulfill a variety of

competing and sometimes contradictory roles...When the requirements of those roles are realistically perceived and effectively learned, the student’s experience is likely to be “successful,” but when the roles are not accommodated, the resulting identity diffusion and role conflict may affect the student’s emotional well-being, and present serious obstacles to the achievement of educational objectives. (Pedersen, 1991, p. 10)

According to Bochner (1972) international students must learn to play four new roles: (1) university student, (2) young adult, (3) foreigner and (4) ambassador for their home country. While the former two may not require adjustment, the roles of “foreigner” and “ambassador” may be completely new to the student. While some students may embrace these roles, they can present serious challenges to identity, self-confidence and self-image in other students.

For Vivian, the roles of university student and young adult came easily to her. Her educational experiences in Ghana and her comfort with taking on responsibility allowed her to emerge as a leader both academically and among her peers. With her abundance of international experience, even the role of foreigner was not new to her. The one new role she openly rejected was that of ambassador for Ghana, Africa and often for all black people. But Vivian also took on one more role: that of educator. Following her mother’s counsel – “wherever you go, whatever you do, make sure you leave your mark, make an impact on people” – Vivian had the skills and confidence to turn ignorance and insults into growth through educating others about her culture and country.

Language. Another source of marginalization for international students is the level at which they speak, read, understand, and can communicate in English. Du Bois (1956) postulates that the degree to which a foreign student knows and can learn English during her/his stay in the United States is no doubt one of her/his most significant skills. It is “at the same time a symptom of his capacity to understand and to deal with the American environment, particularly the highly verbalizing environment of colleges and universities” (p. 82). A low level of English is a serious handicap which will isolate the student from both personal and academic support, increase the educational workload, and may prevent the student from achieving goals which are essential to adjustment. Even for students who speak English fluently, language can still be a source of marginalization because an adjustment to pronunciation and context may be necessary.

Ethnocentrism. International students encounter the same anxiety as other undergraduates about making friends and feeling that they “belong.” Yet for some students, these anxieties are compounded by such complications as a difficulty with the language, or having different cultural histories and experiences. Moreover, “direct

hostility on the part of the host to a particular nationality is not necessarily the most damaging attitude to a foreigner's self-esteem. Pure ignorance and naive stereotypes may be even more demeaning to a foreign student's self-esteem" (Du Bois, 1956, p. 42).

Vivian told countless stories of encounters with racism and ethnocentrism. She was not only challenged by stereotypes of people from her own nation and continent, but also with those of African Americans. She was confronted with blank stares when she arrived to tutor students in chemistry, and open hostility when others assumed she was a shoplifter or did not have enough money to pay for purchases in a store.

Instruction. Mossler (2000) highlighted the differences in instruction style that international students often encounter between their classes in the United States and in their home country. Lansdale (1984) asked students from developing countries how many of their professors used reading materials, assignments, or teaching methods in their classes which were relevant to situations in their home countries. Fifty-four percent claimed that none of their professors used such materials and only 16% said that many professors had. While budgets in many universities are tight, all students have a right to a multicultural pedagogy and curriculum in institutions which designate multiculturalism as part of their mission. Responsibility for education about other ways of understanding, experiencing, and organizing the world should not lie solely with Vivian and her fellow international students.

Mattering: A New Paradigm for Working with International Students

Schlossberg (1989) defines mattering as "our belief, right or wrong, that we matter to someone else" (p. 9). Mattering is the alternative feeling to marginality (Schlossberg, 1989). It is the affirmation needed when one asks the questions, "am I important?" or "do I belong here?" Rosenberg and McCullough (1981), who coined the term "mattering," assert that this perspective motivates people: "the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension exercises a powerful influence on our actions" (p. 165). They identify four elements which comprise the feeling of mattering: attention, importance, ego-extension, and dependence. Schlossberg (1989) identified one more form of mattering: appreciation. These five forms are discussed in the following section.

In light of the many marginalizing forces on college campuses in the United States today, what is it that colleges and universities can do to draw international students in from the margins, so that they feel they matter? Schlossberg claimed that "a culturally defined marginal group may not suffer from marginality when they are centrally involved in that group" (p. 8). In her community of international students at UVM, opportunity existed for Vivian and her peers to establish communications structures and familiar environments which could bring them back into the center. This article will now address how educators, student affairs professionals and administrators can build such a community, so that international students of all backgrounds and personalities may succeed. Strategies are recommended to address the five forms of mattering.

Attention

Attention, the most basic form of mattering, is commanding "the interest or notice of another person" (Rosenberg et al., 1981, p. 164). All professionals in colleges and universities need to pay attention to the fact that international students exist at their institutions. Simply acknowledging their arrival with a welcome from the international education office, the student is receiving the message that they are being attended to or, in other words, that they matter. Vivian cited the welcoming support and the orientation experience at the Office of International Education Services (OIES) as having been a large part of her "wonderful experience." Other university professionals should also be encouraged to welcome international students and recognize the distance traveled and effort made to study at an institution so far from home, as well as for their scholarship, leadership, and additional strengths which brought them to the university.

Importance

Importance is the belief that someone else "cares about what we want, think and do, or is concerned with our fate" (Rosenberg et al., 1981, p. 164). In particular, student affairs professionals in international education offices can follow up with students on previous conversations, check in about class schedules and advising, and make an effort to understand the people and situations the students left behind in their home countries. This

approach expresses to the international students that there are people around them who recognize how important this event is in their lives and who also care that it is a successful experience.

Ego-extension

Ego-extension refers to the sense that “other people will be proud of our accomplishments or saddened by our failures” (Rosenberg et al., 1981, p. 164). Educators and administrators can take pride in what their students are accomplishing and express that publicly. They can create communication structures both outside and inside the community of international students where accomplishments and honors can be announced. Many international students excel in their academic programs and in leadership and recreational activities. College professionals can advocate for their students to receive honors and recognition and should serve as links to school newspapers where such achievements or successes can be reported. By encouraging a feeling that someone in their community is taking pride in them, or supporting them in their struggle to be treated fairly and equally, international students are more likely to hold on to their connections with community and strive for success. Vivian’s host family, a local family with whom she was matched during her first year became a strong source of support and encouragement for Vivian. Because they took pride in her accomplishments and suffered with her through her frustrations, she rarely felt alone during the highs and lows of her experience.

Dependence

Dependence refers to the belief that other people rely on us. “That our behavior is influenced by our dependence on other people is easily understood...What is...more mysterious is why our actions are equally governed by their dependence on us” (Rosenberg et al., 1981, p. 164). Some students may be able to overcome feelings of helplessness, worthlessness, and marginality if they are connected to a group or organization of people to whom they have responsibilities.

Pedersen (1991) reports a high success rate for student support groups for international students at Syracuse University. Feeling needed is an important part of being in a community, and encouraging students to become involved in a group can help them to feel central, instead of marginal. However, it is important to take time to understand the student’s relations with her/his family at home. Some may already be experiencing an overwhelming feeling of dependence because of present or future financial obligations to those at home. These students may need to be encouraged to join activities which elicit more enjoyment than responsibility. In either case, student affairs professionals should encourage a healthy balance of independence, dependence on other students, and feeling needed by others. Through opportunities in the international student office to lead orientation and to assist newly arrived students, Vivian established strong networks of interdependence, in which she had a central place. By helping students to figure out how to use the ATM, go to the grocery store, and register for classes, she both attended to new students, and felt useful and valuable to her community.

Appreciation

Appreciation refers to the feeling that one’s efforts are recognized and valued by others. Student affairs professionals and college faculty and administrators can make international students feel appreciated in giving both formal and informal recognition to different efforts those students make. Contributions such as helping a fellow countryman adjust or reaching out to the local community should be recognized and commended. International education offices in particular can devise ways in which students can show appreciation for each other. Professionals in these offices can arrange special opportunities, such as guest speakers or coffee with the president of the institution, to express to students that they are indeed appreciated as individuals, as well as for their efforts and accomplishments. Different offices around the college or university could invite them to speak about different aspects of their home country, about their experience as a foreigner in the United States, or about their area of specialization in their studies. These are all ways of showing appreciation for international students as whole people, and international exchange is simultaneously promoted. These methods also emphasize to students that their uniqueness is not something for which they should be marginalized, but is indeed what makes them special.

Conclusion

Graduating with a degree in nursing, five awards for performance, and service to the UVM community, and an outstanding academic record, Vivian recalls her four years at the University of Vermont as “a wonderful experience.” How did she emerge from the overwhelming challenges and obstacles that she faced in her

academic life with such success and warm memories? Vivian thanks God and luck for all her blessings, and cites her African name, “Mauishi” which means “in the hands of God.” Yet I would argue that her success also grew out of her own ability to create and nurture the support systems and personal growth that she needed to feel that she mattered, as well as from some support structures that were already in place at the University of Vermont, namely through the Office of International Education Services.

“The polar themes of marginality and mattering connect all of us—rich and poor, young and old, male and female. Are we part of things; do we belong; are we central or marginal? Do we make a difference; do others care about us and make us feel we matter?” (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 6). Unfortunately, these questions elicit negative responses for many international students, who find themselves simultaneously marginalized on a number of different levels and far away from the people and environments which make them feel that they matter. Vivian’s story illustrates an experience from which colleges and universities can extract valuable insight into what contributes to a successful experience for international students. This article has attempted to define structures of mattering for international students at colleges and universities, and has identified some ways in which educators and student affairs professionals can make a difference in the lives of international students and make them feel that they matter, so that they too can find success and happiness in their experience abroad.

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