

A Look into How a Mentorship Program Influences International Students' Integration into University

Introduction

- In the current study, we established a mentorship program for new international students from the Western English Language Centre, and employed different measures (both qualitative and quantitative) to assess the program's effectiveness.
- In the program, the international students met weekly with a same-gender Western student mentor. Pairs were encouraged to engage in conversation and explore the campus and community.
- Goals of the focus group interviews:
 1. Evaluate the mentorship program.
 2. Understand the positive experiences and challenges international students face as they negotiate the integration process.
 3. Use the qualitative data to guide the development of quantitative survey questions.

Method

- Four sessions were conducted, ranging from 2-5 students, with one facilitator and one note-taker.
 - Questions included:
 - If you like Western, could you tell me why?
 - What has been difficult during your time here?
 - How much do you feel like you belong here at Western?
 - How have you liked your time in the program so far? How has it helped you?
- Analysis: Followed guidelines for Thematic Analysis as described by Howitt (2006).

Themes

Welcoming Campus Promotes Belonging

Lack of Cultural Knowledge Affects Friendship Formation

Mentorship Program Complements Academic Program

Students are impressed with the physical environment and educational facilities and opportunities. They also find the people around them friendly and are comfortable with asking Canadians for help. Based upon these interviews, it also seems that the campus environment can actually foster a sense of belonging amongst international students, as the students feel they have the same access to facilities that other (e.g. domestic) students have. Students who do not utilize campus facilities as much feel less connected.

"I can't see any differences in terms of services or in terms of facilities that the university offers us... I also send an email to the University Community Centre to participate in some activities. And I don't see any sign that makes me feel like I'm not part of the university."

One of the primary challenges that students face involves the formation of close friendships with Canadian students. This is constrained not only by how students might evaluate their own language proficiency, but also by how students perceive their level of knowledge of Canadian culture. At times, international students may not feel like they have common topics to discuss with Canadian students and therefore may find it difficult to establish friendships with them. This experience can be particularly prevalent at residence, where students might experience some of the cultural differences most often.

Participants noted the instrumental benefits that were gained from participation in the mentorship program. They were more comfortable pursuing a variety of activities in their new environment, including ordering food, taking public transit, and approaching others. Also, students discussed how the mentorship program complemented what they had learned in their academic studies. The program provided an outlet for learning about the culture and how to socialize with Canadians, which they could not learn as directly in their academic studies.

"We have (a) student card. We can take the bus (for) free. We also can borrow (books) from libraries. Also we can have some food in Ontario hall or UCC. Something like that. I feel I'm a part of the community."

"We study at the ELC and then we don't go to the main campus usually... Because I don't experience Western's life, I can't judge." (This student does not use facilities on main campus, so does not feel that she can judge how much she belongs at Western).

"I'd say hang out with Canadian people at residence... sometime they are friends and they are willing to help people. But sometimes I have trouble to hang out with them."

"I can hang out with them but usually what happens is there's not so many things in common."

"First, it's really good, she invited me to her parties and we hung out a lot but then after one month, two months, our conversations were just like hi, how are you and bye... Every time she talks, she speaks some slangs that I don't know. She always needs to explain to me." (Discussing her roommate who is Canadian)

"Culture and what people (are) like here. What they're interested in. And yeah and I want to be friends with them so I should learn some things they are familiar with." (Student on what she wanted to learn before coming to Canada).

"When she talked to me she didn't talk to me about grammar. But she helped me. She taught me how to order in the restaurant. She recommended some movies or TV series to me."

"I could say here at the ELC we'll learn (the) language to apply in school... In the (mentorship) program we learn the language to talk to other people. The cultural language, not the other language."

Conclusions and Recommendations

Accessible and welcoming campus facilities can help international students feel a sense of belonging to the university community.

While there are still challenges, the mentorship program begins to provide international students with the skills that will help them negotiate difficulties in the integration experience beyond the academic setting.

It is important to continue to assist international students with developing cultural knowledge – peer mentorship programs can help fill this function.

We are grateful to the Western English Language Centre, Student Success Centre, and ELSIR lab group for their support in helping us develop this initiative.

Relevant Publications:

Howitt, D. (2013). *Introduction to Qualitative Methods in Psychology*. Toronto, Pearson.

Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada. (2014). *Canada's universities in the world: AUCC internationalization survey*. Retrieved from: <http://www.aucc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/internationalization-survey-2014.pdf>

Thank you for your interest!



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