Examining the Role of Structural Diversity in Intercultural Competence

Janelle S. Peifer, Ph.D.
Agnes Scott College
Karen L. Chambers
St. Mary's College
Elaine Meyer Lee, Ed.D.
Agnes Scott College

Abstract

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the United States have identified intercultural competence as a priority for students in the modern, globalized economy. Increasingly, institutions utilize an intersectional approach to understand how individuals from different backgrounds engage with global learning and international educational experiences. This is an exploratory study which examines the association of institutional diversity and individual students' race/ethnicity with the outcome of global learning. The study includes two women's colleges: a predominantly white (77%), faith-based liberal arts institution in the US Midwest and a majority-minority (61%) liberal arts college in a Southeastern metropolitan area. Findings indicate that incoming students at the majority-minority college have higher Global Perspectives Inventory (GPI), (Braskamp, Braskamp, Merrill, & Engberg, 2012). scores when compared with the students, pre-study abroad, at the predominantly white institution (PWI) and that people of color (minority group members) had higher GPI scores than their white peers. Moreover, white students entering the majority-minority college had higher self-reported intercultural competence than white students at the PWI. Finally, controlling for majority/minority group status, institutional racial/ethnic makeup predicted GPI scores such that being a student at the majority-minority was associated with higher intercultural competence scores. Implications for institutional diversity are discussed as they relate to intercultural competence initiatives and outcomes.

Keywords: intercultural competence; institutional diversity; international education

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the United States have identified intercultural competence as a priority for students in the modern, globalized economy (e.g., Jones & de Wit, 2012; Lazor, et al., 2010). Upon students' completion of secondary education, these same positive cognitive and learning outcomes help students successfully navigate an international economy and job market that demand flexible, self-aware citizens who are able to skillfully traverse cultural boundaries (Altbach & Knight, 2007). It is likely that institutions with different

cultural makeups (e.g., a predominantly white institution compared to a majority-minority one) attract students who enter the higher education environment with different levels of interest in and skills related to intercultural competence. This study examines that hypothesis to better inform how institutions approach their culturally-informed educational efforts.

Institutional diversity and student outcomes

Assuming the value of intercultural competence as an education outcome, there is a substantial body of literature that establishes how attending a higher education institution with a more diverse student body composition—a feature also referred to as structural diversity--is correlated with higher levels of student intercultural competence. These researchers have also found an array of other positive educational outcomes such as cognitive complexity and openness (Gottfredson, et al, 2008, Gurin, et al., 2002, Denson & Bowman, 2013). These data were cited in the 2003 Supreme Court ruling that institutions of higher education have a "compelling interest in attaining a diverse student body" (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003). Justice O'Connor wrote for the majority that "numerous studies show that student body diversity promotes learning outcomes, and better prepares student for an increasingly diverse workforce and society, and better prepares them as professionals" (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003). For just one specific example of these studies, Saha and colleagues (2008) found in a study of 20,112 graduates from 118 medical schools that white students at the more racially and ethnically diverse medical schools rated themselves as more prepared to care for minority populations and as having stronger attitudes endorsing equitable access to healthcare.

However, since many of these studies are correlational in nature, it is difficult to establish the causation direction that is presumed by O'Connor's statement that student body diversity promotes these learning outcomes. This study aims to explore whether there might in fact be a slightly different chicken-and-egg effect, where students who are higher in intercultural competence to begin with self-selecting into schools with more diverse student bodies. In addition, if both directions of causation are in fact at work, this could create yet another valid educational justification for higher education institutions to pursue a diverse student body: to attract students into their communities who already bring with them strengths in intercultural competence.

Domestic Diversity and Cross-Cultural Experiences

Often, HEIs approach the goals of internationalization and domestic diversity as separate pursuits (Stier, 2003). The perceived discreteness of these objectives is expressed using institutional practices such as having distinct learning outcomes, courses, and even departments to promote and measure domestic and global diversity. Typically, there is no attempt to envision the underlying themes as being complementary or similar (Olson, Evans, & Shoenberg, 2007; Stier, 2003). While there are fundamental differences between these pursuits (Kahn & Agnew, 2015), both internationalization and multicultural education ask students to take the perspective of another, to recognize cultural context, to engage in self-reflection, and act in a socially responsible manner (Braskamp, 2014; Kahn & Agnew, 2015). Given their underlying

similarities, these goals can, and, moreover, maybe should, bolster the development of one another.

Students who engage in frequent interactions with diverse peers show a greater openness to diverse perspectives and a willingness to challenge their own beliefs (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). In the study cited in the previous section, Saha, Guiton, Wimmers, and Wilkerson (2008) found that increases in white medical students' cultural competency were found only when students perceived a positive climate for interracial and intercultural interactions. Thus, preparedness to engage academically and socially in both international and diverse domestic cultures may be complementary. Notably, a similar effect was not replicated in black medical students; the authors argue that this was due to the presence of a ceiling effect for cultural competency in the black medical student population regardless of institutional composition. Considering this, it seems important to explore how White students and students of color may interact differently with the structural diversity of their institutions and engage differently with intercultural competence development. The current study sets these questions as its goals.

Intersectionality of Race and Gender in Global Learning

Until recently, the education abroad field has largely approached intercultural competence as a culture-general construct. In the past, the homogeneity of primarily White students of a high socioeconomic profile studying outside of the United States may have masked some of the nuanced differences of students' cultural competence development processes (Salisbury, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2011). Tools to assess students' intercultural competence outcomes, like the Global Perspectives Inventory (Braskamp, Braskamp, Merril, & Engberg, 2012), were developed to be distributed and interpreted in the same way for individuals from different racial, gender, and religious backgrounds (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009).

In the past decade, some scholars in the field have called for an intersectional approach to examining globally-related intercultural outcomes of interest (Willis, 2012; Huber, 2010). Intersectionality--a term attributed to Kimberle Williams Crenshaw--highlights how interconnected identities related to systems of oppression (e.g., gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation) interact in important ways and shape individuals' identities and experiences (Collins, 2015). The current study takes a first step in exploring students' racial and gender identities and the role that they may play in cultural competence. Additionally, the study seeks to incorporate the macro-context of the institution. All participants are studying at small, liberal arts colleges for women: something that only one percent of the population of college-going women in the United States do. Despite this shared experience, we hypothesized that these students would still have significant differences in their cultural competence given their selection of colleges with vastly different institutional racial and cultural makeup (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). Within each institution, we also sought to understand how these culturally-related outcomes may differ for women of color and white women. To better understand the intricacies of college students' outcomes, we take a culturally-informed approach to examining women

college students' cultural competence and incorporating a look at macro-level, institutional diversity.

In conceptualizing what factors might contribute to students' global competence development during college, we look to Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Outcomes (I-E-O) model. The I-E-O model is a template developed to guide research on outcomes of interest in HEIs. The I-E-O model posits that student outcomes are influenced by characteristics that students have before attending college (e.g., race, gender, family experiences) as well as what they do in college (e.g., social engagement, study abroad engagement). The Input-Environment-Outcomes (I-E-O) model has been applied to studies of a range of student outcomes including satisfaction and retention for minority students (Strayhorn, 2012) and the impact of study abroad programs (Zhai & Scheer, 2002). When applied to college students' intercultural competence development, it highlights the importance of considering how college students' individual characteristic and previous experiences interact with the environment to affect outcomes.

Methods

Participants

All students in the sample attended a private, liberal arts, all-women's college. Of the total 295 women, 195 (66%) were enrolled in a majority - minority institution (MMI) and 100 (34%) a predominantly white institution (PWI). At the MMI, 42% self-identified as White only, 31% as Black, 4% as Latina, and 23% as other or not identified, whereas at the PWI, 59% self-identified as White, 5% as Black, 5% as Latina and 31% as other or not identified.

The majority - minority institution is located near a large metropolitan city in the Southeastern United States. Ninety-two percent of the college women in this sample identified the United States as home. The predominately white institution is located in an economically and racially diverse community region of approximately 500,000 residents. Over the last seven years, the college has seen approximately 50% of its students study abroad at some point prior to their graduation.

Materials and Procedures

Both colleges employ a multi-modal method to evaluate study abroad outcomes and contacted students with a link to complete the survey. Students at the MMI completed the surveys prior to the start of their first year at college (early August 2015, before beginning participation in Summit), and the students at the PWI completed the surveys prior to the semester they studied abroad. At the MMI, 279 of the enrolled students were contacted with a link to complete the survey using Qualtrics online survey software. Initial recruitment and reminder messages were sent via electronic mail to the students' college-affiliated addresses. Additional messaging about the survey was posted on the incoming class's official Facebook page. The survey questionnaire took an average of ten minutes to complete. At the PWI, 149 students were contacted after they had been accepted into the program and asked to complete the surveys prior

to their time abroad. Reminder messages were sent via email to the students' college-affiliated addresses.

Among the various measures used, students at both schools completed the Global Perspectives Inventory (GPI), (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2007). Many higher education institutions throughout the United States and abroad utilize the Global Perspectives Inventory (Braskamp, Braskamp, Merril, & Engberg, 2012) to assess their students' global learning outcomes. The GPI explores the multifaceted aspects of college students' pluralistic identity and global awareness. It is a self-reporting, 35-item questionnaire that has been nationally normed and is designed to assess the holistic development of intercultural maturity on the dimensions of cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal domains (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2007). Each of the tested dimensions has two subscales.

The cognitive dimension consists of the knowing subscale (the degree of complexity in one's view of the importance of cultural context in judging what is important) and the knowledge subscale (the degree of understanding and awareness of various cultures). The intrapersonal dimension consists of the identity subscale (the level of awareness of one's unique identity, purpose, and philosophy of life) and the affect subscale (the level of acceptance of cultural perspectives different from one's own and degree of emotional confidence when living in complex situations). The interpersonal dimension consists of the social responsibility subscale (the level of interdependence and social concern for others) and the social interactions subscale (the degree of engagement with others who are different from oneself and degree of cultural sensitivity in living in pluralistic settings). (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Engberg, 2014).

The GPI is utilized to collect baseline information from incoming first year students and includes items related to students' academic and co-curricular high school experiences. Students responded using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree) on questions related to their own cultural identity and feelings towards those who are culturally different. Sample items included "Some people have a culture and others do not," "I see myself as a global citizen," and "I frequently interact with people from a different race/ethnic group than my own."

Analysis and Justification

This exploratory study examines differences in baseline intercultural competence for students of color and White students nested within different institutional contexts (i.e., a predominantly white and majority - minority women's college). To do this, first, we use a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to check for differences in the outcomes based institutional affiliation. Then, we use a MANOVA to explore differences in intercultural competence outcomes of interest for students of color and White students, separating the findings by institution. Finally, to better understand the impact of campus diversity not only on students of color but also White students, we examined the outcomes for White students only, analyzing differences for White students attending a predominantly white versus majority - minority institution.

Findings

The first MANOVA tested for potential differences in intercultural competence for students enrolled at the predominantly white (PWI) versus the majority - minority institution (MMI). Overall, students enrolled at the MMI (M = 3.86, SD = .35) had higher scores on the overall measure of intercultural competence compared to students at the PWI (M = 3.60, SD = .47); $F(1, 286) = 28.98$, $p < .001$. Results indicated that students at the MMI (M = 3.69, SD = .50) had higher scores on the Cognitive Knowing subscale when compared to students at the PWI (M = 3.38, SD = .42); $F(1, 286) = 28.49$, $p < .001$. On the Interpersonal Social Interaction subscale, students at the MMI (M = 3.51, SD = .74) had higher scores than students at the PWI (M = 2.86, SD = .73); $F(1, 286) = 50.52$, $p < .001$. Women at the PWI (M = 4.18, SD = .73) had higher levels on one subscale (Intrapersonal Affect) when compared with the women at the MMI (M = 3.86, SD = .57); $F(1, 286) = 16.85$, $p < .001$. For the three other subscales (Cognitive Knowledge, Intrapersonal Identity, Interpersonal Social Responsibility), there were no significant differences between the groups.

After confirming differences in these areas of intercultural competence, we separated the subsequent analyses by institution. From there, we assessed differences for students of color and White students within their individual institutions. For the PWI institution, there were no differences in intercultural competence scores for students of color when compared with White students. Looking at the MMI, the MANOVA revealed differences on the Cognitive Knowing subscale, such that White students had higher scores (M = 3.83, SD = .49) compared to students of color (M = 3.63, SD = 50); $F(1, 165) = 6.44$, $p = .012$. Students of color had higher scores on both the Intrapersonal Identity (M = 4.10; SD = .48) and Interpersonal Social Interaction (M = 3.65; SD = .71) subscales of the GPI compared to White students' Intrapersonal Identity (M = 3.90; SD = .52); $F(1, 165) = 6.66$, $p = .011$ and Interpersonal Social Interaction scores (M = 3.28; SD = .75); $F(1, 165) = 10.49$, $p = .001$.

Next, we examined intercultural competence outcomes for White students alone. To do this, we executed a final MANOVA assessing possible differences for White students at the PWI and at the MMI. White students at the PWI (M = 4.25, SD = .44) had higher levels of Intrapersonal Affect on one subscale when compared to White students at the MMI (M = 3.76; SD = .50); $F(1, 125) = 33.31$, $p < .001$. On the overall measure of intercultural competence, White students at the MMI outperformed students at the PWI (M = 3.81; SD = .33); $F(1, 125) = 11.54$, $p = .001$.White students at the MMI (M = 3.83, SD = .49) had higher score on the Cognitive Knowing subscale compared to PWI students (M = 3.42, SD = .24); $F(1, 125) = 34.01$ $p < .001$. White students at the MMI (M = 3.28, SD = .75) had higher Interpersonal Social Interaction scores compared to PWI students (M = 2.79, SD = .64); $F(1, 125) = 15.09$, $p < .001$.

Discussion, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

Discussion

The main overall finding is that it appears that the more racially and ethnically diverse college may attract students with higher scores on a common measure of intercultural competence. This finding suggests that today's more sophisticated students in terms of these issues may be looking for a rich multicultural learning environment. Moreover, these findings control for the possibility that this difference is in itself a result of the greater diversity (caused, for example, by students of color having developed more complexity around these issues given their different lived experiences), since the white students by themselves at the more diverse school have higher scores on average than their counterparts at the less diverse school (and there is no significant difference between white students and students of color at the less diverse school). These findings underline the urgency of continued efforts to diversify student populations and curricula to attract students who are engaged with the intercultural competencies so needed in the workforce today.

Finally, the racial comparison at the more diverse school is a bit more complex: While incoming students of color do score higher than their white classmates on most of the subscales, there was one subscale (Intrapersonal Affect measuring level of acceptance of cultural perspectives different than one's own) which showed the reverse pattern. Further research into other possible difference between these groups, such as diversity of home community or distance traveled to college) would be necessary to interpret this finding.

Limitations

It must be stated that in an exploratory comparative study conducted by analyzing existing data, the most serious limitation is that the time of data collection was different at the two institutions, examining the experiences of new arrivals to the MMI and more experienced students preparing for studying abroad in the PWI. Therefore, in the latter case, it must be stressed that these results can only yield potential insights about who the college is attracting, rather than claims of any kind about the intercultural learning happening at the College.

Future Research

Much more analysis beyond the scope of this brief report needs to be done at the more diverse school to understand these racial differences, as suggested above. In addition, it will be necessary to compare these scores with those of students who entered before the launch of the bold focus on global learning to try to tease apart the effect of its ongoing demographic diversity from the effect of this new initiative in terms of the type of students it is attracting. Also, it will be very interesting to compare post-study abroad data from the two institutions, because the less diverse school also has high levels of participation in high-quality international programs and general education requirements in intercultural competence and global learning. Finally, since these two institutions are both women's colleges, it would add another dimension to compare these data to that of women students at co-educational colleges. Overall, the increasing interest

in and interconnectivity of both diversity and global learning in higher education compels more research into the intersection between these two areas, to best equip all our students to be effective change agents in this complex global society.

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About the Authors

Elaine Meyer-Lee, Ed.D., Associate Vice President for Global Learning and Leadership Development at Agnes Scott College, has been a Senior International Officer and intercultural leadership/diversity and inclusion educator for 15 years. Besides teaching, she has assessed intercultural higher education at the Harvard/Facing History Project, Boston College, Yale, Cambridge College, and Saint Mary's College since earning her doctorate in human development and psychology from Harvard. She has received grants including a 2014 Fulbright in France, and authored book chapters on internationalizing undergraduate education, intercultural competence, short-term off-campus programs, and assessing outcomes of education abroad. She has given numerous invited talks and juried presentations on assessment and

leadership and has served on several national boards in the field, including NAFSA's Board of Directors, of which she is currently Chair and President**.**

Janelle S. Peifer is an assistant professor of psychology at Agnes Scott College. She earned her Ph.D. in Clinical and School Psychology at the University of Virginia and is an alumna of Wake Forest University. Her research examines intra- and inter-cultural processes of college students' global competence development. Peifer's clinical and applied interests include emerging adult's identity formation, trauma/resilience, and the impact of travel-based experiences on young women's leadership development.