Housing international students: integration or separation?

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Housing international students: integration or separation?

Abstract
Today there are a variety of issues and concerns in higher education. At the center of most of these issues and concerns are students. Many theories have been developed which address the needs and issues of college students and their development. One major theory of student development is Arthur Chickering's (1993) Vectors of Development. Chickering's theory, or vectors of development, address a variety of student concerns and how they deal with issues/concerns such as developing social and intellectual competence, developing interpersonal relationships, and establishing autonomy. The focus of this theory tends to be on transitions and maturation through those transitions. Along with these developmental transitions, Blimling and Miltenberger (1990) state that students attending college for the first time feel scared or unsure due to loss of familiarity and distance from family.
HOUSING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS:
INTEGRATION OR SEPARATION?

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Today there are a variety of issues and concerns in higher education. At the center of most of these issues and concerns are students. Many theories have been developed which address the needs and issues of college students and their development. One major theory of student development is Arthur Chickering's (1993) Vectors of Development. Chickering's theory, or vectors of development, address a variety of student concerns and how they deal with issues/concerns such as developing social and intellectual competence, developing interpersonal relationships, and establishing autonomy. The focus of this theory tends to be on transitions and maturation through those transitions. Along with these developmental transitions, Blimling and Miltenberger (1990) state that students attending college for the first time feel scared or unsure due to loss of familiarity and distance from family.

In addition to this new and unfamiliar experience, traditional age students encounter the new environment of the residence hall. According to Blimling and Miltenberger (1990), "Residence hall living is likely to form important peer groups that significantly
influence the development of students during their college years" (p. 102).

Considering the transition students face in a new environment and the possible influence of peers in the process, adding another dimension creates a more complex developmental puzzle. This added piece for some college students is that of interacting with people from diverse backgrounds.

Today, there are approximately 14 million students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities (Open Doors 1992-1993: Report on International Student Exchange, 1993) and approximately 450,000 are from foreign countries (Desruisseaux, 1994). Considering the number of international students attending U.S. colleges and universities, do university/college residence life professionals understand how foreign students are interacting and living with American students? By American students, I am referring to students who are born in the United States or who are a citizen of the United States.

When assigning roommates and other housing options, residence hall professionals tend to focus on roommate compatibility. A study conducted by Perkins (1977) revealed that poor relationships with roommates
was related to unhappiness with living conditions. A critical part of relationships is communication and understanding (Waldo, 1989). Adding a cross-cultural dimension creates a complexity which needs attention.

The purpose of this paper is to examine issues relating to housing international students. First, I will explore the needs of international students as they relate to their living environment and satisfaction at college. Next, I will discuss the cases for and against housing international students separately from American students. Finally, I will examine possible alternatives and implications for housing international students.

**Needs of International Students**

The first area of focus is the needs of international students as they relate to their living environment and satisfaction at college. Several studies have been conducted on the topic of international students' feelings and concerns (Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Parr, Bradley, & Bingi, 1992; Perkins, Perkins, Guglielmino, & Reiff, 1977). These studies focused on how these feelings and concerns influence their adjustment and success in U.S. colleges and universities. According to Heikinheimo
and Shute (1986), the major objective or goal of international students is academic success. But in order to achieve that goal, international students' social and environmental needs also must be fulfilled.

A study conducted by Perkins, et al. (1977) examined the adjustment problems encountered or experienced by three different international student groups. Some of the problems mentioned by international students were adjusting to "American social customs, making friends, and being accepted by social groups" (Perkins, et al., p. 382). In addition, Heikinheimo and Shute (1986) found that international students feel a need to interact socially with students of the host culture or country. Without this interaction, international students tend to feel isolated. This feeling of isolation often carries over into the classroom setting resulting in poor academic performance.

In relation to the needs of international students, one of the major problems or concerns cited in many studies is the language barrier (Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Parr, Bradley, 1992; Perkins, et al., 1977). The students expressed that the language barrier impeded their progress toward both social and
academic success. As a result, there is a tendency for international students to withdraw because of a lack of communication or ability to express ideas and feelings which American students can understand (Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986).

Other areas of concern have also been expressed by international students. Perkins et al. (1977) conducted a study comparing the adjustment problems of three international student groups. They found that international students also face problems of "homesickness, housing, funds, food, and relationships of the opposite sex" (p. 383). Parr, Bradley, and Bingi (1992) found similar results. They also stated that some international students experience problems understanding the competition and assertiveness displayed by American students.

Although many similar results were found concerning the needs of international students, Perkins et al. (1977) cautions against generalizing across different international cultural groups. Some groups share similar concerns, yet there are differences between and among the groups. Differences are found among the types and priorities of concerns. It may be that the situation
and environment influences the needs and adjustments of international students (Perkins, et al., 1977).

**Housing International Students**

Now that a better understanding of the needs and concerns of international students has been explored, what about the housing issue? Should international students be separated from American students or should they be integrated?

A case may be made for separation. As mentioned in the studies cited previously, language is a major barrier to the adjustment and socialization of international students. Americans first, and usually only, language is English; consequently U.S. students use only that language. By placing international students with American students, a high risk of alienation is at stake. According to Blimling and Miltenberger (1990), "if students must communicate in their second language or dialect to receive feedback and to control their environment, they bear an additional burden that can inhibit success" (p. 295). If international students are forced to speak English without a clear understanding and ability, frustration and lack of communication can take place. This situation can ultimately lead to isolation.
Another reason for separating American and international students is the feeling of home international students receive by being around those with similar backgrounds. Heikinheimo and Shute (1986) and Shea (1993) stated that students, international and minority, expressed a tendency to experience less racial tension when they are in an environment with others from their own cultural background. Through special housing for international and minority students, there was a feeling of support and comfort like being at home which was not given by students from other cultural backgrounds.

A third reason to separate international students is possible alienation from their own ethnic group. It has been stated by international students that they are concerned about interacting with American students socially because of a fear that others from their own ethnicity will view them as traitors (Fondacaro, Heller, & Reilly, 1984; Shea, 1993).

So is it possible for integration to work? The case for integration suggests that yes it can. A problem that can result from separation is segregation. Perhaps, letting groups remain separated encourages stereotypes and assigns reputations without a clear
understanding. On one campus, special student housing or theme housing led to a divisive atmosphere of one side of campus versus the other side of campus (Shea, 1993). In other words, students on this campus treat it as two separate campuses, the North Campus and the East Campus, rather than one unified campus community.

When international students are separated from American students, there is lost learning which takes place through interaction on the part of both groups. According to Penn and Durham (1978), interaction promotes learning. Promotion of learning through interaction is connected with the cited needs of international students to have social interaction. Also, interaction promotes opportunity for adjustment and appreciation (Saidla & Grant, 1993).

**Housing Alternatives**

Now that the cases for and against separation have been presented, what are the alternatives? One option an institution can choose is to separate international and American students. This means establishing housing for international students without a mix of American students. As stated before, the risk could be segregation and possible hostility. It may also mean a lost opportunity for international students and
American students to learn from each other. On the other hand, separate housing can allow international students an opportunity to make a connection and to have a feeling of home (Shea, 1993).

The other alternative for housing is to integrate international students by creating special houses or theme houses within the residence hall. These houses can promote a feeling of home and family connection needed by students (Shea, 1993). Communication can be built through resident assistants and other staff. The hall staff can create programs and opportunities which foster a shared experience. Programs can focus on diversity, different ways of living, and cultural awareness.

Along with integration, a support can be built in by creating and presenting communication workshops. These workshops can help international and American students overcome the language barrier. According to Waldo (1984), roommate conflicts were improved by improving communication. Students attended training sessions which helped them learn how to live and deal with their roommates in a positive way.

Another finding by Waldo (1989) is communication enhancement groups. One residence life department
offered workshops to enhance relationships. Resident assistants conducted the workshops by working through four stages of training with residents. First, resident assistants define communication skills. Next, they model the effective ways of using communication skills. Then, residents practice demonstrating the skills. In conclusion, resident assistants facilitate a discussion among the residents. Through these workshops, students work together to improve communication. Also, the study showed that the quality of relationships and communication was improved by attending the groups.

Another alternative is to create international theme halls which only house international/American roommates. According to Saidla and Grant (1993), this type of housing creates an opportunity for relationships and understanding to be developed through special programs which have an international focus. Special programs can be as simple as having a panel of international students talk about their own culture, developing a fashion show which models various clothing styles from different cultures, or having an international food tasting day or week.
Recommendations for Residence Life Professionals

In order to build community and understanding, it is important for all students to encounter diversity. One way of facilitating this encounter is through the safe environment of the residence hall. Therefore, I believe that international students should be paired with American roommates.

However, there is no one best way of handling the international/American roommate issue. Housing international students is a priority and concern which should be handled in relation to the needs of the students and the environment of the campus. Each institution may need to establish different ways of dealing with the issue. Separating or integrating should be based on what is best for the students involved. It may be that a variety of options should be available to students in order to offer students the challenge and support they need to succeed in college.
References


