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Exploring narratives of community among domestic and international students at a research intensive, American university

Currently, more than four million students study in another country. There are several reasons to explain the significant increase of international student mobility within the past 15 years. First, student mobility is intertwined with the larger trends of globalization, where countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia are competing for the best and brightest minds to not only study in their respective countries, but to ultimately immigrate. Secondly, many students look to study in other countries to better their chances of finding employment once they return home. And lastly, many cash-strapped universities look to international students to help fill in budget gaps, as these students pay significantly higher fees than their domestic counterparts. Additionally, international students have a significant impact on both local and national economies in their host countries. As the top hosting countries compete for international student numbers, global debates have ensued regarding how international students are integrating on campuses. As campus communities continue diversifying, so does the concept of finding a sense of community. However, international students may assume that domestic students already have a sense of community on a university campus, but literature suggests domestic students struggle as well. The primary aim of this study was to conduct an in-depth exploration of narratives of both international and domestic students in order to compare how these students construct sense of community in an unfamiliar campus environment. Additionally, this study explores how international and American students negotiate belonging on campus, the dynamics about community when international and American students interact, and how these students negotiate their own and others' cultural identities. As a result, this study provides practical implications for universities to enhance the experiences of both international and domestic students.

The theoretical base of this study included acculturation theory, social representation theory, third space theory, Tinto's Model of Student Retention, and the theory of

matter. With an epistemological constructivist paradigm, this study took a qualitative research approach with a case study research design. A total of 20 international and American students participated in this study through focus groups and weekly journals. A researcher's journal was also utilized as a way to interpret the findings of the study.

The findings of this study boldly underline the importance of sense of community, though when comparing the narratives of the international and American students, the views of sense of community had similarities and differences. When examining the surface of the narratives, both international and American students expressed satisfaction with the university community. However, a deeper dive into the data provided a different story. Both groups of students shared feelings of not mattering to the university community, but perhaps mattering to certain individuals. This study also showcases how each set of students entered this new environment with certain social representations or "lenses", especially regarding higher education. This suggests that students need platforms and opportunities to have complex and diverse interactions in order to learn and think differently about complex issues, such as sense of community.

The implication of this study is to encourage a dialogue in defining sense of community on university campuses not just in the United States, but around the world. This study reinforces the impact sense of community has on the success of university students, as well as the impact it has on student recruitment and retention. Additionally, this study showcases the complexity of identity development and the delicate nature of how one processes cultural interactions.