

International Students and the Politics of Difference in US Higher Education.

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Introduction

The relation between education and democracy is a difficult one. Even the wealthiest countries with highly educated populations have failed to develop educational systems that provide adequate educational experiences and opportunities for individuals within all social groups. Since the mid 1960s, higher education institutions in the US have made efforts to change the landscape of their campuses from a largely white, male middle-class terrain to one that incorporates students and staff from different ethnic, racial and gender backgrounds. Unfortunately, wide achievement gaps still exist between students of different social backgrounds at almost every stage of the educational ladder.

In their assessment of the educational disparities between social groups in the US ,for example, Jacobson, et al. (2001) point to a wide and alarming disparity that exists between the educational achievements of minority students, especially Hispanics and African Americans, and white students from grade three onwards. These failures have led to debates about how to attain equal educational opportunity, how to understand the role educational systems play in sustaining or undermining racism and other forms of oppression, and how to identify the strategies available through educational systems to dismantle oppression and enhance the well-being of those who are members of socially disadvantaged groups. At the centre of these debates are questions about the nature of equality, whether and how best to recognize diversity amongst social groups, and how to reconcile diversity and democratic participation.

In this paper, I examine the policies and practices of US universities in light of the changing demographics from a social justice perspective to underscore the extent to which policies and practices of institutions work to sustain social inequalities among different groups of students. Focusing on the experiences of female international graduate students in two US higher institutions, I argue that contemporary diversity efforts in US educational institutions emphasize a recognitional concept of equality based on the celebration of students and staff diversity without any significant reference to either social justice or the economic basis of socio-cultural differences. Drawing on the insights of social theorists like Iris Marion Young and others, I contend that a true diversity effort requires establishing a politics that welcomes difference by dismantling and reforming

structures, processes, concepts and categories that sustain difference-blind, impartial, neutral, universal politics and policies.

Diversity Politics and International Students in US

Attracting international students has become a priority for U.S. universities regardless of size or location. Higher education institutions have sought to use the internationalization of their student body as a conduit to achieving greater diversity, and are often quick to point to the number of international students admitted as evidence of their commitment to diversity efforts. While the policy of contemporary higher education in the US seems to welcome and encourage the presence of people from diverse backgrounds and interests, recent events in the US and worldwide¹ have precipitated intense examination of the spectrum of multicultural methods and programs and have sharpened the focus on the immediate need to protect the concept of diversity while still negotiating its limits.

To this end, many higher education institutions have what they consider very comprehensive mission statements that stress their tolerance for diversity. But as Sonia Nieto (2000) observes, tolerance simply represents the lowest level of multicultural education in a school setting; to tolerate difference in such settings means to endure them and not necessarily embrace them. In terms of policies and practices, tolerance may mean that linguistic and cultural differences are borne as the inevitable burden of a culturally pluralistic society.

There is no doubt that universities and colleges in the United States have made great efforts to develop and expand international activities, study abroad programs and student and faculty exchange programs as part of their diversity efforts. But a close examination of how the different social groups on these campuses function, the extent to which they are integrated into the larger community, and the efforts of the universities in

¹After the events of 9/11 in the US, the need to manage immigration and to keep racialized elements suspected of being prone to terrorism from entering became a priority security issue. The 9/11 attacks also provided the grounds for the general public to condone vigilance and suspicion toward certain racial groups.

making sure that the diversity efforts go beyond a mere tolerance, suggests that the main object of these efforts is in the financial benefits host institutions derive from admitting international students. It is no secret that in most universities in the US and elsewhere, international students pay almost double to three times the cost of tuition their domestic counterparts pay. According to the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors (NAFSA) report in 2004, international students brought in \$13.3 billion dollars into the US economy as money spent on tuition, living expenses and related costs. The US department of commerce data describes higher education as the country's fifth largest service sector export, as these students bring money into the national economy and provide revenue to their host states. However, the general attitude towards International students in most higher education institutions can best be described *as a necessary evil approach* in which the economic and to some degree, the socio-cultural significance of international students is acknowledged with disinterest.

Research Context

The analysis of the data upon which this paper draws stem largely from oral interviews I conducted with individual female international students in two US higher education institutions: a small liberal arts college located in the west coast with a total international student population of less than 300, and a large public research university in the mid-western region that ranks among the top ten universities hosting the most number of international students in the US. In both cases, I held focus groups with students and extended conversations with individual female graduate students to elicit their views and life experiences studying in the US. I also spent some time in the international student offices, observing student interaction with international student office staff during check-ins.

Although varied in size, location, and numbers or focus of programs, both institutions have had exponential increases in international students in recent years and stress their commitment to diversity and internationalization as a means to providing well rounded educational experience for a globalized workforce. The women from the liberal arts college are mostly students in master's degree programs, in their early-to-mid twenty years, whereas those from the research university were mostly doctoral students in their

early thirties on average, most of who are married and or have children. I least expected any similarities in their experiences, considering the differences among the two groups of women in terms of institutional context and other demographic features (i.e. age, level of study). Yet several common themes emerged from the women's narratives, which I discuss in the paper to underscore the common pattern in female international students' experience in the US educational institutions. In order to understand the warmth of the welcome international students experience in US institutions, it is essential that one examines the 'insiders' cultural representation of 'outsiders' and how the discursive frame enables insiders to maintain and safeguard the physical and symbolic boundary of their society.

Cultural Representation of International Students

Gramsci (1973) and Hall (1996a, 1996b) stress the importance of cultural frameworks in giving meaning to different classes to enable them to make sense of the world around them. Cultural frameworks, they suggest, assume a life of their own, capable of changing the material and political world and thus contribute to reproducing it. In other words, the objectified social world is represented through ideas, language, symbols, and culture, and in turn, the representation provides the meaning of the social world. As Hall (1996c, page number) puts it, "regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role". In this way, contestations in the social world -- whether based on class, gender, or race -- necessarily involve contestations in the symbolic order of representation. The study of frames of representation incorporates many facets, including what Hall (1996c:442) called "relations of representation" such as the "contestation of the marginality", as well as how "a set of ideas comes to dominate the social thinking of a historical bloc" (Hall, 1996a:27). In short, unequal relations in the social world are both reflected and constituted by unequal relations of representation that are shaped by ideas, concepts, and norms which old-timers inherit and develop in their understanding of "others", that is, those who are deemed to be different by virtue of their birthplace, race, language, and other cultural idiosyncrasies.

Historically, the US has maintained a racialized cultural framework to judge those being excluded or included as immigrants within its national borders. That cultural framework continues to influence the way international students are viewed in US institutions. Even though the demographic landscapes of colleges around the country are changing-- a welcome trend that indicates a growing embrace of diversity by colleges, one may well agree with Garland's (2002) observation that "higher education often focus on the formal aspects of diversity while permitting all of the substantive evils associated with chauvinistic attitudes to continue to thrive"². He notes that the academy has focused on bringing more faces of color onto our campuses without paying attention to "the quality of their experiences, which includes stereotyping and other behaviors that have negative effects on people of color on our campuses" (p.38).

One general perception of international students in US higher education, for instance, is the idea that they lack independent skills and 'hard work' for teachers. In the US, higher education is largely constructed around the concept of independent learning that views the student as an active consumer of educational services, taking responsibility for his/her own learning as an autonomous and self-directed individual. This is particularly true in doctoral education in which as Johnson et al. (2000) point out, the desired outcome of doctoral candidacy, the autonomous scholar is achieved by rejecting the emotions and embodiments of human dependency. The idea of self-directed learning is often accompanied by claims about its capacity to promote 'deep' as opposed to 'surface' learning. Mclean (2001) notes that "self-directed learning curricula, such as problem-based learning will certainly provide an academic environment that promotes [a deep learning] approach" (McLean, 2001, p. 401).

The model of the individual assumed in these discussions is not only a masculine one, but specifically western, white and middle class, a perception that mostly excludes female international students who are perceived to come from "collectivist" cultures. Studies in cognitive psychology have emphasized the role of self as a link between the macro level of culture and the micro level of individual behavior (Erez and Earley, 1993). According to Anit Somech (2000) those in individualistic cultures are more likely to

² Commenting on the significance of racism in US colleges, Garland agrees with Joe Feagin that higher education has a leadership role in the area of race relations but fail to lead(see Feagin, 2002The Continuing significance of racism: US Colleges and Universities. Washington, DC: American Council on Education).

define themselves as independent, whereas those from collectivist cultures tend to emphasize the interdependent aspects of their selves.

Drawing on interview data from her research on identities and cross-cultural work, Somech questions whether the “concept of an individuated self, capable of free choice and action is not a construct of western languages and cultures” (Somech, 2000, p. 178). Individualistic cultures, she argues, emphasize self-reliance, autonomy, control, and priority of personal goals, which may or may not be consistent with in-group goals. An individual feels proud of his or her own accomplishments and derives satisfaction with performance based on his or her own achievements. By contrast, in collective cultures, people will subordinate their personal interests to the goals of their in-group. An individual belongs to only a few in-groups, and behavior within the group emphasizes goal attainment, cooperation, group welfare, and in-group harmony. Thus, pleasure and satisfaction derive from group accomplishment (Triandis et al., 1985; Wanger & Moch, 1986). Accordingly, in individualistic cultures, there is a higher probability of sampling the independent self, while in collective cultures there is higher probability of sampling the interdependent self. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect the independent self to be more salient in individualistic cultures and the interdependent self in collectivistic cultures.

It is important to note that in all of these discussions about the distinctions between independence and interdependence, the basic assumption has always been that western cultures are inherently individualistic whereas non-western cultures are naturally collectivist. This notion, I believe, only considers the two kinds of selves as relatively consistent and stable structures within each culture. But the question arises as to whether the independent self and the interdependent self have the same meaning across cultures. For example, does the independent self consist of the same schemata, images and representations in individualistic cultures as in collectivistic cultures?

The women I interviewed in this study varied in their view of whether individuals from non-western cultures are more individualistic or collectivists. Most of them acknowledged that in their home cultures, co-operative natures are emphasized and individuals are encouraged to view their roles and the implications of their actions within a collective context. They, however, object to the idea that viewing one’s role within a

larger context makes the person less independent; some further question the ideal of an independent learner or individuality purported to be characteristic of western cultures.

Let's take Anil,³ a fourth year graduate student in the Midwest who explains how a management related class she took in her second year made her realize the negative connotations interdependence attracts in US context:

“So, we start to talk about Hofstede’s cultural dimensions then the professor give examples of individualistic cultures and everybody start to say how China people as collective...we do things in group...and how we ask too many questions. So I don’t ask many questions again.”

In this class, discussions about the characteristics of different cultures and the examples that different people cited in class made it clear to Anil that “asking for help” was frowned upon. Her subsequent approach is to withdraw from seeking help in order not to appear dependent. In reaction to Anil’s experience, Agee (a third year graduate student from eastern Africa) distinguishes between individualism and being an independent learner and further questions the basis of such claims to independence and critical thinking by American students.

“I don’t know why American students and teachers will think that I am less independent or critical when I navigated through the difficulties of finding admission, getting visa and travelling by myself to study here. I wonder how many of these same students in the class can figure out how to go to another country to study on their own ...”

In her view, it takes an enormous amount of critical thinking skills and independent spirit for an individual international student to study for all the required exams and to navigate the challenging process of acquiring a visa (which is more difficult in some countries) in order to study in the US. She highlights the self-centered nature common among students in the US, “...what is happening here is that American students tend to take credit for everything...it’s all about ‘me’, ‘I’, and ‘myself’ when it comes to

³ All names of individuals are pseudonyms and bear no relationship with actual names of persons in any context.

American students.” This in her view is one reason American students often assume they are more independent learners than their non-western peers.

For Se-he, a social science master’s student in the west coast, no one is completely independent and universities are implicated in sending mixed messages about what skills or values are more significant ...“I think universities try to teach contradiction...sometimes, they say that you have to show that you can work in co-operation with other people, collaborate and team work, but they want people to take individual credit for group work...I think no one is independent or dependent, it just depends on what you choose to show more at what time or place”.

On the other hand, studies (Brookfield 1999 and Tough 1967, 1979) have shown that there is strong reliance on external resources, both human and material, in the conduct of learning projects. In his study of how adult learners conduct their learning projects, Tough (1979) observes that the learning activities of successful self-directed learners (SDL) are placed within a social context, and other people are cited as the most important learning resources. He questions the conception of the self-directed learner as one who pursues learning with a minimum of assistance from external sources, arguing that, “it is evident that no act of learning can be self-directed if we understand self-direction to mean the absence of external sources of assistance” (1979, p.7). He concludes that SD learners appear to be highly aware of context in the sense that they place their learning within a social setting in which the advice, information, and skill modeling provided by other learners are crucial conditions for successful learning. Despite the conflicting interpretations and understanding of what independent or self directed learning entails, the image of the autonomous, ‘isolated’ self directed learner persists in higher education.

The findings in Somech’s (2000) study demonstrate that regardless of cultural origin, people tend to define themselves mainly through independent cognitions. The difference between cultures therefore is expressed in the proportions of independent statements as compared with interdependent self. People in individualistic cultures tend to characterize themselves most often through pure psychological attributions which are context free. In collectivist cultures, however, people use context-related statements to define independent self. The self becomes most meaningful and complete when it is cast

in the appropriate social relationship. This view features the person not as separate from the social context but as more connected and less differentiated from others (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

A discussion of the argument as to whether western societies are indeed individualistic or not is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to note here that whether or not one group acknowledges the social context in which they function does not preclude the fact that they all function in a social context. The difference here is the extent to which one group is willing to acknowledge that context versus the other. It is not uncommon to hear American students for example take exclusive credit for results for which they clearly had to seek and rely on other people's support to achieve. For the same results, however, non-western students will often acknowledge the support they sought and received from others. Although studies in this area have failed to establish that Euro-American students are indeed more independent than those from non-European backgrounds, and despite the increasing success of international students in US and other European educational institutions, the common notion still holds that international students are less independent and lack critical thinking skills. Such perceptions as I show in the rest of the paper have practical manifestations in the way that individuals interact within a society, which in turn affect individuals' ability to access material resources within such institutions.

Female International Graduate Students and Marginalization

The relation between distributive issues and oppression is complex. Some forms of oppression tend to be implicated in distributive issues, but none is merely a matter of distribution. In fact, some forms of oppression are not affected whatsoever by reforming the distributional pattern, while other forms are affected but not dismantled or transformed. For instance, the oppression experienced through marginalization often intersects with the ways in which resources are distributed in the sense that marginalization has often entailed alienation of individuals or groups of individuals from active involvement and thereby causing that group to experience material deprivation over time. This, in turn, can have profound consequences in perpetuating social disadvantages for that group, including material disadvantages. But attempts to rectify

marginalization by redistributing material resources alone will not dismantle it because how resources are distributed is often the symptom of a problem whose sources lie within the structures and institutions through which distribution is managed. At best, such measures will address some symptoms that arise; but resources are not themselves power. They usually have to be sustained by structures and relations, such as a particular culture, a safe or unsafe environment, an exclusive or inclusive public, or a monopolization of information or knowledge, that give meaning, significance and thereby power to some resources or agents and not to others. One way to understand female international students' marginalization in US higher education is to examine the idea and practice of social networking in institutions.

Networking and the Ideal of Independent Learning

The phrase “it’s who you know, not what you know that counts” is often heard in conversations about people who get ahead. In academic circles, this concept translates into what is often called “networking”. The daily life of the graduate student in US universities hinges on the individual’s ability to interact and form strategic alliances with other members of the academy. Indeed, networking is a widely accepted norm within higher education and commonly practiced by well meaning progressive scholars in the academy; but few, if any, have examined the ability of such a practice to exclude certain groups and individual students from active academic participation. The structure of these institutions is such that almost everything ranging from class exercises/assignments to resource allocation to research publications center on this practice.

The nature and strength of a particular network alliance is often dependent on multiple and often non-manipulable factors that are hardly taken into account in discussions about networking. Similarity breeds connection(!). This principle is known as the homophily principle and structures network ties of every type including different ties in higher educational institutions. Common sense and casual observation tell us that social groups are not random samples of people. The principle of homophily asserts that people who are similar to one another along certain socio-demographic dimensions are more likely to interact than people who are dissimilar (McPherson, Popielarz, and Drobnic 2001).

Blau (1977) has argued that socio-demographic dimensions such as age, sex and education shape the social interactions between individuals in society. According to McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook (2001), race and ethnicity are the biggest divide in social networks today in the United States and they play a major role in structuring the networks in other ethnically diverse societies as well. In their view,

“the baseline homophily created by groups of different sizes is combined with the differences in racial/ethnic groups’ positions on other dimensions (e.g. education, occupation, and income) and the personal prejudices that often result from the latter to create a highly visible, oft studied network divide”(p.420).

Consequently, the process of networking in the United States is not devoid of the historical tensions that revolve around race, gender and class relations and other forms of divisions, including religion in recent times. For female international students in US institutions, these dimensions, coupled with their perceived lack of independent and critical thinking skills intersect to complicate their experiences in unique ways.

Several empirical studies have also shown a direct relationship between network characteristics on socio-economic standings (Huang and Tausig 1990. see also, Lin, 1999a, 2000). Depending on the processes of historical and institutional constructions, each society structurally provides unequal opportunities to members of different groups defined over race, gender, and class. In a study about how network systems affect people’s social capital, Nan Lin (2000) observes that significant differences appear in the social networks and embedded resources between females and males. Inequality of social capital occurs when a certain group clusters at relatively disadvantaged socioeconomic positions. In Lin’s analysis;

“Social groups (gender, race) have different access to social capital because of their advantaged or disadvantaged structural positions and associated social networks. Situated in different positions in the social hierarchy, and given the tendency to interact with other members of the same social group, members of a disadvantaged group may find themselves deficient in social capital. Inequality in social capital, therefore, can be accounted for largely by structural constraints and the normative dynamics of social interactions”(2000, p.793).

This appears to be the case among the two groups of female international students whose experiences I discuss here.

In their analysis of black students' experiences in predominantly white colleges and universities, Feagin, Vera and Imani (1996) observe that "the subtle and overt distinctions that are made in everyday interactions define the character of the social position one occupies in interaction with others" (p.94). This theme was echoed by many of the women in this study as one female graduate student in the humanities describes her experience of indifference and marginalization in a graduate seminar in the mid-west:

"I took this seminar on research methods with this guy....it was just four of us out of 11 students that were not white. The three of us who were international students, one was an African guy and the other student was Asian looking, she could have been bi-racial...I don't know that for sure, but I could tell by her Americanized accent that she probably was born here or grew up here...but anyway, it was just the four of us from non-white backgrounds. For the first six to eight weeks, I realized this man ignored every comment or contribution any of the three of us made in class. The other lady never said a word in class. But any time I raised a point, this professor will just keep quiet and either ask another student or move the discussion on to another focus. At first, I thought that was just his policy not to affirm or dispute any point of view that students raised, but as the class progressed, I noticed he would heartily commend the good points that the other white kids made but when I make a point, everybody acted like I did not exist in the class. But when the same point that I raised earlier is mentioned later by another student, the professor will make comments like 'that was insightful'. At first, I thought maybe it was because I spoke in an accent that may not be understood, but as time went by; I just noticed it was a deliberate action to make me feel invisible" (R.I., 5/24/2005).

This student went on to explain how she had to interrupt the discussion one day after a point she had made was ignored by the professor, only for another student to state the same point shortly after and received positive compliments by the professor.

".... But a few minutes later, another white girl basically repeated verbatim, what I said earlier, and this man went ecstatic with praise for the great insight the girl had...I just couldn't ignore it anymore" (R.I., 5/24/2005).

It may be that this particular professor is just downright mean and his actions may not reflect the majority who work with international students daily. But even the attitudes of well meaning professors sometimes convey nothing more than a lack of interest. Describing some of her experiences, Sharron, a social science master's student in the west coast notes;

“...you know, sometimes I don't know what to call the reaction that I get when I meet with some professors. You probably have faced such a thing before (pointing to other women in group)...where you go to meet with a professor, and after saying what you want to say for about 3 minutes, you get this attitude of ‘what did you say?’ It looks like as soon as you start to speak, they tune off their ears and minds.... In total black-out until you are done, then they turn back on as if they just recovered from some trance”.

This “zoning out” attitude as some of us call it has become a common experience for many female international graduate students in US colleges.

Babara Lovitts (2005) for example describes the process of earning a PhD degree in graduate education as one in which the student acquires the capacity to make independent contribution to knowledge. This capacity is achieved in a two stage process; the first being the dependent stage whereby:

“Students are immersed in mastering the knowledge base of their disciplines and specialty areas, learning the methods and theories of the discipline and establishing relationships with peers, faculty and their advisors” (Lovitts, 2005, p.140).

From this description, students at this stage are supposed to establish the needed contacts and relationships and acquire the skills that will facilitate their transition into the second stage - the independent, autonomous stage where their “relationship with knowledge changes from learning what others know and how they know it” (Katz, 1976) to conducting original research and creating knowledge (Wisker et al, 2003). The relationship between students and their peers, faculty and advisors at this ‘independent’ stage according to Lovitts (2005) also changes to one in which they are expected to be autonomous and work independently. Students’ successful completion of the dissertation

in her view “marks the transition from student to ‘independent scholar ’” (Lovitt, 2005) But in order for students to successfully negotiate the process of going from a dependent stage into the independent stage, they must undergo both psychological and social transformations; transformations that Lovitts (2005) admits are more manageable for:

“students who have access to informal sources of information and students who are rich in the personal and social resources needed for the kind of independent and creative performance associated with the independent stage of graduate education ...”(p. 140).

The above assertion indicates that underlying this transition, and a successful progress in doctoral education for that matter is the student’s access to resources; social, financial and interpersonal. In most research universities in the US however, access to these resources are often governed by informal rules, regulations, codes and norms that are normally difficult to understand especially by individuals or groups of students who have not been traditionally part of the system. Because international students come into US institutions from educational systems that are often structurally different and considering the negative perceptions of international students as bearers of linguistic and cognitive problems by American professors and students, it is fair to argue that international students in general are more likely to have difficulty in gaining access to the needed information and resources for a successful completion of doctoral study.

The informal knowledge necessary to get through graduate school is acquired through a process of socialization into the culture of the discipline (Delamont et al., 2000). This socialization comes about by spending time in the department and interacting with and observing one’s advisor, departmental faculty and fellow, often more senior, graduate students (Pearson, 1996; Delamont et al., 1997, 2000; Lovitts, 2005). Common sense and casual observation however show that this process of socialization does not occur in random fashion. In the US educational environment where these idiosyncratic characteristics are further complicated by institutionalized racism and individual bigotry, it becomes difficult for such students to get closer to professors and for the professors to know the actual strengths and weaknesses of the students. For instance, conversations

about international students among teachers, staff and students in American institutions often trivialize or otherwise demean the cultural, linguistic, social and other differences that international students bring in. In my interactions with international students as part of my research, it is common to hear international students lament the disdain and lack of respect they encounter from fellow students, staff and even professors. For female international students (from non-western backgrounds) the notion that they lack independent thinking skills is further exacerbated by their attitudes and actions that often exude meekness and timidity. These perceptions and actions overall limit mutual interactions and increase suspicion and tension between female international students and other members within the academy.

Iris Young and a New Form of Politics of Difference

Despite the much-heralded diversity trend within US higher education, difference is often reduced to mere pluralism: a 'live and let live' approach where principles of relativism generate a long list of diversities which begin with gender, class, race, and continue through a range of social structures as well as personal characteristics. As stated earlier, the current climate of diversity in US institutions is one in which greater emphasis is placed on the recognitional politics of admitting distinct cultural and social groups than on redistributive policies as a means of addressing significant economic and social inequalities between the different social groups. A politics of difference focuses on cultural and political identity as central to the meaning of democracy and democratic representation. To sustain a genuine democratic representation, the new politics of difference focuses on transforming the monolithic and the homogenous into new forms of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity that welcome the contingent, the provincial and the shifting (West, 1993).

The underlying component of this new politics of difference is equity and social justice. According to Iris Young (1990), social justice requires dismantling structures of oppression and domination, and oppression and domination are not merely about how resources are distributed. This is not to say that disparities in wealth have nothing to do with unequal educational opportunity and achievement. Rather, the concern is that, as important as universal accessibility to education (or any other public good) is, it is not, by

itself, enough to ensure that all individuals are treated justly by institutions or, in the case of education, that the system is doing its utmost to secure social justice. Unequal educational achievement and opportunity will persist in socially diverse societies even if schooling and educational programs are fully accessible to all students (Young, 1990, p. 26). This is because equalizing resources does not, by itself, address all the forms of injustice that have a direct impact on undercutting the opportunities and achievements of individuals within socially disadvantaged groups. In particular, universal accessibility and policies which seek to treat all individuals precisely the same, do not address the sources of many forms of oppression and domination that are directly experienced by groups in every society.

Young identifies five ‘faces of oppression’ that are not reducible to one common source and are not alleviated by distributing resources equally. These are exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence (Young, 1990, chp. 2). For the purpose of this paper, I will concentrate on the issue of marginalization as it relates to the experiences of female international students in US institutions.

International Female Marginalization: What to Make of It

Access to the best opportunities in society is denied to some groups not because explicit discriminatory rules bar them from access (although this is still clearly a problem in some jurisdictions), or because they have less material resources to start with. Rather, the domination and oppression experienced by some individuals lead many to be denied dignity and respect, to have access only to poor choices, to be included only on terms that are alien to them, to exclude themselves, and to opt out. A politics of difference aims at taking political reform well beyond questions of how best to allocate material resources. The social relations that are important to sustaining oppression include the division of labor, decision-making power and procedures, and cultural forms of interacting and communicating. For example, the qualifications for a particular job, despite being standardized and merit-driven, privilege the characteristics of particular social groups. Or conversely, sometimes a set of characteristics typical of particular social groups happen to be a liability within a particular job. Even where qualifications are standardized and competitions merit-driven, and even in cases where employers would be delighted to find

amongst willing applicants, a woman or member of a visible minority, positions can still be structured in unjust ways. If particular jobs cannot accommodate people who devote time to care-giving, or if they penalize minorities by relying, even informally, on social networks typically less accessible to those outside the white and or male mainstream (as the case may be in most departments in higher education), then they are likely to replicate the social injustice that characterizes the particular society in which they are situated. In the case of female international students, the intersection of addressing oppression requires that we take note of, first, how social groups are positioned in relation to each other, second which social groups enjoy non-material goods such as respect, power, and opportunity and, third, how the enjoyment of these goods is sustained by particular social relations (Young, 1990, p. 16). In doing so, what becomes exceedingly clear is that social inequality is structural in the sense that it is reproduced by social processes “that tend to privilege some more than others” (Young, 2001, p. 2). Unlike rules that either allow or bar all individuals within a particular category from engaging in a specified activity (e.g. ‘No Blacks need apply’), social processes create tendencies, through incentives and disincentives that affect social groups without necessarily directing the behavior of each and every individual. This reveals the ways in which oppression is group-based in the sense that it can be detected only by comparing the situations of social groups, not by comparing the situations of un-situated individuals.

Any given individual might or might not find a way of negotiating the social processes to their advantage. The social inequality that characterizes a society is located in patterns of injustice that are reinforced by processes that treat some groups unjustly. So, given that oppression is structural and group-based, the ways to address social inequality entail restructuring social institutions and processes so that they reflect, recognize and value the differences amongst social groups. A radical reorganization of educational institutions, including the curriculum, staffing, and decision-making processes, along lines that embed group-based difference in each aspect of the system, makes good sense if the project is to dismantle social disadvantage. Even uncontroversial programs, such as cultural or racial awareness education, are likely to be rendered impotent if they are at odds with the general thrust of the regular curriculum, if they are contradicted by how decision-making works in a school, how staffing decisions are made,

or how students and teachers treat each other. If the content of the curriculum, the way in which students are assessed, the structure of the school day, or the treatment they receive from other students and teachers, neglects or is hostile to the values of all communities, except for one dominant one, it will hardly be surprising to find that students from minority groups will not perform as well as those within the majority.

By focusing on the presence of oppression rather than the unfair distribution of resources, we are forced to focus on a set of social problems that are far broader in scope, more deeply embedded in social relations than are the problems that are related to distribution. Oppression implicates not simply who has what, but also how people think about themselves and about others, how they act, what they desire and what symbols, structures and processes lead them to think and act the way that they do.

In effect, the conventional sense of the fundamentals of equality which focus on the equalization of the fiscal and physical (facilities, supplies, etc.) aspects of the issues are no longer enough to disturb the problematic contours of contemporary learning arrangements. For Young, “a politics of difference aims at equalizing the division of labor, the organization of decision-making and the status of cultural meaning” (Young, 1997, p. 153) even if opportunities and resources are equal.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that while many education institutions may have what they consider very comprehensive mission statements that stress their tolerance for diversity, and despite growing attempts to increase the numbers of students and staff from diverse ethnic, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, other structural arrangements have created an environment that continues to alienate minority groups of students, including international students. I have shown that increasing the representational numbers of students of different backgrounds serve a valuable purpose of distributive equality, albeit that is not enough to dismantle other forms of oppression and domination that lead to unequal student outcomes. I have drawn on Iris Young’s idea that “oppression and domination.., not distributive inequality, ought to guide discussions about justice” (Young, 1997). Hence, equalizing educational opportunities first requires eliminating oppression, not merely developing a calculus by which to allocate resources

equally. Second, eliminating oppression requires establishing a politics that welcomes difference by dismantling and reforming structures, processes, concepts and categories that sustain difference-blind, impartial, neutral, universal politics. Third, a politics of difference requires restructuring the division of labor and decision-making so as to include disadvantaged social groups but allow them to contribute without foregoing their particularities.

Contrary to liberal politics, wherein differences amongst individuals are officially not used to determine one's status in decision-making, a politics of difference recognizes that social structures and institutions can only address oppression and domination by making space for difference and by not reducing difference to some impartial, neutral or universal perspective. Justice requires paying attention to the ways in which differences have structured social relations and then restructuring these relations accordingly.

To conclude, a substantive and inclusive democracy especially in education demands more than tolerance; it requires justice as an ethical response to the other, as well as an extension of resources, rights and recognition to all of those whose very presence and difference expand and deepens the very meaning of freedom, democracy and equality. Despite impartial rules, institutional structures, standards, and values resist group difference in a myriad of ways. Even without formal or financial barriers, these institutions can alienate individuals who come from communities which are significantly different from the majority. Institutions need to confront all the ways in which they potentially adhere to the values and standards of one dominant community.

The best way to ensure that institutions and structures are sensitive to different perspectives and to the particularities of different social locations is to embrace democratic decision-making and participatory institutions that are difference-sensitive. A politics of difference requires institutions in which a politicized discussion about difference can take place and in which forums and media are available for alternative cultural experiment and play (Young, 1990, p. 152). It would also require, within all institutions and decision-making forums, that discourse and communication was made sensitive to difference by considering the ways in which different groups communicate and present their reasons or justify their positions (Young, 2000, chp. 2).

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Jane-Frances Lobnibe

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