

Who Belongs?

International Students' Feeling of Belonging in Canadian Higher Education Institutions

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Tags

Crisis-Management; Cross-Cultural Issues; International Student and Scholar Services; Internationalization and Global Learning; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

This case occurs within the context of a small to a medium-sized public university in Canada. The university has a population of 5,000 students of which over 30% are international. This university offers three different styles of on-campus residence. One of these housing options provides both international and domestic students with the opportunity to share a common room, kitchen and two bathrooms in a townhouse style. This residence provides a cozy feel where students have the opportunity to share and connect during their university life. Domestic students are defined as students that self-identify as born and raised in Canada, and international students are defined as students that self-identify as not from Canada and typically hold study permits or visas.

Case

Michiko is an 18-year-old international student from Japan. After she participated in a Canadian study tour during her senior year of high school, she began looking forward to studying abroad in Canada. She loved the ethnic diversity of Toronto, the majestic trees and greenery of Vancouver, and the welcoming and friendly Canadian people she met during her three-week tour. After these experiences, she was determined to study in Canada. She chose to take her undergraduate degree at this university as they offered the specialized program she was interested in. Her future plan was to apply for a graduate program either in Canada or in the CSIE cases are offered as professional development for readers and are not meant to focus on specific individuals or organizations. Names and other identifying details within the cases have been changed. In some instances, cases may have been amalgamated. Article reuse guidelines: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

U.S. to continue with her education. She reasoned that completing an undergraduate degree in Canada would provide her with the best opportunity to advance her post-graduation education plans.

Michiko wasn't 100% confident in her English abilities, so she decided to choose an on-campus residence accommodation with the hope of interacting with more Canadian students to improve her English and develop meaningful friendships.

One day, after a late afternoon class, Michiko went to her residence to prepare for dinner before her night class. She noticed that all her Canadian roommates had already gotten together and finished dinner before she arrived. She felt bad that they had pre-arranged this plan and cooked dinner together without extending an invitation to her. Michiko felt left out. She prepared a quick meal and ate alone in her room.

The next morning, Michiko overheard her roommates planning a dinner party on the weekend. Michiko felt alone and was upset that again she was not included in the conversation. To avoid feeling left out again, Michiko decided not to go to her residence for dinner on Saturday night and instead ate dinner at the student cafeteria with another Japanese student.

The following week, Michiko was in a class and the professor asked the students to form groups of 4 to 5 teammates to work on a project. Each group was quickly formed and Michiko ended up joining a few other international students in the class. Michiko felt it was not fair that none of the international students were invited to join domestic students' groups but neither the professor nor the domestic students seemed to care. Michiko wanted to speak out but since she was struggling with English she decided not to. Besides, she was not comfortable with challenging her professor or classmates, since this is not common in Japanese culture.

Michiko started to experience a mental health breakdown. She began retreating from all social activities and classes, and wasn't eating well or taking care of herself. After a series of unsuccessful attempts to reach their daughter, Michiko's parents reached out to Michiko's Japanese friends to check in on her. Michiko's Japanese friends discovered that Michiko was suffering from depression and social anxiety and informed Michiko's parents accordingly.

Michiko decided not to seek help from the university counseling office because admitting there was something wrong with her mental health is considered taboo in her home country. This would be seen as a significant weakness and would, ultimately, bring shame to her family and culture. Through these experiences, she had feelings of low self-worth and didn't feel as if she belonged to the university, culture, and classes she attended. Her struggles were exacerbated due to the language barrier she was experiencing causing frustration and feelings of inadequacy in the fact that she couldn't express her feelings freely to her classmates, professors and roommates. After finding out Michiko's condition, Michiko's parents decided to withdraw her from the school and bring her back to Japan for treatment.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What impact did the roommates' behavior have on Michiko's feelings of belonging at the university?
- How do you think Michiko or the Canadian roommates could have approached the living situation differently?

- Could the school have done anything differently to mitigate potential issues like this during the early stage of residence life? For example, what process/ procedures could the school have in place to identify the early signs of being at-risk, as well as providing necessary intervention?
- What could the professors have done differently with a diverse, in-class student population working on a group project?
- What can schools do to make the campus environment, inside and outside of the classroom, more inclusive of all students?
- What type of cross-unit collaboration (e.g. with international office or counseling services) could have taken place to support Michiko?
- Do you think any cultural differences influenced Michiko's withdrawal from the university?