

Diversity, Discourse, and Exclusion on Liberal Arts Campuses

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Generally speaking, the liberal arts colleges of North America tend to focus on creating very specific outcomes for their students. These outcomes include an interdisciplinary “breadth” of knowledge, the ability to see problems from various points of view, the ability to view problems as un-resolved, and ask questions which challenge existing beliefs.

Students become familiar with a Eurocentric *Weltliteratur*, with analytic philosophy, with foreign languages that take them “above” any national context, with progressive political economy and cultural critique, and with painting, dance, and the arts. Students tend to develop discourses which are highly progressive, and engage themselves politically, artistically, and intellectually, on campus in a very public way. In many ways, this is a model of education that can and should be praised.

During my time at Bennington College, a small liberal arts college in southern Vermont, I saw the student body gradually become international. For me as a domestic student, this had various advantages. My education was made richer, and my perspective was widened. Spending time at Bennington made me a strong proponent of international education environments. However, through conversations with international students, it became clear that these advantages were not always shared.

The liberal arts education model becomes

more problematic when looking at the internationalization of liberal arts campuses. American liberal arts education has become internationalized (like many other initially national institutions) as part of its attempt to respond to the broader financial troubles within the US education system.¹ As Qiang writes, “the recruitment of foreign students has become a significant factor for institutional income and of national economic interest.”² It is particularly dramatic in the cases of community colleges and others which employ recruiters. As Slaughter and Rhoades write, “the international recruiting practices of some community colleges extend beyond brochures and websites that target prospective international students. In some cases, institutions pay recruiters a commission that is a percentage of the first year’s tuition.”³ Especially gifted students, and students who will bring money to the college, are recruited from an increasingly global market. Slaughter and Rhoades worry that admissions have shifted “to a marketing function,” and students are increasingly treated as a mere resource.⁴

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Liberal arts colleges have not been exempted from this process. “Liberal arts colleges,” Ferrall writes, “with their residential campuses,

¹ Zha Qiang, “Internationalization of Higher Education: Towards a Conceptual Framework,” *Policy Futures in Education* 1, no. 2, (2013): 248-267.

² *Ibid.*, 249.

³ Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

⁴ For more, see: Slaughter and Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy*.

small classes, full-time tenured teaching faculties, lack of graduate student teaching assistants, expansive facilities, and so on, provide the most expensive undergraduate education.”⁵ Bennington, like many other liberal arts colleges, has experienced quite significant financial difficulties.

During my time at Bennington, this was well known by many students who had seen increased class sizes, the need for more student housing, and budget cuts which hurt campus workers (and resulted in protests on campus). This unstable financial situation, of course, is not a new phenomenon. Throughout their history, liberal arts colleges have faced disaster, and even in the 1980s, Allan Pfnister observed that it was common to see “the liberal arts college [as] an endangered species that needs to be preserved at all costs in the face of forces bent on its destruction.”⁶ Certainly Bennington faced such issues in the past, with particularly great financial difficulties in the 1960’s, 70’s and 80’s.⁷

Our present situation is not unprecedented, but there are new features which need new reflection. My worry is that with students increasingly seen as resources, international students are brought to US liberal arts colleges which are unequipped (on all levels, including the existing student body) to deal with this increased diversity.

With a wave of students being recruited from outside the United States, liberal arts col-

leges are now finding themselves with a large population of students who do not fit their molds. These students, many from religious, non-western, or recently war-torn countries, may struggle to find a place within prevailing campus cultural discourses.

Looking specifically at the experiences of foreign students at Bennington College, this essay examines the internationalization of American liberal arts schools. It does so by looking at inclusion and exclusion in campus discourses, which I understand as a social practice of knowing which originate in power relations, pedagogy, and technique.⁸

I do not mean to say that the liberal arts model, or Bennington College, is in any way unsuited to international students. However, the demographics of student bodies are changing. Students, educators, and administrators need to be sensitive to this shift (beyond vulgar economic imperatives), and to the increasing range of experiences, viewpoints, and personal needs of American liberal arts students.

This paper is based on surveys of several current and former Bennington students, and on conversations I had with students at Bennington on an informal basis between 2014 and 2016. It is also based on a literature review, which I hope places what I have written in a wider context.

Free Speech

What does the internationalization of American liberal arts education mean for free speech on US campuses?

In one sense, it can greatly expand the perspectives and voices in liberal arts campus communities. As Lee and Rice write, interna-

⁵ Victor E. Ferrall, *Liberal Arts at the Brink* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 30.

⁶ Allan O. Pfnister, “The Role of the Liberal Arts College: A Historical Overview of the Debates,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 55, no. 2 (1984): pp. 145-170.

⁷ For a report on this situation from the mid-1980’s, please see Fox Butterfield, “Financial Woes Forcing Changes at Bennington,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 1985,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/09/us/financial-woes-forcing-changes-at-bennington.html>.

⁸ Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800 / 1900*, trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

tional students “increase the diversity of student populations, add new perspectives to classroom conversations, and, related, increase our awareness and appreciation for other countries and cultures.”⁹ Moreover, stressing the immense potential of international students as a group of people whose diverse viewpoints can be considered a cultural resource for U.S. domestic students, international students can be a source of opportunities for cross-cultural communication and the enhancement of international and intercultural skills.¹⁰

However, this situation has sometimes erected a line between those who can participate in campus discourses, and those who, given limited social capital, struggle to participate in campus discourses. Different than the line between different political and social orientations, the line made by campus discourse, which is (arguably) already present on the Bennington campus, is a line between inclusion and non-inclusion, or between participation and non-participation. This line should be informally articulated by asking “Who is and isn’t speaking and participating, and why?”

In a discussion in class or everyday campus life, students and faculty should be more clear about whether or not all viewpoints are being expressed. The scholars I have thus far looked at especially stress that internationalization needs to be a process which involves the whole of a college’s or university’s culture, with reflexive measures taken to insure the wellbeing of all students as it takes place. As Braskamp so eloquently puts it, “you may use the terms, ‘global

citizenship,’ ‘global perspective,’ or ‘intercultural competence,’ but always keep students at the core of the discussion.”¹¹

I worry that in the internationalization of liberal arts colleges, such a message is inadequately heeded. If, as this special issue of the *Journal of School and Society* prompts us to, we ask questions such as “Who gets to decide what degree of distress is acceptable?” or “What kinds of dissent is acceptable?” exclusion emerges as a problem for international students on liberal arts campuses.

The inclusion/non-inclusion line often determines what sort of outrage and distress is acceptable, what sort of disagreements and alliances are legitimate, and what counts as rational speech on liberal arts campuses. Students from conservative countries are a good illustration of this point.

Unlike American conservative students, who can most often quite easily navigate progressive liberal arts campus discourses with ease (or at very least easily transfer to another, more conservative-leaning school in the States), students from conservative countries have often been raised in an environment in which they have never heard of these discourses. As a result, their inclusion within social, political, and intellectual life on campus is often a task to be achieved, if even desired.

Some of the students I spoke with expressed this clearly. This unseen boundary line can be an issue for conservative Jewish students in the extremely progressive political environment of American liberal arts campuses. For several of the African and Asian students I spoke with (from conservative Christian and Muslim backgrounds), social, political and sex-

⁹ Jenny J. Lee and Charles Rice, “Welcome to America? International Student Perceptions of Discrimination,” *Higher Education* 53, no. 3 (2007): 381–409.

¹⁰ Ewa L. Urban and Louann Bierlein Palmer, “International Students as a Resource for Internationalization of Higher Education,” *Journal of Studies in International Education* 18, no. 4 (2014): 305–24, 307.

¹¹ Larry A. Braskamp, “Internationalization in Higher Education: Four Issues to Consider,” *Journal of College and Character* 10, no. 6, (2009): 4.

ual discourses of American liberal students were, at times, alienating.

At Bennington, I once met an international student who expressed concerns to me about his relationship to his home country and about getting married. He told me that back home his friends were working and getting married. They were, as he said, “becoming adults,” whereas he was in school and unable to do so.

Residential colleges were designed to oversee people who are almost adults, but still need oversight and guidance. Whereas in the US, college-aged people are not quite adults, it should be understood that ideas of adulthood (and what it entails, and when it takes place) vary culture-to-culture. This student’s case shows that US colleges are welcoming many students who do not fit existing models. For this student’s difficulties, and given his personal struggles in a foreign country, was the campus community equipped to be a supportive environment?

We as domestic students, I think, were woefully unprepared to be as supportive to many of these students as we were to each other.

It certainly was not when we spoke two years ago, and at very least colleges need to be more conscious and aware of their growing diversity. At the time of our conversation, his comments made me reflect upon the current situation of the college, and how rapidly it was inviting international students to study. We as domestic students, I think, were woefully unprepared to be as supportive to many of these students as we were to each other. A more diverse student body means an expanding intellectual and social culture. When this conversa-

tion took place, I fear that Bennington’s campus culture was too progressive and monolithic to function as an inclusive environment for students from conservative backgrounds.

The experiences of international students entering into liberal arts campus communities is unquestionably different from those of domestic students. From Eastern Europe (especially including the recently-war-torn ex-Yugoslavia), the “Middle East” (including Israel and Palestine), Southeast Asia, Africa, and South-Central America, international students arrive onto liberal arts campuses in the USA which are predominantly populated by white upper-middle-class domestic students.¹² This is not to say that domestic students do not face their own sets of difficulties in college, or that many international students are not fully (socially, culturally, financial, academically, etc.) equipped to handle life on a liberal arts campus in the USA. However, one cannot forget that there can be major differences in kind between the individual struggles and needs of international and domestic students. Such growing diversity is something liberal arts colleges should be aware of and adapt to. When I was a student, Bennington—I am referring both to the campus administration and to students—had yet to come to terms with the increasing diversity in its student body. If the campus discourses do not adapt to the changing demographic structures, this presently inchoate problem may cause larger challenges, and negatively continue to negatively impact students.

There were also various students who held different views about marriage and sexuality—particularly in the direction of a greater degree of sexual conservatism (or as some progressive students informally expressed it to me, “a lack

¹² For more, see: “Liberal Arts and Humanities Demographics,” *Data USA*, 2016, <https://datausa.io/profile/cip/24/#demographics>.

of sexual openness”). One could ask whether these people were included within campus sexual discourse. Of course, it is easy enough to say that such students should simply “liberate themselves” politically and sexually, but this has “universalist” (in the bad sense) and colonialist overtones which risk turning the liberal arts into a patronizing, Anglo-American cultural fad. Related to this, a study by Spencer-Rodgers found that “socially and culturally maladjusted” was the second most common negative stereotype that American host students had of international students.¹³

This is not a matter of the “right way” of thinking, but of a power dynamic which progressives (albeit often unwittingly) fall into participating in.

One student told me that his classmates “try to assert their views and opinions on others, and believe that their perspectives on politics, race, religion are absolute.” Further, this student told me that, after seeing heated classroom discussions turn into targeting of students with diverse viewpoints, he became hesitant to express himself.

I found such a view was all too common when I was at Bennington. In a progressive environment such as that upheld by the liberal arts, there is the fear that students will feel entitled to be acerbic with those who do not share their beliefs. For students whose experiences are out of line with the (unlikely-any-longer-statistical) norm, and who consequently feel disagreement with dominant viewpoints, this aggression poses a problem.

Students at liberal arts colleges need to do the work of lowering themselves from the high castles of righteous indignation and come to realize the realities of the changing environ-

ments in which they live. Teachers, or diversity centers, should hold short trainings to help US students learn to talk across fundamental difference, especially when they are in a position of privileged access to certain discourses and social capital.

If US liberal arts colleges want to ensure the flourishing of their students, they need to ensure that their campuses are places designed for all students

“What is right,” especially on liberal arts campuses, is an open question. How can this questioning be made more open and inclusive? We know these students are mostly quite young (while they are forming their identities), so educators must help them engage in intellectual pursuits in more open and fruitful ways. The students at Bennington with whom I spoke stressed the urgency of this task.

Conclusion

This power dynamic between native and foreign students on US campuses is rooted in the foundational changes facing US education. This paper points to the emergence of this power dynamic. It has taken a very limited approach and has not sought to show to what degree this power dynamic exists: Merely that it is a problem to explore.

Drawing upon conversations past and present, there is enough to suggest further research is needed. I encourage social scientists to take up the problems posed in this paper and conduct empirical research on liberal arts campuses

¹³ Julie Spencer-Rodgers, “Consensual and Individual Stereotypic Beliefs about International Students Among American Host Nationals,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 25 (2001): 647.

in the USA to understand the ability of foreign students to engage in campus discourses.

If US liberal arts colleges want to ensure the flourishing of their students, they need to ensure that their campuses are places designed for all students, not merely tacitly welcoming non-US students, and then leaving some of them outside of campus discourses. The internationalization of liberal arts colleges does not necessarily lead to the exclusion of certain students from campus discourses. However, if students, staff, faculty, and organizers on liberal arts campuses are not aware of this kind of exclusion, damage will be done (perhaps irreparably) to liberal arts students and the promise of liberal arts across the globe.