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Tell Me Your Story: Interviewing International Students

One of the dreams in my early teaching career at CSB/SJU was to be here long enough to see the fruits of efforts to bring international students and students of color to join our rather white student body.

In my first years here, my classes were mainly composed of white students from Minnesota, often sisters or brothers of graduates from the school. Others were first generation students, excited to be the first of their family going to college, just as I myself was many years ago in western North Dakota.

I recall Herculean efforts by Jose Bourget, a young man from the Dominican Republic who was appointed Director of Cultural Enrichment in 1993-1994. According to CSB Archival notes, he presented such workshops and initiatives as “A Theoretical Framework for the Implementation of a Model of Cultural Enrichment at CSB and SJU” in September of 1993. At this time, I was teaching part-time on the campus and noticed the excitement around me come to life as these initial activities began.

A McKnight Foundation grant was being used to support activity building to promote multiculturalism in the academic community. The activities included lectures, data collecting, summer academic camps, recruitment, revision of courses, and a cultural advisory board. It was during the Presidency of Sister Colman O’Connell that strategic progress towards commitment to cultural pluralism in education was made.

In other words, CSB/SJU already was making greater efforts to recruit more international students even before a National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Report voiced concerns

about issues of diversity at CSB/SJU in 2001. In the fall of 1998, besides recruitment efforts in the Bahamas, China, and Vietnam, college fairs were held in Trinidad and Tobago. And since 1998, at least 300 Bahamian students have been part of our student body, along with other smaller groups of students from Vietnam, Trinidad/Tobago, and China. In addition, through advertising in Peterson's Guide to four-year colleges, both in print and on-line, international students began to inquire.

They also began to attend. I recall in 2006 being delighted with two students, one from Columbia and the other from Vietnam, in my Symposium class who were virtually alone on campus. They were outgoing and had planned an education in the United States for themselves. Over the next few years, individual students or very small groups arrived from such places as Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, and Kenya to become part of the student body. Because I told the academic advising office that I love having at least one international student in my first-year classes, I usually had the privilege and delight of teaching someone from these countries.

A couple of other memorable initiatives aided the advancement of international students and students of color as part of the student body. For example, entrepreneur Dan Whalen, CEO of Peace Trails Program in Bosnia-Herzegovina, invited a cohort of students he had employed there to come to CSB/SJU for their education. The Whalen Family Foundation provided generous scholarships for these non-traditional students. Many returned to Bosnia-Herzegovina after graduation to help rebuild their country. One of these students, Savo Heleta, while studying abroad in South Africa, stayed in Port Elizabeth and finished both his Master's Degree and a Doctorate in Conflict Management. He is still connected with CSB/SJU because he works with study abroad programs through Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) where current CSB/SJU students attend study abroad in South Africa.

In 2005, I-LEAD or Intercultural Leadership, Education, and Development began for many first-generation students attending CSB/SJU. This program accepts a cohort of approximately twenty students each fall semester. These students are from diverse populations in the United

States. Recruitment efforts take place especially in St. Paul, Los Angeles, Newark, and Dallas. Besides other academic successes, these students are invited because of their leadership abilities and efforts in high school. They add a zest for life and learning that has given my class, and me as well, a boost in the quest for living in a diverse world. They represent many different cultures, races, and ethnicities. Therefore, in my FYS, there are students from New York, California, and Minnesota, including Hmong American and Hispanic students, as well as international students from China. I find the richness of such a group to be beneficial to all.

After witnessing the effects of these efforts, I chose as an FYS instructor to try to do my part in continuing to foster relationships among our diversifying student body. I enjoy befriending international students myself, and as a lifelong learner, I am always looking for ways to understand other countries and people.

Observations taught me that I am more outgoing in this effort than are my students. Therefore, since the theme of my FYS course is “The Power of Story,” I brainstormed ways of combining my joys and assisting my students to experience similar benefits of expanding their world view. These observations helped me realize that first-year students are generally more reticent about jumping into anything right away. They, so to speak, “test the waters.”

As a matter of fact, I also realized that international students and American students of color tended to navigate the community by using the security of numbers. I would notice groups of Chinese students together, for example, or Hmong American women gathering to go somewhere together. Seldom did I see groups of mixed nationalities or ethnicities, other than male-female pairs. Even within my own classes, I noticed that single Chinese students, for example, were befriended by only one other person, and usually not by the entire class.

Finally, I asked myself what I could do. How could I create a better community atmosphere in my own classes, branching out to the larger community? Could the overarching theme of my course be vehicle to accomplish such a connection?

I asked the Dean of International Students if we could identify students who would be willing to volunteer to be interviewed by my first-year FYS students who would write their stories. The Dean agreed wholeheartedly and the project was launched.

Thinking pedagogically, I determined the following advantages of the assignment:

- 1) Students write more passionately, precisely, and carefully when they know the person they interview;
- 2) Interview techniques seem simple but students need practicing and reviewing of the process;
- 3) Converting an interview into a narrative is a difficult writing exercise;
- 4) Crafting a story is a learned skill;
- 5) And sharing a “real” story accomplishes a major goal of the course.

For several years I have been including this writing project in my class and am pleased to say that the power of story definitely affects my students. They understand more fully the trials and struggles that international students experience. Some become friends with their interviewees or at least passing acquaintances.

My project begins with the reading and discussing of the stories in *Cusub Bilow/New Beginnings*, which is a book that a previous class of mine, Writing Well, produced in 2004.

We partnered with Service Learning and United Way of St. Cloud. The twelve students in the class were introduced to a Somali partner from St. Cloud and spent the semester interviewing and writing the story of that Somali partner. The purpose of the book was to assist the greater St. Cloud community to begin to understand the great influx of Somali immigrants who had moved to the city at that time. United Way assisted us in distributing these books to various waiting rooms and break rooms across the city so that people could pick it up and by reading a few stories begin to understand something about the Somali population.

By reading and discussing the stories in this book, my FYS students learn about the trials and struggles of immigrants who live in the area, observe narrative writing produced from many interviews, and experience passionate writing about real people.

After reading *New Beginnings*, the students make up a long list of possible interview questions preparing themselves for the face-to-face interview with the international student they will meet. For my students, the greatest hurdle is the actual contact and meeting with the other student. They never “know what to expect” and therefore often need to meet more than once.

Concluding the project means that students write the story, share it with their partner, and then tell it to their peers in class. The students are fulfilling two of the goals of FYS, in that they have written a substantial paper and have participated in an oral performance as well. Some years we have even been able to print the stories for the partner international student.

In fact, this act of printing the stories would fulfill my last dream because I would like to create a repository for these stories that our library could house and offer the rest of the community, displaying the richness our campus community experiences year after year due to the inclusion of students from around the world.