Doerr Innovation Award Final Report: Promoting Cultural Agility for International Students

PROJECT OBJECTIVE
The goal of this project was to help develop the cultural agility of international students at Rice. Cultural agility is defined as the ability to “quickly, comfortably, and effectively work in different cultures and with people from different cultures” (Caligiuri, 2012, p. 6). In 2017, Rice’s entering class had twenty-one different countries represented and 11% international students. Like all Rice students, these international students are bright and eager to learn; however, they also face unique challenges that domestic students do not have to overcome, including communicating in a new language and adjusting to a new culture. Indeed, it is clear that compared to domestic students, international students pursue fewer leadership opportunities at Rice and pursue them later in their undergraduate career. As a result, I wanted to highlight the barriers that international students face when pursuing leadership opportunities and to help them address these barriers, such as by improving their cultural agility.

PROJECT COMPONENTS
Part 1. Interviews with 20 international students at Rice (current and alumni)
Part 2. Cultural agility workshop in seven First-year Writing Intensive Seminar (FWIS) classes for 105 students
Part 3. Updated Rice International Student Association website
Part 4. Developing evidence-based writing interventions for belonging and self-affirmation

OVERALL TAKEAWAYS
What I have learned. In my original proposal, I wanted to focus on helping international students build more cultural agility so that they might feel more comfortable pursuing leadership positions earlier in their undergraduate careers at Rice. I wanted to provide a resource or opportunity to international students that other organizations on campus were not already doing for them. We were unable to do the initial lunch exercises that I proposed due to lack of resources (e.g., interested peer coaches) and practicality (e.g., did not ultimately seem like something that would be sustainable unless someone was in charge of running the program). However, the exercises that we utilized in the cultural agility practicum for international students in Fall 2017 with Drs. Ryan Brown and Beth O’Sullivan could be adapted to help supplement the existing Speaking Up and Interpersonal Skills programs for Mandarin speakers that Doerr currently offers.

Based on the interviews with international students (part 1), it seemed like cultural agility is also important for domestic students to serve as allies to international students. Whether it is entering a new social situation or pursuing a leadership position, there is only so much that international students can do – domestic students need to be accepting and supportive as well. Therefore, when I put together a cultural agility workshop (part 2), I accepted an opportunity to pilot the workshop in a few FWIS courses, which contains both domestic and international students. The main drawback of this was that it may have diluted my efforts, as the workshop was short and very general, which did not allow for a more in-depth discussion or reflection on how cultural agility applies to the students’ lives.

Moving forward. After piloting the workshop, I thought about other ways that I could help international students feel more comfortable and supported – which might indirectly
improve their confidence and cultural agility at Rice. This led me to reach out to the Rice International Student Association, one of the main international student organizations on campus, to see if I could help update their website (part 3) and add some resources that I had found as well. In addition, I put together two writing interventions focused on belonging and self-affirmation (part 4) that could be easily integrated into future FWIS courses. These interventions have been empirically demonstrated to help improve racial and gender minorities’ experiences on college campuses, but have yet to be tested with international students. However, the interventions would be hypothesized to have similar positive effects. Please see below for more details on all of the Project Components and their individual takeaways.

PART 1: INTERVIEWS WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Method. I interviewed 20 international students at Rice, including both current students and alumni to help better understand their experiences at Rice and with the Doerr Institute. The international students ranged from Class of 2015 to 2020, and represented a variety of majors, including engineering, social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences. I asked them the following questions: (1) Have you ever struggled to feel like you belong at Rice? In other words, have you ever struggled to feel connected to your peers or the broader Rice community? (2) How comfortable do you feel speaking up in the classroom or in groups outside of the classroom, and why? (3) How comfortable have you felt entering into leadership positions at Rice? Do you feel like cultural differences have influenced your comfort level with taking on leadership roles, and if so, how? (4) What qualities do you think make a great leader? Do you think your definition of a great leader is different than that of most people at Rice? If so, how? (5) How do you feel Rice and the Doerr Institute might be able to help international students like you to build their leadership skills and feel more connected to the Rice community? Are there any skills that you feel like are especially important for international students to learn?

Results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Common themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Q1: belonging at Rice            | • Many students felt that Rice provides a good infrastructure for belonging with Orientation Week (O-Week) and O-Week groups, and felt like they were able to make good friends this way. They also felt like students at Rice were open and supportive.  
• However, some students expressed feeling a lack of belonging, especially if they weren’t from a more Westernized country or a country with many international students from there (e.g., China). These students talked about feeling “out of place” or “disconnected.”  
• Some students also talked about cultural differences, such as how there were often misunderstandings of American sayings or values and how it is often easier to spend time with other international students who “get it.” Some students also talked about how it can be very tiring to speak and think in English if that wasn’t their first language. |
| Q2: comfort in speaking up       | • Again, international students who are from more Westernized countries or had been exposed to Western-style schools felt less of a cultural shock and felt more comfortable speaking up in classes. |
Differences in personality also impacted comfort, such that those with more outgoing personalities felt more comfortable.

- The students also talked about language being a barrier, such that they didn’t feel fully comfortable with their English to speak up in class and worried about how “others would view [them].” They also talked about how speaking up in small groups is often easier – as well as how more practice speaking in class helped with confidence.
- Most students felt comfortable speaking up in groups outside of class, especially around people they knew well. However, some students talked about how, even in these situations, it sometimes felt like there was “no room to talk” and how they had to project themselves more to “get noticed.”

**Q3: comfort in entering leadership positions**

- Within the sample, individuals varied with how comfortable they were with pursuing leadership positions. Some individuals talked about how they felt pretty comfortable and viewed being an international student as an advantage, because it means “more understanding of different cultures.”
- However, many others talked about how it took some time for them to feel comfortable, wanting to focus on “fitting in and understanding the culture first” or making sure they had enough education or experience before applying for a leadership position. One participant noted, “the ability to express and advocate for your opinion is important in the U.S.,” which was something she had to adjust to.

**Q4: qualities of a great leader**

- In talking about what makes a great leader, there were a lot of qualities that the students found important, such as someone who inspires and empowers others. They also found it important for them to have both technical skills (e.g., someone who is responsible, hardworking, adaptable, and puts ideas into action) and interpersonal skills (e.g., someone who works well with others, communicates effectively, has empathy for others, and listens and takes feedback).
- Some of the participants acknowledged that at Rice, it sometimes seems like the leaders are those who are the most “outspoken, popular, and charismatic” but that this doesn’t necessarily mean these are the best leaders. One participant noted, “I used to think being a ‘leader’ was a big word, but now I believe that you can start with smaller things, like changing yourself internally and empowering others.” Similarly, another participant discussed how leaders don’t have to be those at the “top” and how it’s important to figure out what works for you.

**Q5: better helping international students**

- The students had many suggestions on how Rice and Doerr could continue supporting international students, such as encouraging the students to work with others, focus on similarities (rather than differences), and not get frustrated if there seems like “an invisible wall between an American and non-American student.” Participants
described the importance of looking at things as opportunities and not being afraid of failure, as well as the importance of reaching out for help when needed.

- Other students talked about how Rice and Doerr could help international students be more vocal and feel more comfortable stepping outside of their comfort zone. They talked about how language proficiency is important, but communication skills are also about how to “organize opinions and communicate in a clear way.”

- Doerr could help specifically with their coaching program for students by specifically reaching out to international students and telling them more about coaching. Many of the students said that they did not really understand what coaching was about at first, and how it was much more personalized than they expected. One participant talked about how it was “a little confusing and ambiguous at first,” and how she struggled to be “open and vulnerable” with her coach in the beginning.

- However, many of the students found value in coaching, such as better understanding who you are and why you do what you do. They talked about how it can help you think about how you define leadership and what kind of leader you might want to be. They also talked about how coaching was good for practicing English, expressing their thoughts, and building their confidence.

- Lastly, the students talked about other ways that Rice could better support international students, such as helping them understand what opportunities exist for them to get more involved in the Rice community, holding more joint student organization events with international student groups for people to get to know international students better, and creating positions to better integrate international students (e.g., international student representative in student government).

These results were presented as a poster at the fifth biennial American Psychological Association Division 45 Society for the Psychological Study of Culture, Ethnicity, and Race research conference in July 2018.

**Takeaways.** The main takeaways from these interviews are that international students at Rice generally feel supported, but Rice could continue to improve in how they integrate international students into the community. International students do face unique challenges that domestic students do not; however, there are tangible ways that Rice and Doerr can help them become more comfortable and build more confidence.

**PART 2: CULTURAL AGILITY WORKSHOP**

**Method.** I created a cultural agility workshop to be presented during seven FWIS courses, based on Dr. Paula Caligiuri’s (2012) work. This workshop was about 20 minutes long, and covered the definition of cultural agility, why it is important, how different cultures vary in how they communicate, and how they could improve on the cultural agility competencies of perspective-taking, cultural humility, and tolerance of ambiguity. 105 students (55% female)
took part in the workshop, and all students took a survey right after the workshop. A follow-up survey was distributed 3-4 months after the workshop to examine the effectiveness of the workshop; 56 (58% female) students completed this follow-up. This follow-up survey included measures of cultural agility and engagement in intercultural activities.

Results. Out of the students who completed the follow-up, their mean score on the cultural agility scale was 5.65 (standard deviation ($SD = 0.66$). This scale was from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) with respect to the competencies of perspective-taking, cultural humility, and tolerance of ambiguity (e.g., “I am able to see situations from multiple viewpoints”). This score was not significantly different from the mean score during the cultural agility workshop, which was 5.63 ($SD = 0.64$). The average rating for engagement in intercultural activities was 3.62 ($SD = 0.61$) on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (all the time) for activities in the past 1-2 months, such as “said a positive comment about individuals from a different culture than me” or “initiated an interaction with someone from a different culture than me.” These results were presented as a poster at the 31st annual convention of the Association for Psychological Science in May 2019.

Takeaways. It is clear that Rice students have pretty high self-ratings of cultural agility that were not impacted much by the workshop, likely due to a ceiling effect. This also could have been due to the fact that the workshop was only 20 minutes long and, therefore, was only able to cover the basics of what cultural agility is and why it is important. However, it seems that Rice students already understand the importance of cultural agility. That being said, we all have areas of improvement, which is demonstrated in the prevalence of international students not quite feeling like they fully belong at Rice. Although the self-reported intercultural behaviors also had a relatively high average (between 3 = sometimes and 4 = often), this could have been impacted by the awkward wording of question, which may have been better written as a frequency question (e.g., How many times in the past 1-2 months did you engage in each of these behaviors?), as well as self-report bias. Future efforts should focus on helping Rice students think more critically about their potential blind spots and how they can continue to improve and translate their positive attitudes into more effective action.

PART 3: UPDATED WEBSITE

Although an active student organization with many beneficial programs, events, and campus engagement, the Rice International Student Association was primarily operating from their Facebook page, and their website had not been updated in over a decade. Since there are many online resources that Rice international students can use for their personal and professional development, I wanted to help put all of these resources in one place. In addition to updating the Rice International Student Association’s website, I compiled a list of resources for a new page on this website. The resources page includes information and links to the Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS), Center for Career Development, Program in Writing and Communication, Office of Academic Advising, Doerr Institute, Ascend Houston, and Counseling and Wellbeing. The section for the Doerr Institute also includes the information gained from Part 1, and helps provide more information about the value that coaching specifically provides for international students. Website URL: http://riceisa.blogs.rice.edu/resources-for-international-students/
PART 4: WRITING INTERVENTIONS

Researchers have demonstrated the immense value of interventions aimed at affirming students’ sense of belonging and personal values. These interventions have been shown to improve close relationships, campus involvement, and academic performance (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Walton, Logel, Peach, Spencer, & Zanna, 2015; Yeager et al., 2016). They work by helping students understand that they are not the only ones who might feel like they do not belong and that their sense of self is greater than any insecurity they are feeling in the moment. These interventions are short but impactful. The belonging intervention begins with students reading a few student stories about how they struggled with feeling like they did not belong at the beginning of college but how it got better over time. The self-affirmation intervention begins with students identifying their top three values from a pre-generated list of values. The next step is having the students write about how the stories or values personally relate to them. Because many international students have discussed language proficiency as an important skill that takes time to develop during their undergraduate career, these exercises could be additionally helpful by providing an opportunity to practice their writing skills. Based on Dr. Gregory Walton and colleagues’ work (2019) on belonging interventions and Drs. David Sherman and Geoffrey Cohen’s work (2006) on self-affirmation interventions, I created belonging and self-affirmation interventions that could be used with Rice students. I gave the materials and instructions to these interventions to Dr. Jennifer Wilson, the Director of the Program in Writing and Communication, as a potential activity to be integrated into future FWIS courses.

References


