

Perceptions of Diversity in the CEGEP Experience: Student Voices

Strength in Diversity

What does diversity mean to CEGEP students? How do students develop a sense of belonging to the college community?

Since its creation in 2015, the Vanier College Critical Diversity in Higher Education (CDHE) research group has been employing a student-centered approach in working with issues surrounding diversity and belonging in CEGEPs. With funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), the CDHE organized the (Dis)Comfort Zones conference in 2017, providing the CEGEP community with student recommendations and effective teaching methods in managing issues surrounding diversity in the classroom.

The research project conducted in the fall of 2018 represents a natural extension of the CDHE's continued work on diversity. This project involved interviews with students about their perceptions and experiences with diversity at Vanier. The pilot research project intended to identify key variables in the integration/marginalization of students and to explore how students perceive and engage with diversity in their CEGEP experience. The goal is to better understand student strategies in establishing networks and developing a sense of belonging to the broader Vanier College community.

"I'm just passing through. Being accepted. It's enough."

The theoretical framework for this project was based in an intersectional approach (Brah & Phoenix, 2004) in order to allow for greater understanding of the complexity of individual identities. This approach focuses on how variables such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, (dis)ability, and other factors overlap in understanding individual realities and background to respondents' experiences. Respondents for the project (all of whom were students) were volunteers, referred to the project by faculty and staff based on the student's involvement in formal and/or informal groups on campus. Among the recognized formal student groups, respondents in this study were associated with or participated in Model UN Club, the Chess Club, CORE, Badminton or Volleyball. Informal networks, on the other hand, tended to group friends from a program, friends from high school and/or friends with similar ethno-cultural backgrounds/religion from networks outside of college.

Findings and Discussion

Choosing Diversity

CEGEP often gives students a first real opportunity to represent themselves and feel represented: a space where *"they're encouraged to think for themselves"* and practice self-identification and self-authorship. In choosing a college, Vanier College's reputation as a diverse

multicultural institution was a deciding factor for students: half of respondents explicitly chose to come study at Vanier College over other colleges because of the CEGEP's reputation as being a diverse institution. For many, attending Vanier College represented a precious socio-academic opportunity:

"Diversity: that's what Vanier stands for. In the same hallway, you encounter a Black person, an Asian person... That's why I'm here."

The Importance of Belonging in College

Belonging is a meaningful measure of student success (Love, 2009). Students who associate or participate in ethnocultural and/or religious student groups actively employ these formal and informal networks as means of social integration and differentiation within the existing diversity of the College. The CEGEP experience being in itself short - *"2 years: it's so temporary"* - students feel like *"they can connect, foster a community"* while they pursue their studies at Vanier College. Moreover, results indicate students from self-described visible minorities derive their sense of belonging to Vanier College from simultaneous representation and inclusion in identity-based groups and informal networks:

"It makes so that people who look like me have a support system."

In their associative choices, students attempt to find a balance between the desire for similarity, representation, and support and the opportunity to engage with different identities. Students seek out networks that meet their needs: self-described immigrant students gravitate towards formal groups to make contacts, whereas students from visible minorities seek out clubs for representation. LGBTQ students tend to find support in informal networks in order to maintain a certain level of invisibility. The social functions of identity-based and interest-based student networks reveal themselves to represent cultural comfort zones that foster a sense of belonging. This involvement in college life can, in turn, encourage civic interest and provide potential socio-professional connections for the future (Gudeman, 2001; Kawashima-Ginsberg & Levine, 2014; Joshee, Peck, Thompson, Chareka, & Sears, 2010). As one student explained:

"It's the experience of figuring out what fits with you. The social aspect. They're good connections to have and, you know, being sociable, being involved in society."

Indeed, the college's diversity may operate as a form of social control among students, encouraging tolerance:



Photo credit Giovanna Arcuri

“There’s a large LGBT presence at Vanier. You can’t be outwardly homophobic”

Learning from Challenges

Effective and active diversity management on campus is correlated with student success and student retention (Barnett, 2011; Packard, 2013). Students interviewed report resistance to diversity as the main challenge in and out of the classroom, with teachers perceived as largely responsible for actively managing tensions and microaggressions. In the classroom, students report feeling overwhelmingly positive about having the opportunity to engage with peers of different cultural backgrounds although many pointed out that exchanges could force students to engage outside of their comfort zone:

“In class, it’s like forced interactions. There’s reluctance (...) It’s harder to navigate because sometimes, the source of discomfort is unknown.”

Equally important to students is the increased diversity among faculty, ideally coming to reflect the multicultural composition of the classroom. Many respondents echo the following sentiment in some way:

“You need to see people who look like you.”

Some studies indicate that ineffective management of diversity, or avoidance of issues in the classroom can encourage students to seek out groups or networks on campus that provide social capital and self-identification (Boysen, 2012; Strachan, & Owens, 2011).

Indeed, the need for representation on campus might at times compromise students’ desire to integrate. Identity-based comfort zones on campus create a sense of belonging but many students interviewed perceive falling back on racial or religious networks as a threat to inclusive diversity:

“People are connected as a group. But it excludes others... It’s good for the person in it. Makes them feel welcome.”

On the other hand, all of the respondents relay the importance of mixing in the classroom. In fact, the classroom represents a social arena that permits exchanges between different student identities that might not otherwise associate on campus or elsewhere. The controlled environment of the classroom represents a sometimes rare and precious opportunity for students to positively engage with diversity because of many students’ tendency to fall back on existing identity-based networks otherwise.

Immigration and the CEGEP experience

Overall, the CEGEP years represent a pivotal moment for students in their socio-professional lives, and this is particularly important for first-generation immigrants (Lapierre & Loslier, 2003). A significant portion of the sample for this research self-described as first-generation immigrants, i.e. individuals who had themselves migrated to Canada. These respondents describe the significance of getting involved with formal groups and networks during their studies at Vanier College because these groups symbolize pre-cious opportunities to meet people and transit between different student communities.

“I came here for my program. Networks provide names, friends that perhaps will follow to university.”

First-generation immigrant students actively employ networking strategies to facilitate sociocultural integration into the college community as well a civic society at large. The value placed on belonging to a formal and academic student group is high because of the group’s recognition within the College and the potential socio-professional contacts that may be made.

Students’ sense of accomplishment comes from being good citizens and extends beyond academics. As they graduate, most students expect to maintain their College networks through university and beyond.

Diversity Breeds Success

Previous research conducted on American campuses supports the positive correlation between students’ sense of belonging, academic success and civic involvement (Barnett, 2011; Packard, 2013). Students’ sense of accomplishment comes from being good citizens (Quaglia & Corso, 2014) and extends beyond academics. As they graduate, most students expect to maintain their College networks through university and beyond. Students currently enrolled in honors programs and smaller programs also feel their networks would play a role in their lives beyond the CEGEP years in that they provide emotional support and motivation.

Conclusion

Going forward, additional inquiry into the college experience in relation to multiculturalism and minority populations is needed so that we may better reflect and respond to the existing diversity on campuses and develop intercultural competence in and outside of classrooms to prepare students to effectively engage with diversity. Supposing active engagement with diversity positively influences levels of integration into socio-professional networks and civic society (Guo, 2014), Vanier College could be leading the way in shaping well equipped, accomplished students as well as involved citizens.

“The takeaway, at Vanier, is a general sensitivity to other cultures.”



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Resources and Research Report

Perceptions of Diversity in the CEGEP Experience: Student Voices
<https://www.vaniercollege.qc.ca/psi/files/2019/01/Pilot-Diversity-Research-Report.pdf>

(Dis)Comfort Zones Conference Proceedings
http://www.vaniercollege.qc.ca/psi/files/2017/10/Discomfort-Zones_Final.pdf

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