

# Falling Between the Cracks: Ambiguities of International Student Status in Canada

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## ABSTRACT

As Canadian universities seek to attract more international students, there is a need to recognize and respond to the diversity within this group and to question the binary categories of domestic students and international students. Relying primarily on 116 qualitative interviews with international undergraduates at the University of British Columbia, we utilize American students as a case study from which to explore the complex and blurred boundaries between these two categories. Americans resemble domestic students in some respects and international students in others, yet they are often less prepared to meet adaptational challenges because they have low expectations of cultural and institutional differences. We compare the experiences of Americans and international students from other countries, as well as other groups of students who fall between the cracks of the domestic and international student classifications. We argue that, by targeting services on the basis of these broad administrative categories, categories that were created for financial purposes, the university reduces the take-up of the very services students need.

## RÉSUMÉ

À une époque où les universités canadiennes cherchent à attirer de plus en plus d'étudiants internationaux, il est nécessaire de reconnaître la diversité de ce groupe et d'agir en fonction de celle-ci. Cela demande de s'interroger sur la division binaire des étudiants entre les catégories « canadien » et « international ». En nous appuyant sur 116 entrevues qualitatives avec des étudiants internationaux en études de premier cycle à l'Université de la

Colombie-Britannique, nous entreprenons une étude de cas des étudiants américains, afin d'explorer la complexité et l'imprécision des frontières entre ces deux catégories. Sur certains points, le profil des étudiants américains est semblable à celui des étudiants canadiens, mais sur d'autres, il s'apparente plutôt à celui des étudiants internationaux. Pourtant, ces étudiants américains sont souvent moins prêts à faire face à des difficultés d'adaptation, car ils ne s'attendent pas à être confrontés à des différences culturelles et institutionnelles. Nous comparons les expériences des étudiants américains avec celles d'étudiants internationaux provenant d'autres pays, ainsi qu'avec celles d'autres groupes d'étudiants dont la situation ne correspond pas aux classifications « canadien » ou « international ». Nous soutenons que, quand les services d'aide ciblent les étudiants sur la base de vastes catégories administratives conçues pour des raisons financières, l'université contribue à limiter l'utilisation des services dont les étudiants ont précisément besoin.

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Canadian universities have recently expanded their efforts to “internationalize” their student bodies (Chen, 2006; Douglas, 2005; Knight, 1997, 1999; Nerad, 2010). As job markets demand employees who can navigate an international stage, universities enhance their competitiveness by preparing students to engage with other cultures. They view an international student body as an asset and testimony to the university's dedication to global citizenship (Teichler, 2004). At most Canadian institutions, international students also pay closer to the real cost of post-secondary education, offsetting costs for domestic students whose tuition is subsidized. For these reasons, universities have turned to aggressive recruiting outside Canada, increasing international scholarships, and promoting their support services to enrol more international students (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Bond & Thayer Scott, 1999; Shute, 1999).

The potential value of international students for Canadian society is well documented (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada [AUCC], 2001; Cudmore, 2005; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Mueller, 2009; Pidgeon & Andres, 2005). Federal and provincial governments and organizations have acknowledged this potential by marketing Canada as a country of academic excellence,<sup>1</sup> a message that resonates with international students (Humphries & Knight-Grofe, 2009; Picard & Mills, 2009; Savage, 2009). Studies have consistently shown that international students are likely to stay in the country where they obtained their credentials (Aslanbeigui & Montecinos, 1998; Finn, 2000; Trice & Yoo, 2007), and foreigners who receive Canadian degrees typically face fewer barriers to labour market integration than immigrants with foreign credentials. Their social networks and experience in Canada while studying can facilitate later economic and social integration. Noting these advantages, the government created the Canadian Experience Class of immigrants in 2008 to help foreigners who recently graduated from a Canadian institution become permanent residents (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2008).<sup>2</sup> It also launched in November 2011 an initiative allowing current international PhD students to apply for permanent residency through the Federal Skilled Worker Program (CIC, 2011).

Despite the recent focus on the benefits of international students, these students are often viewed as a monolithic category with shared traits and needs related to language

acquisition and cultural adaptation which distinguish them from Canadian students. Yet this group of students is internally diverse, and the line between international and domestic is increasingly blurred, with universities enrolling international students partially schooled in Canada, Canadian citizens who have never resided in the country, recent immigrants to Canada, and American students who share language and some cultural elements with English-Canadian students. This complex reality is at odds with a binary classification of domestic and international.

In this paper, we utilize American students as a case study from which to explore the complex and blurred boundaries of domestic and international student classifications, comparing the experience of Americans to that of international students from other countries. The United States, Canada's closest neighbour and largest trading partner, has been sending large numbers of students to Canada for decades and has been the third-largest source country of Canada's international students since 2001 (CIC, 2009). Yet American students have received little programmatic or academic attention. Few studies explore the experiences of U.S. citizens in Canada, despite the history of transnationalism between the two countries (Matthews & Satzewich, 2006).<sup>3</sup>

One reason for this lack of attention is that American students are not seen as a vulnerable group, especially compared with other international students who face larger linguistic and cultural barriers (Matthews & Satzewich, 2006). Public conceptions associate the category of international student with students of colour who come from distinct cultural backgrounds and need language and integration assistance — a social construction that does not generally include American students. Yet Americans, as foreign nationals, experience many of the same institutional hurdles as other international students. However, because of an assumed cultural similarity, they may be less prepared to deal with those hurdles.<sup>4</sup> Faced with rising tuition fees at home, American students are a growing market for Canadian institutions, which compete with British, Australian, and other universities to attract them (Jaschik, 2007; Woo, 2006).

In this paper, we focus on international students at the University of British Columbia (UBC) as a case study of Canadian universities. International students make up 24% of students in British Columbia (Algarf, 2010) and nearly 12% of the undergraduate population at UBC<sup>5</sup> (University of British Columbia Planning and Institutional Research [UBCPAIR], 2010a, 2010b). The United States is the top foreign-sending country at UBC, accounting for about 20% of international students (UBCPAIR, 2010a, 2010b). We interrogate the utility of the generic international student category as a bureaucratic designation that often differs from social constructions of how students view themselves and are viewed by others. We examine how the experiences of American students differ from those of other international students, assess how well international student services meet the group's needs, and explore the many other types of students who see themselves as falling between the cracks of the domestic and international student designations. We rely primarily on 116 qualitative interviews — 24 with American undergraduates and 92 with other international undergraduates at UBC — conducted between 2006 and 2008.

The American experience reveals a broader pattern of how administrative categories created for one purpose may be problematic when applied to another. The international student classification was developed primarily as a financial distinction related to the differential tuition fees charged to the two groups. Yet it has become a means of identifying

students in need of certain kinds of support. The international student category is now used to target services such as language instruction or assistance, assistance with paperwork such as visas or health insurance registration, and information about cultural practices or adaptation. However, Americans and several other groups of students do not see themselves fitting into the designations of domestic or international, and, as a result, are less likely to access services targeted along these lines. By advertising support services to students on the basis of the domestic or international financial categories, the university alienates students who do not identify with those labels and reduces the take-up of services those students do need.

### **INTERNATIONALIZATION AT CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES AND UBC**

The internationalization of higher education has morphed from being associated with specific international programs to being related to broader strategic initiatives for global effectiveness (Botstrom, 2010). The concept is now used to discuss several international dimensions of higher education, including the integration of international content into the curriculum and the classroom (Bond, 2003; Bond, Qian, & Huang, 2003; Odgers & Giroux, 2009), student mobility (Hipel, Okada, & Fukuyama, 2003; Knight & Madden, 2010; Nerad, 2010; Taraban, Trilokekar, & Fynbo, 2009), and international research cooperation (Chan, 2004; Smeby & Trondal, 2005).<sup>6</sup> Although the growing presence of international students is only one aspect of the internationalization of higher education (Knight, 1997), and more specifically of the internationalization of strategic plans of higher education institutions (Childress, 2009; Knight, 1995; Weber, 2007), we use the term internationalization to refer primarily to the efforts of Canadian institutions to attract and support a more international student body (Cudmore, 2005; Knight, 1995; Savage, 2005).

International students began studying in Canada in large numbers after World War II, with no targeted services for this group (Bond & Thayer Scott, 1999; Cameron, 2006; Cunningham, 1991). Initially seen as part of Canada's international development assistance (Walmsley, 1970), the language of internationalization emerged in the mid-1980s with rapidly increasing numbers of international students (Hurabielle, 1998), and education came to be understood as a Canadian "export commodity" (Knight, 1999, p. 206). By the 1990s, internationalization had become "one of the most significant issues to challenge and alter the focus of higher education in Canada" (Knight, 1997, p. 27), with 64% of institutions offering international student orientation programs and more than 80% focusing on the international aspects of their educational mission (Knight, 1997; Walker, 1999). As a result of these local and national efforts to recruit students abroad to Canadian universities and colleges (Association of Canadian Community Colleges [ACCC], 2010), international student enrolment has increased rapidly since 1985, especially since the late 1990s (AUCC, 2011).

Although internationalization has evolved in Canada, American students have remained in the background, despite being in the country in considerable numbers. According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2009), Americans have been the third-largest group of international students in Canada since 2001, after students from China and Korea (see Table 1). The percentage of American students has decreased — a result primarily of the large increase in students from China — while the number of students

from the United States has remained relatively steady, around 11,000 students a year. In 2008, Americans made up 43% of the first-year international cohort at McGill and 26% at Dalhousie (Grayson, 2008).

Table 1.

*Number of Students in Canada From Top Three Sending Countries, 1999–2009*

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
China	6,465	11,055	20,415	29,807	36,611	39,296	39,592	39,843	41,087	42,154	49,905
Korea	11,030	15,704	20,738	24,132	25,562	26,719	27,251	29,035	30,084	27,440	25,871
U.S.	10,766	11,841	12,685	12,767	12,645	12,589	12,676	12,357	12,003	11,317	11,275

*Note.* Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2009)

As the third-largest university in Canada (University of British Columbia Public Affairs [UBCPA], 2008), the University of British Columbia provides a valuable case study of internationalization on Canadian campuses. In the mid-1990s, the institution articulated the clear goal of increasing its international student population. Although the objective of making the university experience an international one was an important impetus, UBC was also influenced by the B.C. provincial government's tuition freeze, which prohibited the increase of domestic tuition fees from 1996 until 2002. To deal with its rising expenses, UBC raised international student fees and increasingly emphasized international student recruitment. In 1996, UBC's Board of Governors inaugurated the International Student Initiative with the goal of "increas[ing] the enrolment of international undergraduate students based on a tuition assessment that would cover the full costs of delivering an undergraduate education" (University of British Columbia Student Services [UBCSS], 2010d). The program set a benchmark for recruiting 15% of its undergraduate students from abroad. Tuition for international students remained steady at \$461 dollars per credit (compared to \$76.50 for Canadian students) until 2002–2003, when it increased by 12%. International students in first-year general programs now pay 4.6 times the tuition fees of domestic students (UBCPA, 2001; see Figure 1).

UBC's first consultative vision plan, *Trek 2000*, highlighted internationalization and raising the number of international students among its key objectives (UBCPA, 1998). Increasingly, the university's documentation came to emphasize cultural, rather than financial, benefits to enlarging the international student population (UBC, 2005). *Trek 2010*, launched in 2005, presented internationalization objectives of "strengthen[ing] global awareness," "increas[ing] international learning opportunities," and "enhanc[ing] UBC's reputation internationally" (UBC, 2005). To enhance its international reputation, UBC aimed to "continue to promote international undergraduate student enrolment through the International Student Initiative" and "enhance and increase support services for international students at UBC" (UBC, 2005).

UBC's initiatives have clearly borne fruit. Its international student population has more than tripled, from 2,212 in 1996 to 6,804 in 2009, when international students made up 12% of undergraduates and 18% of the overall student population.<sup>7</sup> Since 1996, the United States has regularly sent the greatest number of international students to UBC, ranking slightly ahead of China and significantly ahead of Korea.<sup>8</sup> Since 1996 the number

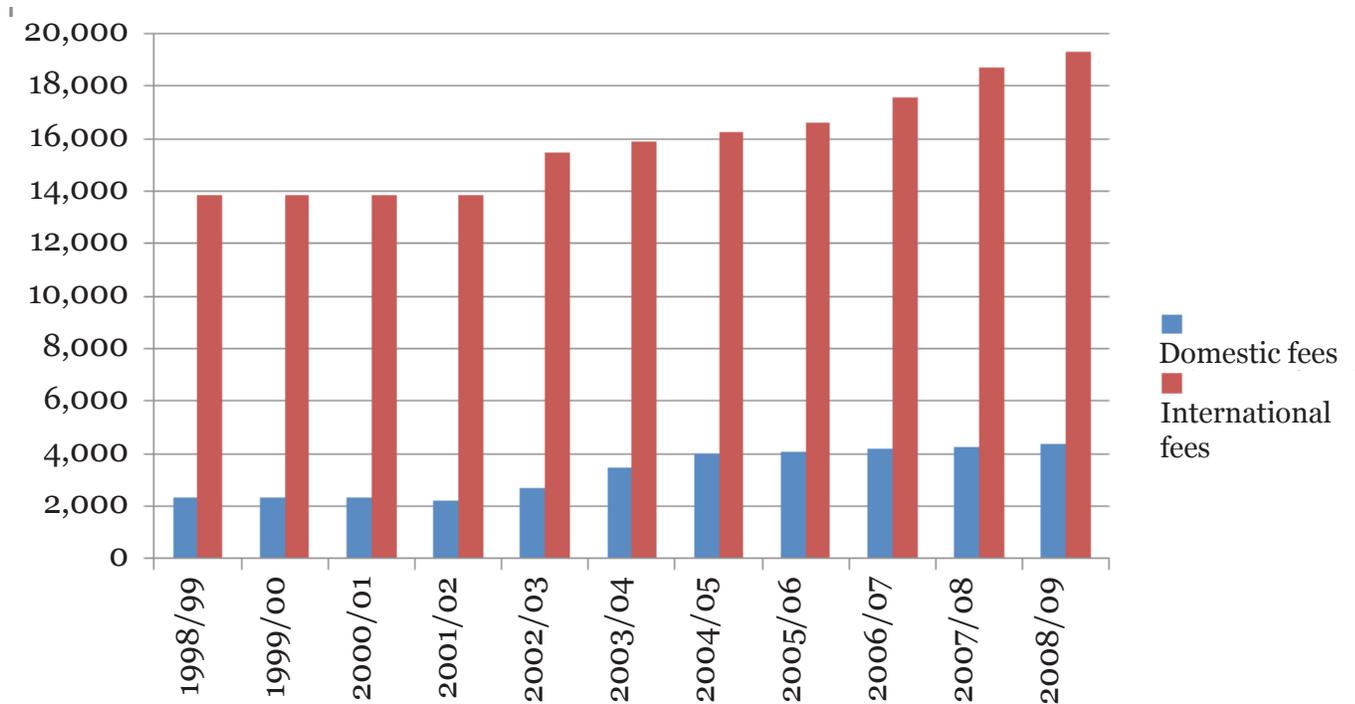


Figure 1. Fees for 30-Credit Program at UBC, 1998–2009.

*Note.* UBC Planning and Institutional Research Office (domestic fees) and UBC Academic Calendars (international fees).

of American students has increased more than four-fold, from a total of 303 to 1,361. The population of American students may not be the most visible, but it is a significant part of international student life at UBC.

## DATA AND METHODS

This paper analyzes qualitative interviews from the Study of International Student Integration at UBC. The study was created to provide hands-on research experience for students in undergraduate and graduate sociology courses in qualitative research methods. A total of 313 in-depth interviews with undergraduate and graduate students (178 with international students and 135 with domestic students) were conducted by 179 students enrolled in these courses between 2006 and 2008.<sup>9</sup> We focus primarily on the subset of 116 interviews with undergraduate international students, of whom 24 are American.<sup>10</sup>

International undergraduate students were eligible for interviews if they were not Canadian citizens or permanent residents, if they were planning to get their degree from the Vancouver campus of UBC, and if they did not complete all of their secondary education in Canada. Respondents were assigned to domestic and international categories based on their official designation by the university for the purposes of this project, though we interrogate those designations here. All students were screened before the interview for these criteria, but students in nine cases identified themselves as international and later revealed they had Canadian permanent residency or citizenship. In part, this lack of clarity indicat-

ed the blurry boundaries between the categories for students. In these cases, the interview was reclassified as domestic and excluded from our analysis of international students.

Although not the primary focus of our analysis, we also briefly discuss in our last section some of the types of domestic students who also fall between the cracks of administrative classifications. For this discussion, we draw on the 98 interviews with undergraduate domestic students from the larger study.<sup>11</sup> Students were eligible for the domestic interviews if they were Canadian citizens or permanent residents and were planning to get a degree from UBC–Vancouver.

In 2006 and 2007, first-year students were interviewed during their first term at UBC. In 2008, students in any year of their undergraduate studies were eligible, as long as they had not previously participated in the study. Respondents were recruited primarily through the interviewers' personal networks and notices posted on campus.<sup>12</sup> Although we discuss below the potential disadvantages of having so many interviewers, one primary advantage is that each interviewer tapped into different social networks to recruit respondents, effectively acting like a snowball sample with 179 different starting points. Respondents were offered small incentives for their participation.<sup>13</sup> The interviews covered questions on students' demographic background and residence histories, their pre-university education, entry into Canada and to UBC, services at UBC, their academic and work lives, social activities, and experiences with discrimination. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the interviewer.

There are limitations to the data due to the methodology used. Few qualitative studies rely on such a large number of interviewers and transcribers. It was not possible to control for variation between interviewers or for variation in the quality of the interviews. Although significant time and attention were devoted to the training of interviewers,<sup>14</sup> and many interviewers produced interviews with exceptionally rich detail, relying on novice interviewers means that many did not obtain the richness of detail expected of a professional or more advanced qualitative interviewer. Interviews were not selected for analysis based on their quality, but those providing less detailed answers typically served to confirm or discount patterns revealed in more illuminating interviews.

For this study, we classified respondents as American and Other International (OI) students based on their citizenship. Table 2 provides information on the characteristics of our sample. Using the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti, we analyzed the data by assigning a combination of descriptive and analytical codes and comparing responses between document families based on the two major categories of students we identified.

### **Adaptation:**

#### **“I’m Not Really That International. I’m Just From the United States.”**

The experiences of American students in adapting to life at UBC and in Canada were characterized by a sense of in-betweenness, as they shared experiences with both domestic and international students without fully fitting into either group. This characterization highlighted the problematic fit of the labels domestic and international. Like most domestic students, our American students cited as their biggest challenges adapting to a new institution and city, and living away from home for the first time.<sup>15</sup> One American student described her difficulty familiarizing herself with the university bureaucracy:

It's been hard to understand the ways that UBC is set up. It just seems to sort of sprawl ... geographically and bureaucratically. It took a long time for me to understand who is making decisions, who is in charge of what, whether it was the administration or the board of governors or you know. It's just a massive bureaucracy and it's pretty hard to navigate and understand what's going on there.

Table 2.  
*Characteristics of International Student Sample*

	United States	Other International
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	11 (50%)	29 (30%)
Female	11 (50%)	70 (70%)
<b>Ethnicity/Race</b>		
White	20 (83%)	11 (12%)
East Asian	2 (8%)	47 (51%)
Southeast Asian	--	7 (8%)
Middle Eastern	--	3 (3%)
Black	--	4 (4%)
Latino	--	5 (5%)
Multiracial	2 (8%)	12 (13%)
Did not indicate	--	3 (3%)
<b>Citizenship</b>		
United States	24 (92%)	--
Asia	--	59 (64%)
Europe	--	16 (17%)
Latin America	--	6 (7%)
Caribbean	--	2 (2%)
Middle East	--	3 (3%)
Africa	--	2 (2%)
Dual citizenship*	--	4 (4%)
<b>International Experience</b>		
Previously lived in Canada	1 (4%)	26 (28%)
Attended other B.C. college/university	0 (0%)	16 (17%)
Lived in one additional country**	5 (21%)	43 (47%)
Lived in two or more additional countries**	0 (0%)	21 (23%)
<b>N</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>92</b>

*Note.*

\* Students were asked for their citizenship but were not probed specifically about dual citizenship. This information is therefore only available when offered by respondents.

\*\* Refers to countries other than their country of citizenship and Canada.

Most American students had less trouble getting used to life in Canada than OI students who had not previously lived outside of their country of citizenship.<sup>16</sup> The OI students faced difficulties getting used to cultural differences, ranging from what level of friendliness to express toward strangers, to how loudly it was appropriate to speak in public. Few American students described similar difficulties adjusting to Canadian society. In fact, most American students were hesitant to even identify as international students. One female American claimed both a kinship and a disconnection from other international students, stating, “We kind of have a shared thing of being international, but I don’t really see myself as that international, being from the States.” Another student described herself as only “the lowest form of international,” and several students were unsure whether, as Americans, they qualified for a study on international students. Their hesitance to label themselves as international was compounded by awareness that others — including international students, domestic students, and even faculty — did not see them as international either.

Because many American students did not conceptualize their experience in Canada as international, those who expected to integrate effortlessly were sometimes unprepared when confronted with unforeseen differences. One female American noted: “I was just amazed by all the differences. Canada is much more European than the United States and I thought it would be quite similar.... Little things like the grocery stores are really different, and the way people act and their mindsets are different, and everything’s different.” The familiar environment made subtle reminders of its unfamiliarity even more jarring. These types of subtle differences play into a sense of frustration, and sometimes depression, that studies show to be common outcomes of cultural transitions (Pedersen, 1995). As a result, despite statements about ease of adaptation, many Americans provided a lengthy list of frustrations with the differences they encountered, suggesting minor experiences of culture shock that even they failed to recognize.

Although they did not see themselves as fully international, American students generally resembled OI students in their experiences dealing with Canadian financial and health care institutions. Both groups faced the challenge of setting up new bank accounts, applying for credit cards without a Canadian credit history, and receiving money from families abroad. The paperwork involved in a student visa, working papers, and tax returns, as well as the difficulty finding work as an international student, was challenging for both groups. One male U.S. student described the challenges for Americans living in Canada:

There are logistical challenges for transfer credits, filling out paperwork... and just various things that you wouldn’t think of... Say there’s a career fair going on and you have a variety of promoters there, I won’t be eligible for some of them if they require citizenship to work... They offer these possibilities, but ones that I’m not eligible for... Those would be things that you would face if you went anywhere outside your home country, but it was stuff that I hadn’t really considered coming up here.

Both American and OI students had similar experiences acquainting themselves with the bureaucratic hurdles of a foreign health care system. One American male described his difficulties as a foreigner getting used to the intricacies of the system:

You need to be much more proactive here, you need to seek the help that you need, and if the answer that you get initially isn't what you think you deserve, you need to fight for a much greater answer... The worst thing that's happened to me since I've been up here, I had a snowboarding accident in which I broke my pelvis. And for example that doctor was not going to give me an X-ray... I demanded an X-ray and it turned up to show that I had indeed chipped part of the bone. So there, if it had been my first time in a Canadian doctor's office after having experienced the American doctor's office, I probably would have believed her... But you can't really accept the first answer, you kinda have to push.

These administrative hurdles of learning how to interact with health care, financial, and other institutions reinforced the feeling of being an outsider for both American and OI students.

In terms of adjusting to academic life, an important difference between our American and OI students was their previous educational experiences. Most American students in this study had lived at home and were educated at public high schools, whereas many OI students had attended private international schools and lived outside of their home country before attending UBC. These OI students had the least difficulty adapting to academic life of all our respondents. They felt the academic expectations were not significantly different from those in the International Baccalaureate program many had taken. American students fell in the middle. They were unaccustomed to the tougher marking standards and the different grading system, but they reported general familiarity with the organization and style of instruction at UBC. The group with the most academic challenges was the OI students educated in local public schools in their home countries. They found much greater differences in the style and structure of teaching between UBC and their previous institutions. These students were often uncertain about how to structure essays at UBC, how they were expected to behave in class, and how much choice they had over their curriculum and assignments. Language difficulties often compounded their struggles. A student from Hong Kong remarked on the differences between the countries' education systems:

There are lots of differences. Hong Kong has a so-called spoon-feeding education system, in which students are taught with standardized curriculum. We learn what is required in the exams, no more, no less. In contrast, Canada's education focuses on self-learning and exploration. For instance, during our lectures, the profs would only teach us the main ideas of a topic. We are encouraged to read the textbooks and find out other resources on our own... In UBC, we learn to be independent learners, but it could be a slow progress.

Several publicly educated OI students noted that the greater freedom and flexibility had been hard to get used to.

American students see fairly minor differences in UBC's educational system from what they are used to, and the ease with which they adapted to UBC's academic environment depended on their expectations. Speaking on how well she felt her American high school prepared her for UBC, one female American student explained:

Honestly, I didn't think it would be that big of a deal, and I just find that I feel like I have no idea what I'm doing... I feel like I'm below everyone else here... I feel like I'm kind of at a disadvantage because there are a lot of things that tie into native history, and things that just tie into Canada in general that I just had no idea about, so it's kind of hard. Like in our history class, there are so many things that are common knowledge that I have no idea about, or things like certain French words come up and I've never heard any of that before... I feel that they're such small things, but it's like I'm at such a disadvantage, even more so, which is kind of ridiculous because America isn't that different from Canada, but it is in certain ways, you know?

Although OI students expected to have to familiarize themselves with a new educational system, Americans did not anticipate the need for educational adaptation.

American students and OI students had similar initial experiences with social adaptation, however. Befriending Canadians was a challenge at first (see also Pidgeon & Andres, 2005). Because 88% of undergraduates come from British Columbia (UBCPAIR, 2009), most local students already had friends from secondary school at UBC when they arrived. Yet where OI students frequently remarked that the locals tended to stick together, only some American students continued to find it difficult to make Canadian or local friends over time. American students generally believed that Canadians were receptive toward making friends with international students, especially with Americans who could blend in. Many American respondents felt that after they got to know domestic students, they had little cultural distance to cover. OI students, by contrast, felt that significant linguistic and cultural barriers stood in their way, echoing research findings on international students (Andrade, 2006; Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002; Jacob and Greggo, 2001; Lewthwaite, 1996). Many felt they were more socially conservative than domestic students and were uncomfortable with their partying and drinking habits. Others simply found it difficult to communicate.

As a result of these barriers, OI students were much more likely than American students to socialize primarily with others from their home countries. Nearly half of the OI respondents were involved in or planning to join social groups at UBC that related to their home country or culture. One female student of Indian heritage (who had joined the Indian Students Association, the Sikh Students Association, and the Bhangra Club) described the attraction of these groups as "just being closer to the Indian culture. Because you're away from home, it's just nice to see familiar faces or do things — you know, you all share the same culture, so to do things that you used to do back home." Some OI students combined these activities with campus activities targeted more broadly at international students, which provided a supportive community.

Such formalized opportunities to gather with other students from home did not exist for Americans. Most other international students sought out and joined cultural groups on campus, but there were no cultural groups for American students, despite their being the largest group of international students. Some U.S. respondents did mention a desire to connect with other Americans. For a female student from Minnesota, a group of people from home was the one recommendation for what would have made her transition easier: "I would love to meet more Americans... I heard there were people from Minnesota when I

was pledging [for a sorority], I went around and they were like ‘Oh, I know someone from Minnesota’ and I was like ‘Oh, I would love to meet them.’ I would like there to be like a section in the International House for Americans.” Despite the fact that those who had made these connections to other Americans on campus often found it “comforting,” some of our respondents suggested that a formal club would seem absurd and maybe vain, because the United States is a country perceived to be both culturally similar to Canada and patriotic to the point of conceit. Although we can only hypothesize why such a club does not exist, it is easy to imagine that such perceptions could inhibit the desire of American students to start such a group. OI students openly expressed dissatisfaction that the university failed to address their cultural needs, and Americans often lacked the words to explain what was missing for them on campus. They did not link their difficulties in transitioning to Canada to the disconnect they felt toward resources for international students, including the lack of a cultural community on campus to which they could turn. As the majority of our American respondents were White, this fact may have been a further barrier to their finding cultural student clubs reflecting their ethnicity that they could relate to.<sup>17</sup>

**Use of Campus Resources:  
“They’re for People Who Are Really, Really International.”**

American respondents did face challenges making the educational and social transition to UBC. Yet they made little use of the resources available to them as international students, beyond their original — and cursory — engagement with international services at orientation. Although some U.S. students felt that they simply did not need the support, a greater number sensed that the services catered to a population that did not include them.

American students reported few interactions with international services and programs, but most of them attended GALA, a three-day orientation program organized for all new UBC international undergraduate students. The UBC website summarizes the event’s goals as follows: “At GALA, you’ll learn about study permits, entry visas, health insurance, employment, and the services and resources offered on campus. Plus, you’ll make new friends and have fun!” (UBCSS, 2010a). Although these goals should apply equally to American and OI students, Americans largely saw the event as not catering to them and were more likely to leave the orientation partway through. One American student thought it was “kind of funny” to imagine someone from Seattle going to international orientation, and another one felt that the workshops were not useful for Americans, who already speak English fluently:

I would say that was more for people really, really international, like, they come from this one country that don’t speak English well, and I found that to be a waste of my time, because they describe everything online that you need and this is just a reiteration, and there’s no point in going.

Others noted that they only attended to make friends, and once they had, they left. Some OI students, in turn, served to reinforce the idea that GALA is not meant for American students. One woman from the Netherlands stated, “It was an international joke here that Americans call themselves international... It’s just across the border! If you talk to

Europeans and Asians, Canada and America are the same thing.” It is likely that Americans’ perception of the social distance OI students placed between them encouraged them to distance themselves more broadly from the services and institutions intended for international students.

The international student orientation is not the only service with which American students usually felt a disconnect: they also made far less use than OI students of International House, the only building on campus catering specifically to non-Canadian students. From the perspectives of American and other anglophone students, International House tended to conflate the categories international student and English as Second Language student. Although the International House website refers to American students in its section on culture shock to emphasize that cultural transition can be difficult for all, American students still saw the facility as inappropriate for them to turn to because, as anglophones, they did not see themselves as its target population. This perception means that native English-speaking international students tended to miss out on activities and services provided for them, such as guidance on income tax forms. Only a few American respondents ever sought help at International House, and those who did, did so only occasionally. Virtually no Americans in our sample maintained a relationship with International House or participated in its social activities. This resource played little part in helping one of the largest groups of international students adapt to Canada.

### **Treatment by Others:**

#### **“I Don’t Represent America. I Just Happen to Be From There.”**

OI students who reported discrimination typically described differential treatment based on race or ethnicity. For example, a student from Southeast Asia reported poor treatment in a shop, treatment that she felt was racially based. In contrast to students in other studies (Samuel & Burney, 2003), our OI students usually reported this treatment as happening outside of the university in interactions with businesses or service providers in Vancouver. Clearly, race does matter in how international students are treated. As a mostly White population, American respondents generally did not report any negative treatment because of their race. However, in contrast to OI students, the majority of American students recounted uncomfortable interactions influenced by perceptions of their home country, both on campus and off.<sup>18</sup> Although only seven American respondents said they had experienced nationality-based discrimination, many others, while not using the word *discrimination*, described experiences where they felt treated negatively or unfairly because of their nationality. This experience is not unique to American students in Canada (Dolby, 2004, 2007), but in our data it occurred far more frequently for Americans than for other nationalities.

Many American respondents were angered at being associated with unpopular U.S. politics, especially those of the Bush presidency, whether they supported it or not.<sup>19</sup> In a typical comment, one American female claimed, “I have been attacked for Bush, which is kind of awkward since I didn’t even vote for him... They just kind of put us all in the same boat.” A male American described “riding the bus [where] they’ll pick up my accent,... give me the finger, and yell something about Bush.” Several respondents elaborated that they, as students from liberal areas who had chosen to study in Canada, were least likely to fit stereotypes of political conservatism. An American male said, “Most Americans,

ironically, who come to Canada do so because to a certain extent they disagree with what their government is doing; they want to get away from it. But at the same time, when they come here, they are associated with what their government is doing because they are American.” Students felt a need to defend their country and politics, and to prove their opposition to the Bush administration. One woman noted this defensive stance in her frequent retort in such interactions, “I don’t represent America. I just happen to be from there.” In contrast, OI students confronted negative stereotypes, but there was little mention of country-of-origin politics or assumed political beliefs.

American students also confronted anti-American stereotypes of stupidity, obesity, pushiness, pompousness, loudness, militancy or pro-war attitudes, and limited knowledge of Canada. As one woman said, “I think most people view us as louder, or more pushy, so I find that a lot of people are surprised to find out that I’m American because I’m usually very quiet and I don’t announce that a lot and I’m not all about America: I don’t have Texas tattooed on my arm.” U.S. students felt that these anti-American stereotypes, unlike racial and ethnic stereotypes — or even national stereotypes about other countries — were viewed as socially acceptable, including inside the classroom. Indeed, a few U.S. students noted negative comments about America in class, including comments by a professor who made persistent “little jokes” about a “bad president.” This behaviour made them feel that anti-Americanism was officially condoned.

OI students also experienced discrimination or negative treatment, often language-related. Unlike American students, these students often expected to encounter discrimination, having heard stories of differential treatment, or having been warned about cultural differences. They were prepared to be viewed as foreigners or outsiders. American students, by contrast, were unprepared for these negative experiences and often felt they had nowhere to turn for support.

### **Other Forms of In-betweenness: “From an International Perspective, I’m an International Student. In Terms of Tuition Fees, I’m a Domestic Student.”<sup>20</sup>**

The experience of American students at UBC problematizes the binary classification of students into two administrative categories — domestic and international — that are each typically treated as homogenous. This classification grew out of differential fee structures for the two groups and frequently serves as a basis for providing different services and resources to students. Yet it neglects the diversity within and overlap between the two groups. International students reflect a range of experiences with respect to English-language proficiency, cultural difference, and international experience. Americans are only one example of a student group whose experiences fall between the domestic and the international categorical divide.

A sizable proportion of our OI respondents grew up in an international environment. For some, their upbringing involved attending international schools in their home country and having a largely international group of friends. Others fit a pattern increasingly known as “third culture kids” — those who have spent significant periods of time as a child in one or more cultures besides their own (Langford, 2001; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Van Reken & Bethel, 2005). Often these students moved frequently between countries, creating international friendship networks. One female student from the Netherlands remarked on her international education and upbringing:

I went to a primary school in Holland, then we went to India. I did first to sixth grade in an American Embassy School, then I went back to Holland for a year and a half to go an international school there. And then for the past six years in Vietnam I attended a United Nations international school.

The third culture kids in our sample displayed a high level of international awareness and were more likely to have lived independently, to have studied an international curriculum, and to have experienced adapting to new cultures. Such students reported relative ease in adapting to UBC and Canada. For example, one female student, originally from Singapore, reported, “I don’t find anything difficult [about moving to Canada] actually, because I’ve changed before. I’ve moved to Shanghai before. So to me the culture shock in Shanghai is worse than the culture shock here.” These third culture kids are classified as international students, but they have much less difficulty transitioning than those with little past experience abroad.

Other groups also fall between conventional understandings of domestic and international students. Recent immigrants to Canada are classified as domestic students but may have very limited experience in the country and share many of the same challenges adapting to a new country as international students. Many have just as much trouble with English as international students from non-English-speaking countries. Many were schooled, until quite recently, in educational environments with little institutional resemblance to those in Canada. Yet these students are not targeted for international services, language assistance, or help with adapting culturally. Some recent immigrants consider themselves international students, and they initially identified themselves as such for this study, only to reveal their permanent residency or citizenship later on.

Other students who are classified as domestic are Canadian citizens who were not raised in Canada. Often these students are dual citizens, though this group also includes the children of Canadian diplomats or international business people, and those born in Canada while their parents were temporary residents (for example, graduate students) and who left when very young. These students frequently choose to attend university in Canada in part to benefit from their ability to pay domestic student rates. One male student described his situation, stating, “Here’s the first thing, I have dual citizenship. I was born and raised in Germany but [from] my father’s background I got a Canadian citizenship too.” This student and those like him pay domestic fees as Canadian citizens but experience UBC as international students, having never before lived in Canada. Often these students are not as unfamiliar with the culture as many other types of international students. But they may nonetheless face the same challenges of adapting to a new educational and institutional system and new cultural norms.

Some students classified as international completed part of their secondary school education in Canada, at boarding schools or with host families or relatives. These students often resemble domestic students in their preparation for university and familiarity with Canada. Some domestic students also share needs with international students, such as francophone students who may struggle with language issues and some cultural norms. All these types of students blur the division between international and domestic students, and, like Americans, they challenge the provision of services to students on the basis of these administrative distinctions.

## CONCLUSION

On paper, *international student* is a straightforward administrative category. However, on closer examination, the boundaries between domestic and international blur and overlap. Comparing the experiences of American students, other international students, and a variety of students in other situations illustrates the diverse realities both within and across the domestic and the international categorical divide. University administrators need to more consciously interrogate who falls between the cracks of this binary classification so that services reach all students who need them and so that the goals underpinning internationalization initiatives are realized.

University services should start by more explicitly acknowledging how students differ from other international or domestic students, as well as what they have in common. Resources like international student centres and orientations must acknowledge the lack of fit between an international label and how these students may see themselves and be seen by others. As such, services that are often already available must be targeted more specifically by need, instead of toward broad administrative categories with which students may not identify. For international student orientations, this goal may involve separate workshops tailoring information about medical care, banking, work permits, taxes, and other administrative issues to different groups of students in a format and a language style that is appropriate for them. International student centres must deliberately present themselves with targeted activities if they are to become welcoming homes away from home for Americans, international students from elsewhere in the world, and domestic students requiring assistance with linguistic and cultural adaptation. Terminology and vocabulary must be rethought and refined to be viewed as accessible and relevant to intended populations. Language tied to specific needs and services should be employed in lieu of broad administrative categories, perhaps drawing on simple questions such as “Do you need help with English?” or “Need help with health insurance?” or “Are you new to Canada?” University administrators, as well as students and faculty should recognize that large numbers of non-Canadians and students with international experience on Canadian campuses are part of internationalization, despite perceptions of that process which often focus on geographically distant parts of the world and more obvious linguistic and cultural divides.

The experiences of American students, third culture kids, domestic students who are recent immigrants, non-resident dual citizens, and Québécois students all illustrate problems universities may encounter when utilizing financial administrative categories for purposes other than those for which they were created. These examples are groups whose needs do not correspond with the services associated with the respective international and domestic classifications. Using such categorizations for ancillary purposes can construct barriers to the take-up of the very resources universities intend to provide.

The ways that universities develop and promote services for international students communicates whom they view as a full part of that community. In recent years, the federal government has highlighted the potential contribution of international students to Canadian society as students, workers, revenue sources for Canadian universities, and even as potential immigrants (CIC, 2008). If Canada wants to take full advantage of the foreign talent that it helps to train, universities and the government must ensure that all

international students receive adequate support across a wide range of needs. Students who have their diverse needs met are more likely to make a lasting contribution to Canadian society.✱

### NOTES

1. See the recent branding effort “Imagine Education au/in Canada” (<http://imagine.cmec.ca>) (Birchard, 2007; Wright, 2008) and the brochure “The Value of a Degree in a Global Marketplace” (AUCC, 2010).
2. Students lacking the requisite one year of Canadian work experience can apply for the Post-Graduation Work Permit, which allows them to work in Canada for three years without restrictions, an advantage over regular work permits which are typically tied to specific employment (CIC, 2008).
3. For exceptions, see Stewart and Bennett (1991) and Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1966). Studies of how American students adapt in other English-speaking countries are especially rare, except to note that American students acculturate more easily than non-native speakers (Lyakhovetska, 2004). Bucking this trend, Dolby (2004, 2007) has researched American study-abroad students in Australia. Yet over the past decade no articles examining the experiences of American students in Canadian post-secondary institutions has been published in the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, *Canadian Journal of Education*, or *Journal of Studies in International Education*.
4. In a study of international businesses, Selmer (2007) found that employees relocating to cultures they recognize as different may be at an advantage compared with those who assume cultural similarity, which leads to the belief that no behavioural changes are necessary to adapt to the new society.
5. These calculations are based on the “International Students by Country of Citizenship” and total student population from “Full-time and part-time enrollment UBC Vancouver” (UBCPAIR, 2010a, 2010b).
6. For discussions of the multiple dimensions of internationalization, see Altbach and Knight (2007), Dutschke (2009), Knight (1995, 2006), and Siaya and Hayward (2003).
7. See note 5.
8. Between 1996 and 2009, the United States was the top sending country in all but three years. In 2003, 2004, and 2005, China slightly eclipsed the United States as the top sending country. See UBCPAIR (2009).
9. In 2006, 60 international and 60 non-international students were interviewed in an undergraduate qualitative methods class. In 2007, 65 international and 63 non-international students were interviewed in undergraduate and graduate classes. In 2008, the undergraduate class interviewed only international students (41), whereas the graduate class interviewed one international and one non-international student (24 total).
10. The subset of 116 international student interviews excludes graduate student respondents, nine respondents (two American and seven OI) who identified as international but later revealed permanent residency in Canada, and one duplicate interview where the same respondent had been previously interviewed.
11. A total of 135 interviews with domestic students were conducted between 2006 and 2008. We exclude the 37 interviews done with domestic graduate students and focus here on the remaining interviews with undergraduates.

12. Interviewers were able to interview anyone they knew who was eligible for the study. Some identified respondents by sending out a recruiting email, making announcements in classes and student groups, and posting notices to online student discussion forums. We also placed notices in the international student bulletin and made announcements in introductory sociology classes.
13. Respondents could enter their name in a prize draw for a \$50 gift certificate to the campus bookstore. From 2007 to 2008, respondents were also given a 20% discount coupon for non-textbook items at the bookstore.
14. Training included several classes and readings devoted to interviewing skills and the procedures of the study, watching and evaluating a video of a sample interview, conducting practice interviews, peer evaluations on interviewing skills, and detailed feedback on the first interview before students conducted the second one.
15. International students were more likely to list adaptation related to the country, language, or culture, and many had previous experience living away from home.
16. Although only five of 24 U.S. students (21%) had spent a year outside of the United States, nearly half (43 out of 92) of the OI students had lived outside of their citizenship country.
17. Interestingly, the American respondents of Asian heritage in our sample were not involved in clubs related to the ethnic origins of their family. It is possible they felt distanced from those origins, or they did not identify with the experiences of Asian Canadians. Given the small number of Asian American respondents, and that our interviewers did not probe on this topic, further research is needed on this issue.
18. Despite the post-9/11 context, most of our Middle Eastern respondents did not report similar negative treatment based on nationality. However, as our study includes only three Middle Eastern students, further research is needed to explore the role of stereotypes about nationality and terrorism in their treatment on university campuses.
19. A limitation of this study is that the interviews were all conducted during one presidency, that of George W. Bush, and do not allow for comparison across political and partisan contexts.
20. In this section, we draw on interviews with some domestic undergraduate students as well as international students.

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