Ethnography of International Students at Parkland College

This project is an ethnographic study of international students. Our research group set out to find how comfortable and accepted international students felt in the Parkland community, and how they had adapted to their new college environment. Through conversations and participant observation I came in contact with many international students, and began observing about eighteen students who worked in the library, in the Center for Academic Excellence, and in various other departments at Parkland College. Four of these students agreed to participate in the research, to be interviewed and audio recorded. Research methods included participant observation, formal and informal interviews, and audio recording.

As I walked daily through the hallways of Parkland College, I observed the multiplicity of nationalities, and in some instances heard the variety of languages spoken by different students conversing with each other. The section on international students of Parkland’s website states that it “welcomes the cultural diversity that students from around the globe bring to our campus each year” (Parkland). Taking an applied cultural anthropology course this semester offered me some insight into the ethnographic methods used to understand the culture of people in other lands. Conversely, here in the community of students at Parkland College, our ethnographic study was conducted to investigate how international students come to Parkland. The study has provided us with some understanding on the processes through which more than 350 international students representing over 50 countries have journeyed to the Midwest to further their education at Parkland College (Parkland).
Parkland is a two-year community college located in Champaign Illinois with a student body of over 10,000 students who are pursuing studies in order to acquire academic and vocational degrees, as well as certification in many disciplines. As was evidenced by our interviews and additional informal conversations with almost a dozen international students, they come to Parkland for a number of different reasons. Some students such as myself, who initially applied to the college as an international student, made the decision to return to school to enhance their chances of getting into a new career. Others whom we spoke to came to the college because they had relatives living in the area or because of scholarship opportunities which were presented to them in their country of origin. These scholarships were either through excellence in athletic skills as in the case of a student from Brazil, which offered her the opportunity to play soccer on the Parkland Soccer Team, or through the opening of studentship prospects through agreements between the government of Indonesia and the government of the United States as in the case of another student.

During our interviews with students, they expressed feelings of shyness and some degree of culture shock and homesickness when first arriving at Parkland. The experience of the American classroom culture was quite different from my home culture, and calling the professor by first name was difficult for me, and was one of the points also mentioned in interviews by participants. Culture shock is defined in cultural anthropology as “the experience of stress and confusion resulting from moving from one culture to another, the removal of or distortion of familiar cues and the substitution of strange cues” (Podolefsky 2013:G2). From discussions with our interview participants, and my familiarity with similar situations after moving here from the Caribbean, it was obvious that we had all experienced some degree of surprise and confusion when we first arrived here.

Another point international students found surprising when first arriving at Parkland was the silence shown in classroom social interactions. When I first started college, I was greeted with silence
whenever I entered a classroom and said good morning or good afternoon while students were captivated by their phones or laptop computers. This was strange to me, and also to other international students. One interviewee expressed surprise at certain social behaviors that seemed to be “cold”, and felt that some students and young people were “disrespectful” or “rude” in the way they spoke to teachers and their elders, and felt that Americans were not generally friendly. Basso in his ethnographic work in the Apache culture made the point that “for a stranger entering an alien society, knowledge of when not to speak may be as basic as to the production of culturally acceptable behavior as a knowledge of what to say” (2013:37). I found this to be so relevant to my experiences, as well as to the social encounters of other international students, as it is clear that not knowing when to stay silent marked us as different to this culture.

In our interviews, we found that international students seem to have a positive experience once they overcome initial culture shock. Blake Gibbons, the other member of my research team, and I sat at a Parkland computer lab on a cold and rainy afternoon in April to interview our first participant. In this conversation, no one would have guessed that she had experienced homesickness when she first came to Parkland from Brazil. During the interview, she spoke at length about the academic and employment opportunities she has had at Parkland over the two years she has spent here, and how her involvement in soccer, her academic studies, and work at Parkland had benefitted her, and had helped her deal with feelings of being far away from home. She spoke extensively about the library, and the textbooks that are on reserve and made available to students who do not have money for textbooks. From talking to her, I got the sense that she now fully felt a part of the Parkland community because she had been afforded financial help and was offered in-district tuition as a foreign athlete. She valued the individual attention of the teachers, and the interest they show in students who express a desire to go further in the pursuit of their ongoing education, both here at Parkland and transferring to a four-year college.
International students who travel great distances across the globe to attend college here at Parkland add to the cultural diversity of the college, and their diligence in their studies complement the improvement of student life. They join various clubs and participate annually in the International Students Association Cultures Fair. On Wednesday April 10th the Flag Lounge and the College Center was the scene of colorful tables, posters, global foods, music and an exhibition of the many cultures represented here at the college. One could have one’s name written in Japanese, or have paintings of henna applied to their arms. One could sample tasty treats from various countries and purchase German bread and chocolate from the German Club. The traditional music of many cultures was also staged, and resonated through the corridors. Coming out of class, the beat of African drums drew me to the Flag Lounge, followed by the scintillating music of a Chinese folk song. The event featured information on the many countries from which students come, and there was a food buffet presenting food from Mexico.

It was at the international cultures fair where another of our audio interviews took place, with the participant from Indonesia who showcased her traditional dress of an elaborate batik design. She had an intricate pattern of henna painted on her hand by the students from India to which my eyes continually strayed during the interview. As we spoke we observed other students attired in the traditional dress of many countries including Japan, India, Africa, China, Vietnam and many others. We also noted that the proceeds from the event’s buffet are donated to Doctors Without Borders, an organization which offers voluntary medical services in many developing countries, which lead to a conversation on how international students at Parkland are active in helping to promote globalization in more ways than one. According to Crawford, “globalization is nothing new... the places we think of as only entering the modern world have always been modern, and they’ve always been connected to the world through regional and long distance trade networks”. The populations of international students at Parkland College wherever they come from are a part of this long distance trade network of which the author speaks (2013:289).
An education at Parkland College has been termed by one student featured on the Parkland website as “a world class education” (Parkland). According to our interviewee from Indonesia, whenever a student from her country gets an education in America, “it is seen as very good training.” Thus, being a part of the student body at Parkland College benefits international students from many countries as once they return home they are perceived as having received a prestigious education during their time here, and being well prepared for the world of work and life after college.

International students benefit from their education here, however, many also give back to the Parkland community. A number are employed in the library, and in the speech and computer labs. In addition, the Center for Academic Excellence employs many students from Asia and other countries as peer tutors who help in the teaching of subjects such as business, math, and sciences among many other courses. This helps in the success of the entire student body, as the extra help in these areas can assist in improving students’ understanding of the subject matter resulting in a better grade.

I was delighted with the opportunity to implement this brief ethnography to improve our understanding of the student international community at Parkland College, as I applied to Parkland and was initially accepted as an international student myself. Our conclusions show that international students at Parkland gain the knowledge of “what kinds of codes, channels, and expressions to use in what kinds of situations and to what kinds of people” (Basso 2013:37). These students were able to adapt to the rules governing the conduct of face to face communication, especially with their college professors, as well as written communication, in terms of adapting to the use of American English. As they adjusted and transitioned to the culture of Parkland College, and to life in the United States while pursuing their studies, international students were comfortable in relating their experiences and felt accepted. These conclusions and part of our interviews can be found in our podcast titled “An
Ethnography of International Students,” which our group presented at the Ethnography of the University Conference at the University of Illinois in Champaign in the Spring of 2013.

Works Cited


