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Student or Token?

Abstract

This essay examines the journey of a first-generation Vietnamese international student at a prestigious Western university, focusing on the challenges of navigating higher education without familial guidance. It highlights the tension between personal identity and institu-tional expectations, exploring the concepts of double consciousness (Du Bois, 1897) and the feeling of being a "fish out of water" (Bourdieu, 1997). The essay discusses the cul-tural shock, the adaptation process, and the resilience required to overcome these hurdles. By seeking support and building a community, the student experiences personal growth and gains a nuanced understanding of cultural dynamics, emphasizing the importance of maintaining authenticity amidst external pressures.

Student or Token?

According to Lilly Patel (2023), Durham University ranks as the worst university for social inclusion in England and Wales, with only 23% of its students identifying as first-generation college attendees. As Boliver et al. (2022) point out, "highly selective universities run the risk of losing funding if they do not demonstrate steady progress towards more diverse student intakes." As a student from a minority group, a working-class family, and a developing country, I often ponder my position at such a prestigious institution. Am I genuinely valued as a student, or am I merely a token for the university to secure funding?

This question underscores the tension between personal identity and institutional expectations. As a first-generation college student, navigating the complexities of higher education involves a continuous perception of myself through the lens of others. This double consciousness (Du Bois, 1897) presents both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, it can lead to internal conflict, self-doubt, and a struggle to reconcile my cultural heritage with the academic environment's expectations. On the other hand, it provides a broader perspective, allowing me to understand and navigate multiple cultural contexts with a nuanced approach.

My experience as a Vietnamese international student often highlights this double consciousness in a predominantly Western environment. The unique aspects of my cultural and racial identity—such as language, rituals, customs, and social norms—stand out (Fanon, 2016). Simultaneously, there is an expectation to adapt to the dominant culture, which includes adopting new habits, academic norms, and even accents. Balancing my authentic cultural identity with conforming to prevailing norms often leads to internal conflict and a sense of being an outsider.

The feeling of being a "fish out of water," introduced by Bourdieu (1997), was particularly pronounced during my early days in college. The disconnect between my familiar cultural norms and the new social environment created profound unease and confusion. Interactions with peers and faculty were influenced by our differing backgrounds, and my deeply ingrained dispositions and expectations often felt out of sync with the surrounding academic culture. This misalignment required significant adaptability and resilience as I navigated the challenges of a foreign academic and cultural environment. Culture shock intensified these difficulties, presenting a transformative process of adaptation and resilience (Oberg, 1960). Encountering a different social and educational structure forced me to develop new coping strategies and tactics. The psychological strain of adaptation, feelings of loss from being separated from familiar surroundings, apprehension about acceptance, role confusion, emotional reactions to cultural differences, and a sense of helplessness were all part of this journey (Pyvis & Chapman, 2005).

As an international first-generation college student, I faced additional layers of complexity that my peers did not. Without family members who had gone through higher education, I had to figure out many aspects of college life independently. This included

understanding the admissions process, securing financial aid, choosing the right courses, and balancing academics with social life. To navigate these challenges, I reached out for help wherever I could find it. I connected with academic advisors, joined support groups specifically for first-generation students, and participated in cultural organizations on campus, which provided a sense of community and belonging. Despite these challenges, the experience ultimately led to personal growth and a greater understanding of cultural dynamics.

Reflecting on my academic tenure, I recognize the profound impact of these experiences. While my initial foray into a Western academic environment was marked by significant culture shock, subsequent transitions were easier to manage, thanks to the resilience and adaptability I had developed. This journey has shaped my academic and professional path and deepened my appreciation for the complexities of cultural identity and the importance of maintaining one's authentic self amidst external pressures.

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