Impact of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion on Social Connection and Wellbeing Among Equity-Seeking Students

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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DISCLAIMER

This report was produced as part of the UBC Sustainability Scholars Program, a partnership between the University of British Columbia and various local governments and organisations in support of providing graduate students with opportunities to do applied research on projects that advance sustainability across the region.

This project was conducted under the mentorship of UBC Health Promotion and Education staff. The opinions and recommendations in this report and any errors are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Health Promotion & Education or the University of British Columbia.

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INTRODUCTION

This research provides an overview of the experiences of students belonging to equity seeking groups at UBC and outlines the barriers that influence their sense of belonging and social connection at the institution. Through assessing the relationship between the wellbeing priority areas and social connection this report synthesizes and evaluates the connection between social determinants of health and the structural determinants of wellbeing that can affect social connection.

BACKGROUND

Social connection and having a sense of belonging are social and psychological needs that have been identified as predictors of success, retention, persistence, and the overall wellbeing of college students (Strayhorn, 2018). As a result, efforts to enhance social connection have become a priority for student affairs professionals across higher learning institutions. At UBC specifically, the community consultation and informed research that resulted in the UBC Wellbeing Strategic Framework (UBC WSF) identified social connection as a priority area with high potential to strengthen the wellbeing of students, staff, and faculty. In support of UBC Wellbeing's collaborative efforts, the Wellness Centre at the Vancouver campus provides spaces to help foster and create stronger connections while positively impacting the mental health and wellbeing of students who access the center.

This report will assist the Health Promotion Education unit at UBC and the larger network of health promotion professionals on campus to develop programs and services that are inclusive for equity-seeking students. The equity seeking groups considered in this study include Indigenous students, students of colour, students living with disabilities, and students who identify as LGBTQ+.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The findings outlined in this report are the result of an extensive review of the literature on social connection and belonging as it pertains to the post-secondary student context. The study also included scoping reviews and a local scan to identify interventions that create the conditions for building social connectedness and social participation at UBC. For the purposes of this report, the

scoping review denotes the exercise of clarifying working definitions and conceptual boundaries of the topic, which included the emphasis on the post secondary student context. While the local scan signifies the identification of gaps in existing policies and procedures at the institution. The scan also provided a chance to recognize measures that have worked well at UBC and other Canadian post secondary institutions.

To complement the literature review, scoping review and scan we held an informal consultation session with five UBC students who identified as belonging to one or more of the identified equity seeking groups. Although the opinions shared were not representative of the larger group, they provided a means through which to explore the opinions of the larger groups as detailed and assessed within the literature reviewed. The opinions shared also present a key to initiating future research on social connection and belonging beyond the conceptual boundaries of this study.

SUMMARY

The review of the literature backed by findings from the student consultation affirmed the assumption that students belonging to equity seeking groups are more likely than their non-equity seeking colleagues to have a weakened sense of belonging. This is because their values and experiences are not reflected in the general population of their institutions, in the mandatory curriculum, or in the campus culture. The student consultation also helped to highlight the important contribution of lived experiences to social connection and belonging for students at UBC.

Acquiring a sense of belonging is hard for many Indigenous students as they face both cultural and structural barriers. For example, many have parents who do not share the same aspirations to achieve higher education due to the historical colonial practices associated with education and their impact on Indigenous families (Michalski et al., 2017). The literature reviewed identified lack of understanding of indigenous culture on campuses as one of the institutional factors affecting indigenous students. For example, Crey (2009) participated in a research project that explored difficult discussions of Aboriginal issues that take place in classrooms at the University of British Columbia. According to Crey (2009) for non-Aboriginal students, discussions of the issues affecting Aboriginal people are often understood as taking place "in the past" and events are at a great

"distance". Aboriginal students, however, may have experienced these events or lived their consequences in their families and social realities. When these different views occur, there can be tensions in the classroom and Aboriginal students begin to feel there is a lack of understanding of the Aboriginal culture and what it means to identify and belong to this group.

There are also experiences of racism (Bailey, 2016 as cited in Michalski et al., 2017), which have been compounded through the history of forced assimilation and the devastating impacts of residential schooling. This again highlights that though students technically did not experience forced assimilation they may have experienced these events or lived their consequences in their families and social realities. As identity is a highly charged subject for Aboriginal people, owing largely to colonial efforts to eradicate Aboriginal identities as a part of the colonial history in Canada, racist assumptions about and reactivity towards Aboriginal people are frequently the basis for tensions within the classroom (Crey, 2009).

Furthermore, invisibility within curricula and the predominantly white demographic makeup of educators in Canadian universities and institutions continue to affect students of colour negatively (Maynard, 2017). While challenges for students with disabilities include disclosing their disability and reluctance to ask for accommodations due to fear of stigmatization and discrimination. This can be addressed through more awareness raising among faculty, staff and students however educators at all levels have not been trained in negotiating the ways in which historical and contemporary exclusionary policies impact equity seeking groups.

LGBTQ+ youth were found to be more likely to experience lower levels of school connectedness than their sexuality and gender-conforming peers (Kosciw et al., 2016; Robinson & Espelage, 2012; Diaz et al., 2010 as cited in Strayhorn, 2018). As a result in their quest for belonging this often leads, to antisocial and unhealthy behaviors such as drugs, excessive alcohol, and unsafe, unprotected sex.

RECOMMENDATIONS

o   Make efforts to engage the voices and stories of all students and community members within the curricula by creating places for students to see themselves in the work they create and the material they learn.

o   Create opportunities within the institution to collect or share data on race and ethnicity. Making meaningful improvements depends on the ability to measure what matters. UBC currently does not record race data, which will affect the type and quality of information obtained to support EDI efforts.

o   Increase representation from within the designated equity groups at all levels of the university, including senior leadership, faculty, and service providers such as therapists. This will increase feelings of belonging and enable students to engage with individuals who understand their backgrounds. Minority students should be able to see themselves and their identities expressed in the services they access.

o   Expand the number of programs geared toward equity groups such as the culturally relevant peer-support program for mentoring, recruiting, and retaining Aboriginal graduate students (e.g., Supporting Aboriginal Graduate Enhancement (SAGE) that creates opportunities for mentoring by peers and faculty members.

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