ENGAGEMENT FOR ALL?
A STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATES
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

by

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Abstract

American student engagement literature has identified a set of student behaviours and institutional practices shown to lead to student satisfaction, academic success, and retention to graduation among post-secondary students. However, the relevance of these behaviours and the standardized instrument used to measure them may have limited applicability for non-U.S. students. Building on existing quantitative analysis, through focus groups, this study considered how international and Canadian undergraduate students perceived the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and select behaviours identified in the student engagement literature. This study found that international students misinterpreted key terms such as faculty members and had subtle but important differences in their perceptions of student behaviours and institutional practices compared to the perceptions of Canadian students.
Preface

This thesis and the study it describes are original works attributable to the author. Undergraduate research assistants assisted with subject recruitment and logistical arrangements for focus groups, advised on the focus group script, conducted select focus groups, transcribed their own focus groups, and translated the transcripts into English. Certified translators verified the translations. A professional editor provided stylistic and copy editing services.

The results of this study have not appeared in publication.

Approval for this study was given by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Certificate number H08-02372).
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I am blessed to work with a group of students, staff, and faculty who are passionately committed to meaningful community, rich learning everywhere and at all times, and a supportive campus environment for all students. My special thanks to Janet Teasdale and the staff in International Student Development for their unfailing support through the project.

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I am indebted to writing coach Daphne Gray-Grant for tirelessly coaxing my ideas onto the page. While still in draft form, the thesis benefited from stylistic and copy-editing by Naomi Pauls.

To my husband, Brian Suderman, and to the family and friends who have stood by us on this journey, thank you, thank you, thank you. I look forward to getting reacquainted.
Dedication

To the memory of

Michael Szabo and Karen Hansen Szabo

William Emmanuel Hansen and Ruth Sanford Hansen

And to

Brian John Suderman and

Carl Edward Johan Suderman
Chapter 1.

Introduction

It is onerous to think about our ideas because they are the things we think with.

—Kieran Egan, 2001, p. 923

“Talk to my professor? Oh, he is a very busy man.” The student looks up at me through thick bangs, eyes pleading with me to tell him I was only kidding—surely there must be some way to improve his grades without talking to the professor. In the student’s home country, professors are revered and rarely talk with students outside of class. Where he is from, for a student to admit he does not understand what a professor has taught would be a loss of face for both of them. Yet interaction with faculty members outside of class is one of the prime behaviours identified in the North American student engagement literature that “contribute to high levels of learning and personal development” (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). If the behaviours identified in the student engagement literature are virtually unknown in another cultural context, would students from that culture reap the same benefits from participating in these behaviours as U.S. students apparently do? Does student engagement theory apply to international students, or does it describe a primarily North American phenomenon? These are two of the questions that drove my curiosity to pursue this study.

This study was born out of my efforts to support the unique needs of international students in my care and at the same time support an institutional initiative that may or may not be relevant for international students. As head of international student advising at the large, research-intensive University of British Columbia, I am tasked with enhancing the retention and
learning of international students, who made up 12% of the undergraduate student population at the time of the study. This study records the experiences of undergraduates from East Asia who are trying to succeed at a Canadian university that is still evolving in its ability to support their success.

Three broad trends form a backdrop to this study. The first trend is the intense pressure in higher education to respond to globalization and the role international students play in those internationalization efforts. The second trend is the increasing dependence of Canadian post-secondary institutions on non-governmental sources of income, including tuition from international undergraduates. The third trend is the synthesis of 50 years of U.S.-based research into student success to form the theory of student engagement and the ascendance of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, pronounced “nessie”). The convergence of these trends triggered my concern about the wholesale application of student engagement theory outside of a U.S. context and specifically to the international students with whom I work. Consequently, I held 18 home-language focus groups for first- and fourth-year students from the University of British Columbia Vancouver. This study reports and analyzes the responses of the 55 international undergraduates from five East Asian countries and regions and 12 Canadian undergraduates who participated in the focus groups as they described their responses to NSSE and their engagement with the Canadian university they attend.

This study uses the classic definition of international students as those who are neither citizens nor permanent residents of their country of study and whose primary purpose in that country is to study (Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, 2014). In contrast, the term foreign student overemphasizes strangeness while visa student is not entirely accurate in Canada. I excluded immigrants, as the concerns of permanent settlers could be expected to differ
significantly from those of people whose stated intent is to return home at the completion of their studies.

1.1 Context of the Study

I first heard about the theory of student engagement in 2003 when my institution was the first Canadian university to participate in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). I was a staff member in the newly formed Student Development department, which was named after the predominant theories in student affairs at the time. In 2003, the Student Development staff was told that NSSE would be the driving force in our work for the foreseeable future. Accordingly we did our homework and learned that, after 50 years of various U.S.–based researchers trying to answer the question “What variables best predict and explain success among college students?” they had arrived at a grand unified theory and psychometric framework that they called student engagement. According to this theory, engaging in certain behaviours on the part of students leads in the aggregate to outcomes such as higher grade point average (GPA), greater satisfaction with their university experience, and increased retention to graduation.

My first response was tremendous enthusiasm. Here was the Holy Grail of post-secondary student work, the secret to success, the way struggling or disadvantaged or off-track students could overcome their challenges, and the way that regardless of who they were or what institution they attended, students could get higher grades, be more likely to stay in school, and be satisfied with their postsecondary educational experience. The theory of student engagement made a powerful set of claims. As Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded;“[I]f, as it appears, individual effort or engagement is the critical determinant in the impact of college, then it is important to focus on the ways in which an institution can shape its academic, interpersonal, and
extracurricular offerings to encourage student engagement” (p. 602). Added to this was the premise that institutions whose students more often engage in the predictive behaviours could claim to be institutions of higher quality. In the battle for worldwide institutional rankings, this was heady stuff indeed. I was gratified to encounter a way of evaluating institutions that had more to do with the quality of student experiences than with numbers of published research articles.

Yet as I considered student engagement theory, NSSE, and the specific predictive behaviours, a suspicion began to grow. The predictive behaviours and the concept of engaged student success sounded a lot like my perception of American college life. As a child growing up in a U.S. college town and as the child of an American college professor, I understood that the point of going to college was to get involved on campus, to live on campus, to date on campus, to jump into college life in and out of the classroom with gusto. How was NSSE different? Based on my experience in Canada, where this culture of “college” life seems rare; and on my studies in Germany, where there was little evidence of extra-curricular or residence-based student programming; and on my expertise in foreign higher-education systems based on four years on tour internationally and seven years as a study-abroad administrator, I could not see the NSSE behaviours taking root in any of the places I had been—aside from the United States—any time soon.

Eager to share my new knowledge of student engagement but also interested to test my skepticism about its universal applicability, I attended the International Symposium. This two-day pre-conference event is held each year for non-U.S. attendees to the annual conference of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). These are not internationalists but college student personnel administrators who work in a context that happens
to be outside of the United States. As I discussed my new knowledge with colleagues from
Germany, Lebanon, and Japan, they looked at me blankly. They had never heard of student
engagement theory or NSSE. I described some of the predictive behaviours: talking with faculty
members outside of class, participating in class discussion, engaging in community service
learning. Their students did not do these things. Their students had not done those things in their
secondary schooling. Moreover, their institutions were not set up for their students to do these
things. And my colleagues at the symposium could not fathom why a student would want to do
these things. In other words, here were higher-education systems with centuries or more of
history that did not engage their students in the predictive behaviours, yet apparently their
students were able to be successful. How could this be?

I began to suspect that student engagement theory was a brilliant U.S. guide for U.S.
students on how to be successful while attending schools in the United States. Its applicability
beyond that context seemed uncertain. This alarmed me because the success of my students was
important to me and to my institution, yet the approach that was expected to help them succeed
might be woefully short-sighted. The University of British Columbia is significantly invested in
the success of its students, but to me it seemed pointless to ask them to engage in behaviours that
they were ill-equipped to exhibit and that would divert university resources from approaches, yet
to be determined, that were more likely to help them succeed. Moreover, I suspected that the
wholesale application of student engagement theory to international students might spring from
unintentional cultural arrogance: the assumption that what is true in one context must necessarily
be true in another.

The final impetus for this study came a few years later, toward the end of a NASPA
conference session in which several institutional approaches to using NSSE results were
presented. I asked the NSSE researcher who was presenting: had the researchers considered the potential cultural underpinnings of the instrument, and did they have any understanding of how it applied to the experience of international students, given that entire higher-education systems elsewhere manage just fine without many of the behaviours advocated in the NSSE research? The response was unambiguous: this is an American instrument, valid for an American audience, and may or may not have the same relevance for international students or even for the Canadian institutions who now participate in the study. The researcher encouraged audience members to pursue the matter through campus-specific studies, focus groups, and interviews, and to please share their findings. This recommendation strengthened my resolve to investigate student perceptions of NSSE on my own campus.

Edward Said’s (1983) concept of traveling theory provides insight into this situation. Traveling theory is the phenomenon of theory being adopted across time or place, often without consideration for the particularity of the context out of which it arose or its suitability for the new context. Said urged his readers to pay attention when theory travels, because it is an opportunity for critical reflection. Much can be learned about the originating context, the new context, and the theory itself by critically reflecting on how theory travels and the assistance and resistance that arise as theory enters a new context.

When we look at student engagement theory, we see that it originated in a U.S. higher-education context and was being introduced at virtually the same time to Canadian post-secondary contexts. More importantly for me, the new theory was also being applied to international students in the Canadian context. Considering Said’s theory, would student engagement theory apply equally in the new context of Canadian postsecondary education as it had in the U.S.? What assumptions or limitations of the theory would its introduction uncover?
What in the new context would assist or resist the introduction of the theory? What could we learn about the contexts from which it was coming and to which it was going?

As I reflected on why student engagement theory struck me as unsuitable for international students in a Canadian context, Pierre Bourdieu’s work around fields (1986) captured my interest. Below is an excerpt from the guide I wrote as part of the comprehensive examination for my doctorate (Suderman, 2008):

Pierre Bourdieu depicted fields of struggle, wherein people, united by their acceptance of the rules of play, compete for dominant positions based on certain favoured dispositions called capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1986). According to Bourdieu, each player's actions arise out of their habitus, which is the embodiment of their early socialization, and which has a history and capital (i.e., is more or less socially desirable), so that they live out and perpetuate the social structures of which they are products (Nash, 1999; Bourdieu, 1993). Following Bourdieu, I define habitus as the embodied social norms that make up a person’s world view.

If we substitute Bourdieu’s fields for Said’s context, we have a new way of looking into what assists and resists new theory. The “rules of play” I described in my comprehensive exam, the dominant habitus among the players, and the capital that makes each player more or less advantaged in that field of struggle give us tools to think about the U.S higher-education context and international students in Canada. They also help us explore what are unconscious and unquestioned habits of thought, what constitutes cultural capital in those contexts, and who has strategic advantage in the field. Specifically, again from my comprehensive exam guide, drawing
on Ridley’s article entitled “Puzzling Experiences in Higher Education” (2004) and furthering the notion of cultural capital as it relates to international students:

Culture is a central construct in my practice. According to Jenkins, "the concept of the habitus … functions as an analogue for culture when it comes to explaining behaviour" (2002, p.92). […] Culture acts as an inexorable undercurrent pushing us in ways of which we are largely unaware, not limited to national cultures as in the work of Hofstede (2001), but encompassing the complexity of individual and regional distinctions, the vagaries of power, and intersecting and multi-layered identities. (Suderman, 2008)

Academic discourse can be “confusing and mysterious” to newcomers from a different cultural context (Ridley, 2004, p. 91). Ridley further states that “the confusion can be particularly great for students coming from cultural and language backgrounds that are different to those underpinning the dominant ideologies of higher education institutions” (p. 91). International students may possess significant cultural capital in their home context but when transplanted are structurally disadvantaged, not because of an innate deficiency but because of the mismatch between what counts as capital in this new context and what counts in their home context. This structural mismatch is too seldom understood or acknowledged because we tend to believe our innate perceptions to be inviolate truth. (Suderman, 2008)

This was the most central of my convictions: that the rules of the game for succeeding in the academic “field” at my institution involved a complex set of assumptions that were not
immediately evident to international students (or to university administrators), and that it was unfair to expect students to be successful in a new context without access to those implicit assumptions. Further, I also believed that the success of international students mattered not only to the students themselves, but also to their fellow domestic students, who expected to receive an education that prepared them to be global citizens in part by interacting with a diverse student population, and to the university itself, which was heavily invested in the success of international undergraduates, both financially and through reputation. How could international students succeed if the ways they could be successful were hidden from them? Student engagement seemed to offer a kind of rule book, but one that might or might not be accurate for this field, and it did not explain how the rules could be applied.

The second conviction that led me to this study was the concern that student engagement theory itself contained a complex set of assumptions about the meaning of the behaviours it identified as desirable. As a behavioural theory, student engagement does not try to explain why engaging in certain behaviours achieves the results it does; the data simply identify that students who engage more in these behaviours have higher grades, satisfaction, and retention rates in the aggregate than their peers who do not. But what if the meaning of the behaviours was dramatically different for some students than for others? What if one of the behaviours was driving a car (perhaps as a relaxing or confidence-building activity)? Would that same behaviour accomplish the desired outcome if the student did not have a driver’s licence and in fact came from a country where obtaining a driver’s licence was an expensive and time-consuming ordeal, such that few people drove? The underlying assumptions of the behaviour—that most young people will have a driver’s licence, that driving is common, that access to cars is common, that obtaining a driver’s licence is a kind of rite of passage for young adults—would not translate to
the new situation, and the outcomes of the behaviour would be called into question. NSSE behaviours are similar. If the underlying assumptions of the behaviours, which arguably arose out of a U.S. context, do not translate fully to the new context, the outcomes cannot be expected to be the same.

One possible approach to studying the travelling of this theory – that is, student engagement as applied to international students in Canada – would have been to challenge quantitatively the NSSE claims for international students: that international students who engage in the desired behaviours in the aggregate have higher grades, are more satisfied, and are more likely to remain at the institution. However, NSSE researchers Zhao, Kuh, and Carini (2005) had already taken that route by examining all international student responses to NSSE over the first several years of the survey, and they concluded that an exploration of student perceptions was needed to accurately interpret the findings. Their research provided the rationale to study the way international students thought about NSSE as a survey and the behaviours it measured. If I was right, then international students’ ways of seeing the world—perhaps related to their own national culture, perhaps more nuanced—would be filters through which they would see the survey and behaviours. At the very least such a study would help reveal their perceptions of NSSE and associated behaviours so that at my own institution we could support them in engaging in the behaviours. I hoped that findings from the study would inform the development of solutions at my university to help international students succeed.

1.2 Student Engagement Theory and the National Survey of Student Engagement

At this juncture I will properly introduce the theory of student engagement and why this far-reaching theory cannot be ignored. Student engagement theory comes out of extensive U.S-based research which indicates that engaging in certain behaviours on the part of undergraduates and
their institutions can positively impact academic achievement, personal development, and persistence to graduation. The long list of behaviours includes participating in co-curricular activities, contributing to class discussions, examining one’s views on a topic, having serious conversations with someone of a different race or ethnicity, and making a class presentation (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2008). An extensive literature review appears in Chapter 2.

Student engagement has been defined as the extent of students’ involvement and active participation in learning activities (Cole & Chan, 1994). Counter to common wisdom, student engagement theory suggests that certain outside-of-class activities, such as working on campus, are not necessarily distractions but instead are positively associated with academic achievement, satisfaction, and retention (Kuh, 2001). In numerous studies, time spent practising educationally purposeful behaviours has been positively associated with improved academic achievement and increased rates of persistence to second year as well as to graduation (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Cruce, Shoup, & Gonyea, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In addition, certain institutional practices have been shown to lead to higher levels of engagement, such as encouraging students to meet more often with faculty and peers (Kuh, 2001). According to student engagement theory, institutions are educationally effective when they direct students’ energies toward identified behaviours and engage them at a high level in these activities (Education Commission of the States, 1995).

In 1998, prominent student engagement scholars combined forces to develop a joint psychometric framework and instrument—a kind of grand unified theory of student affairs—that brought together over 50 years of research into the undergraduate experience. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is administered to students at over 1,500 participating
institutions (with an average of 600 institutions participating annually). According to Kuh (2009b),

In addition, questionnaires based on NSSE are being used in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa (Coates, 2008; Strydom, Mentz, & Kuh, in press). Other countries such as China, Macedonia, and Spain also have experimented with instruments adapted from NSSE, making the engagement phenomenon worldwide. (p. 686)

NSSE was developed to provide an alternative to traditional college rankings in the United States and to “help focus discussions about quality on the right questions rather than relying on the traditional indicators of institutional resources and reputation” (Kuh, Hayek, Carini, Ouimet, Gonyea, & Kennedy, 2001, p. 2). The conceptual framework is based on several fundamental principles, including the following: what students do matters more than who they are or where they attend; time and energy on specified tasks is the single best predictor of development; and institutions which engage their students in activities that contribute to desired outcomes can claim to be institutions of higher quality (Kuh, 2001).

Alexander C. McCormick, Jillian Kinzie, and Robert M. Gonyea’s chapter (2013) in Paulsen’s *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* reviews the development of the construct and measurement of student engagement. They point out that the construct grew out of national educational goals and a discontent with measures of educational quality. Further, they describe student engagement as:

an umbrella term for a family of ideas rooted in research on college students and how their college experiences affect their learning and development. It includes both the extent to which students participate in educationally effective activities as well as their
perceptions of facets of the institutional environment that support their learning and development (Kuh, 2001, 2009b). (p. 51)

Thus student engagement is not a monolithic construct; it consists of student behaviours and student perceptions of institutional practices; and it connects to broader issues of educational quality.

1.3 NSSE, International Students, and the Institutional Context

I am a cautious candidate for a culture that is very different from, and in some ways strongly dissonant with, the one with which I had been unthinkingly familiar.

— Guy Claxton in Sutherland, Claxton, & Pollard, 2003, p. 2

International students are one of the fastest-growing populations at the University of British Columbia (UBC). In 2009/10, nearly 12% of undergraduates registered at UBC were international students (UBC PAIR, 2009), and the university had an ambitious growth mandate for the next five years. By 2013/14, that had increased to 19% (UBC PAIR, 2013). Within this mandate, the administration recognizes that international students’ retention and learning are not inevitable outcomes but require focused institutional attention.

In 2003, UBC was the first university in Canada to participate in NSSE (University of British Columbia, 2006). Subsequently UBC has participated on a bi- or tri-annual basis. The university’s NSSE results continue to raise questions across the institution: Based on NSSE results, how do we promote student engagement at our institution? In what ways are we succeeding in engaging our students and in what areas is there a need for improvement? How do
we understand differences in engagement within the institution (e.g., between faculties, or between commuters and students living in university-operated residences)? With this study, I added the following questions: To what extent is NSSE a valid measure of engagement for the growing number of UBC undergraduates who are international? Does “what matters in college” (Astin, 1993) matter for students from abroad?

A further impetus for this study was the concern that international students’ responses to NSSE might mask their perceptions. For instance, if they reported the same level of supportiveness from faculty, staff and students, can we conclude that they perceived themselves to be as supported as Canadians students do? I was curious to explore not only the ways in which Canadian and international students’ NSSE responses differed but also ways in which similar responses might mask different perceptions.

Recently, NSSE researchers underscored the need to interrogate student engagement theory’s applicability to diverse populations:

Harper and Quaye (2009) remind us of the imperative to understand how student engagement operates among diverse populations, all of whose success is vital to the future of higher education and the wider society. The long research tradition that undergirds student engagement is largely based on full-time, traditional college-aged, predominantly White, male, residential students. This raises legitimate questions about whether those findings apply to student populations that differ from the historical norm (Bensimon, 2007; Harper & Quaye, 2009). There is a need to . . . investigate how student engagement may manifest itself differently for populations other than those that predominate in the foundational research on college impact. A promising avenue for future research, then, is to understand variation in student engagement not just with
regard to academic major but also for other patterns of affiliation and identity.

(McCormick, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2013, pp. 82–83)

There is a need to investigate student engagement theory’s applicability to specific subpopulations such as international students.

International students are a particularly fast-growing population in higher education worldwide. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “during 2000-2012, the number of foreign tertiary students enrolled worldwide more than doubled, with an average annual growth rate of almost 7%” with growth expected to reach 7.2 million by 2025 (OECD, 2014, p. 343). Today nearly 4.5 million tertiary students are enrolled outside their country of citizenship, and Asian students account for 53% of all students studying abroad worldwide (OECD, 2014).

According to the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE), Canada is the world’s 7th most popular destination for international students. International student enrollment in Canada increased by 84% from 159,426 in 2003 to over 290,000 in 2013. Just under 25% of Canada’s international students study in British Columbia, and 55% of Canada’s international students are studying at universities. More than 60% of the international students in Canada are from Asia, reflecting global trends (CBIE, 2015).

International students contribute significantly to institutional, local, and national economies. The estimated economic contribution of international students to their host economy was $26.8 billion to the U.S. economy during the 2013-2014 academic year (NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2015) and A$15 billion per year in Australia (International Education Advisory Council, 2013). A 2012 report commissioned by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade spells out some of these contributions:
Overall, the total amount that international students spend in Canada ($8.0 billion) is greater than our export of unwrought aluminium ($6 billion), and even greater than our export of helicopters, airplanes and spacecraft ($6.9 billion) to all other countries. In total, the annual expenditure of $8.0 billion by international students translated to estimates of almost $4.9 billion worth of contribution to GDP, 86,570 jobs, and $455 million of government tax revenue. (Roslyn Kunin & Associates, 2012, p. iii)

International students are no longer visitors; they are primary “clients” of higher-education institutions, and their retention and learning is critical to institutional success, not only for economic benefit but for their essential contributions to the intellectual breadth and internationalization goals of institutions. Yet despite this significant influx, little is known about what contributes to the success of international students, how their success can be enhanced or failure mitigated, or what role their institutions do and can play in ensuring their success (Zhao et al., 2005). If NSSE is to be used to its full potential, institutions require a clearer understanding of international undergraduates’ perceptions of NSSE-related behaviours to plan effective programs and services to enhance their retention at Canadian institutions and to promote meaningful student-learning outcomes in and out of the classroom.

For example, recent research into international student experiences focuses on the unique needs of Chinese international students (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Zhou, Knoke, & Sakamoto, 2005). International students from Asian countries, as mentioned, form a significant percentage of the international student population in Canada and at UBC. In 2006, the 8,525 students from the People’s Republic of China (considered for ease of identification to mean China, as distinct from Hong Kong and Taiwan) constituted 13.8% of all international students in Canada (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2006). In total, students from China, Taiwan, and
Hong Kong accounted for 17.9% of all international students in Canada. At UBC Vancouver, 694 students from China formed the largest group of international undergraduates by citizenship in 2007/08 (UBC PAIR, 2008). Combined with students from Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, the 1,596 students from these five countries and regions accounted for 40.8% of the international undergraduates at UBC Vancouver. These students have often been raised in cultures quite distinct from those of their Canadian student peers.

1.4 The Role of Culture

International students bring the imprint of their cultural contexts with them. For the purposes of this study, I define culture as “the learned and shared patterns of beliefs, behaviors, and values of groups of interacting people” (Bennett, 1998, p. 3). Michael Mercil (n.d.) talks about a person from the land of yellow sunglasses who goes to visit the land of blue sunglasses and, upon returning, announces to his friends that everything he saw there was green. Our cultural lenses affect the way we interpret our experiences. In a world where a white dress can symbolize either a wedding or a funeral, it is short-sighted to think that social constructs such as extracurricular activities, student–faculty member relationships, and study skills are universal. Cultural anthropologists have identified numerous frameworks for understanding cultural difference (Hall, 1966, 1976a, 1976b; Hofstede, 2001; Kluckhohn, 1949; Ting-Toomey, 1999; Trompenaars, 1993) as well as our sensitivity to difference (Bennett, 1986). More recently, psychology professor Richard Nisbett has explored the impact of geography and place on our fundamental ways of seeing the world (2003).

In this study, participants were clear in their responses and preferences. They were not always as clear about why they held these views or how the university should address their concerns. Geert Hofstede’s (2001) extensive research alone and later with his son Gert Jan
(Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005) into national cultural difference provides a sensitizing framework to help us understand and anticipate ways that international students might engage with their institution differently than domestic students, how their responses to NSSE might differ, and how their institution can support them in achieving desirable outcomes.

The culture of a country—or other category of people—is not a combination of properties of the “average citizen” nor a “modal personality.” It is, among other things, a set of likely reactions of citizens with a common mental programming. One person may react in one way (such as feeling more nervous), and another in another way (such as wanting rules to be respected). Such reactions need not be found within the same individuals, but only statistically more often in the same society. (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p. 167, italics in original)

Hofstede’s (2001) research has yielded specific scores for each participating country along five dimensions of difference. Three of these dimensions are of particular relevance to this study:

Power Distance Index (PDI): “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (p. 46).

Individualism Index (IDV): “pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth
onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (p. 76).

Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UA): “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations” (p. 167).

Using Hofstede’s frameworks, we are able to understand and anticipate ways that international students might experience their institution differently than domestic students (throughout this study, I use domestic to mean permanent residents and citizens of Canada). We could expect that international students might encounter their academic and social life differently than students from a North American cultural context. We could expect these differences to colour students’ responses to NSSE regarding how they engage with the institution. Finally, we could expect these differences to impact the role the institution can play to support international students in achieving desirable outcomes.

1.5 Research Questions

The purpose of my study was to provide recommendations for practice for faculty and administrators in higher education regarding how international undergraduates interpret select NSSE questions and perceive select behaviours identified in NSSE, which includes both student behaviours and institutional practices. With support from the Office of the Vice President, Students and the Office of Planning and Institutional Research, this study was constructed in light of existing data comparing UBC Vancouver international and domestic students’ responses to NSSE 2008. Using focus group methodology, this study considered the relevance of NSSE and student engagement theory to international students. This dissertation describes how UBC international undergraduates from select countries interpret NSSE questions and perceive NSSE
behaviours, analyzes how participants perceive their engagement with their host university, and summarizes implications for educational policy and practice.

Specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do UBC international undergraduate students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan interpret select NSSE questions and perceive select NSSE behaviours? How do these interpretations and perceptions compare to those of Canadian undergraduate students?

2. How do UBC international undergraduate students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan perceive their engagement with their host university? How do these interpretations and perceptions compare to those of Canadian undergraduate students?

3. Regarding UBC international and domestic undergraduate students’ perceptions of select NSSE questions, select NSSE behaviours, and their engagement with their university, how do first and fourth year students’ perceptions differ? How do students’ perceptions differ in light of residence status, faculty, and gender?

This study contributes substantive and much-needed perspectives on the engagement of international undergraduate students, particularly international undergraduates from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. Through quantitative analysis and focus groups, the study considered the role of culture in how international undergraduates make meaning of the behaviours identified in the student engagement literature. Results of the study can help institutions understand more broadly how international students perceive their experiences in higher education, how international students’ success can be enhanced and failure mitigated, and the role institutions can play in supporting their international students’ success.
1.6 Organization of the Thesis

The thesis is organized into nine chapters. Chapter 1 describes the part of my professional practice that sparked the study and the contexts within which the study occurred. Chapter 2 expands on the contexts of the study by reviewing the relevant literature and discussing its implications for the study, with particular attention to internationalization of higher education, international students in the context of internationalization, international students as a research focus, student engagement theory and its critique, international student experiences, and cultural difference. Chapter 3 contains an outline of the methodology chosen for the study with references to validity and reliability. Chapter 4 consists of an overview of the findings related to NSSE. Throughout the presentation of the findings, student comments are presented in their own words (at times in translation). Chapter 5 uses one of the NSSE behaviours, participating in class, to demonstrate the approach to analysis and introduce a number of the broad themes arising from the study. Chapter 6 continues the presentation of the findings for the remaining NSSE items the study investigated, including student-faculty interaction, relationships with staff, and contacts with students different than themselves. Chapter 7 examines the findings in light of year in program (first year or fourth year), gender, faculty and residence status. Chapter 8 contains a discussion of the findings. Summing up, Chapter 9 outlines conclusions and implications for the study; it also presents recommendations for future practice, policy and research. Appendices contain forms used in the study, a copy of the NSSE 2008 English survey, and the research report submitted to the host institution.
Chapter 2.

Literature Review

To provide the appropriate background for the study reported in this thesis, this review examines selected literature related to three specific areas—internationalization of post-secondary education, international students, and student engagement—with a brief discussion of cultural difference. The basis for this review is a literature search conducted in 2007 and again in 2014 using Academic Search Premier (2007), Academic Search Complete (2014), ProQuest, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Search terms included internationalization / globalization, international / foreign / overseas student, engagement / involvement / success / academic, and culture / intercultural / transcultural. The review included only literature in English.

2.1 Internationalization of Post-Secondary Education

As described by Lubbers (1998), globalization is “a process that widens the extent and form of cross-border transactions among people, assets, goods and services and that deepens the economic interdependence between and among globalizing entities, which may be private or public institutions or governments” (p. xx).

Altbach and Knight (2007) published a review of internationalization of higher education in which they define globalization in higher education as “the economic, political and societal forces pushing 21st century higher education toward greater international involvement” (p. 27). They further describe a profusion of activities, undertaken by public and private entities, “created to cope with globalization and to reap its benefits” (p. 27). Altbach and Knight view internationalization of higher education as a response to the forces of globalization, which is the
view taken in this study. In 2003, Knight updated her classic 1994 definition of internationalization to read: “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2003, p. 2).

Sounding a cautionary note, Altbach and Knight warn that globalization tends to concentrate “wealth, knowledge and power” where they may be found already (2007, p. 28). This echoes Knight’s earlier observation that internationalization is seen in some regions of the world as “a form of westernization or even neo-colonialism” (1999, p. 1; Knight & de Wit, 1997). Furthermore, Stromquist (2002) contends that globalized capitalism exploits marginalized members of society, reduces their access to education and furthers existing inequities.

Eva Egron-Polak’s (2014) overview of the International Association of Universities (IAU) 4th Global Survey findings indicated that “the study confirms the importance of internationalization for higher education institutions. With percent (sic) 69 percent of the respondents stating that it is of high importance, 27 percent indicating that it has remained high over the past three years, and an additional 30 percent reporting that it increased substantially in importance during that same period, the centrality of this process in higher education is clear” (p. 8). Egron-Polak finds that the benefits of internationalization have been consistent over time, with “student awareness of or engagement with international issues” ranked by participants as the highest benefit (p. 8).

Numerous elements of internationalization have been described in the literature, including an international ethos on campus (Harari, 1989), curriculum innovation (Knight, 1994), international exchanges (Francis, 1993; Harari, 1989; Knight, 1994), and foreign languages (Knight, 1994), among many others. Numerous topics within internationalization have
been the subject of research—see Knight’s 2000 publication for a daunting list of factors that can be measured under the heading of internationalization.

Altbach and Knight remind us that while globalization may be unstoppable, internationalization involves numerous choices. Although consensus on the aims of internationalization seems unlikely, we as individuals and as representatives of educational institutions benefit greatly from identifying the particular perspectives we bring to the task. Classic models framing the discussion of internationalization include Warner’s distinction between market (or competitive), liberal, and social transformation models (1992); Knight’s process, activity, competency, and organizational approaches (1994); and Tillett and Lesser’s benign market, social, and competitive approaches (1992). Only when we understand our motives and those of our colleagues can we stay true to our own values and negotiate meaning with those whose values may differ.

Tillett and Lesser (1992) traced Canadian institutional approaches to internationalization from the 1960s through the 1980s. They reported that in the 1960s, institutional reputation drew individual students to whom universities felt they owed no special services. During the 1970s, institutions upheld a moral and academic obligation and standard, assisting their own students and those from abroad through a broadened education. And in the 1980s, international students formed a specific market to be courted; they were seen to have choices as consumers of education.

It was against a primarily economic motivation that Knight warned in 1999: “Let us hope [future commentators] will say we were bravely open to the challenges and changes facing us, but mindful of the larger philosophical questions about why and what we were doing and the
ultimate consequences for humanity and our planet” (p. 16). In the Communique Declaration of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} UN Conference on Higher Education (2009), participants declared that:

faced with the complexity of current and future global challenges, higher education has the social responsibility to advance our understanding of multifaceted issues, which involve social, economic, scientific and cultural dimensions and our ability to respond to them. It should lead society in generating global knowledge to address global challenges. (p. 51)

In her overview of internationalization research in Canada, Kumari Beck (2012) points out that “an uncritical pursuit of internationalization can result in a reproduction of the economic dimensions of globalization” (p. 133) but holds out hope that we can “move internationalization away from what Luke (2010) calls ‘edu-business’ towards more educational, sustainable, life-serving practices” (p. 135).

Barbara Kehm and Ulrich Teichler (2007) analyzed the research into international higher education since the mid-1990s and found the following trends in the research itself: there was a substantially higher volume of research, more of the research appeared in general publications about higher education and was addressed to policymakers rather than researchers, the research was more closely linked to other topics and showed a broad acceptance of the imperative of internationalization, systematic analyses became more complex, and internationalization was treated as normative but existing within political contexts. International higher education is a topic of growing interest and importance.

Internationalization of faculty members and of the curriculum are important topics for research today. According to Lisa Childress (2009), “cross-case analysis reveals that differential
investment leads to faculty engagement in internationalization plans” (p. 30). Peterson and Helms (2013) assert that “an internationalized curriculum ensures that all students, including those who do not study abroad, are exposed to international perspectives and have opportunities to build global competence” (p. 29).

Haigh (2008) makes an excellent point:

Most Western HEIs build from a knowledge base of national tradition, history, culture and literature (Crossley and Watson 2003). Commonly, there remain implicit assumptions of local knowledge, conventions of learning, teaching and language that disadvantage international migrants. . . The author believes that the best approach is to build from the assumption that most students are ‘international’ (Haigh 2002). (p. 432)

A relative newcomer to the internationalization literature is intercultural communication, which now appears in the literature as a necessary partner to curriculum change; proponents contend that it is not enough to inject cross-border content into courses. One must also understand the cultural dynamics underlying the teaching and learning process (Bennett & Salonen, 2007; Bond, 2003; Odgers & Giroux, 2006). Doria Abdullah, Mohd Ismail Abd Aziz, and Abdul Latiff Mohd Ibrahim (2013) point out that the intercultural component of internationalization continues to lag behind:

The ‘international, intercultural or global’ triad is used as a simple benchmark to evaluate the state of international student-related research. Higher education today has achieved great feats in the first and third component of the triad; however, the second component i.e. “intercultural” is still a work in progress (p. 248).
As a founder of the *internationalization at home* movement, Bengt Nilsson (2003) defined internationalization at home as any international related activity of the university with the exception of outbound student mobility. Internationalization at home is proposed as an alternative “to embrace all ideas about and measures to be taken to give all students an international dimension during their time at the university” (Nilsson, 2003, p. 31, emphasis in original). According to Egron-Polak (2014), “there is almost global consensus that the most important *institutional* risk of internationalization for higher education institutions is that not all students will benefit from the opportunities” (p. 8). Haigh (2008) flips traditional internationalization work on its head:

Meanwhile, the greater irony is that investments in preparing staff for internationalization often address the wrong audience (Haigh 2002). Normally, the ‘international student’ is not the issue. Graduates of an internationalised curriculum should be ‘able to adapt to an unfamiliar culture and operate in a socially and culturally diverse environment; appreciate differences in gender, culture and customs; and be able to work effectively and sensitively...’ (QUT 1997, 1.3). In these terms, most international students are already advanced learners, while many ‘stay-at-home’ students remain novices. (p. 432-433)

Internationalization at home highlights the critical importance of international and intercultural competency development among domestic as well as international students.

Sheryl Bond conducted a pivotal study of Canadian faculty members’ experiences with and perspectives on internationalizing the undergraduate curriculum (Bond, Qian & Huang, 2003). Drawing on survey and interview data from faculty and staff across the country, this study found that 80% of faculty members (agree and strongly agree) see themselves as having the
primary role in the internationalization of the curriculum. Further, 80% agreed they made every effort to internationalize their courses. In short, the study found that faculty were aware of the need and willing to change to internationalize the curriculum, but that they lacked adequate time, sufficient resource materials, travel funds, and clear understanding of the goals and objectives of the exercise.

Valerie Clifford (2009) emphasized the need for an internationalized curriculum in her study of local indigenous, local non-indigenous and international students at one Australian university’s in-country and off-shore campuses. She supported her findings with Giroux:

Giroux (1992) argues that to progress internationalisation of the curriculum universities need to invite, and support, academics and students to become 'border crossers', to view the world from different perspectives and to question long held views of knowledge and what those knowledges mean in practice, to engage in a critical pedagogy that encourages the exploration of one’s own history and place to reach some understanding of self and of one’s own culture in relation to others in the global environment (p. 5-6).

Betty Leask and Jude Carroll’s (2011) study of an intercultural student mentor program called for an alignment of classroom and out-of-class experiences such that students cannot successfully complete the experiences without meaningful interaction across cultures. They point out that not all students will be ready to navigate intercultural interactions unaided or untrained. They paint a compelling picture of intercultural learning as a normal part of student life:

Moving from ‘wishing and hoping and . . . dreaming’ requires we re-conceptualise ‘the curriculum’ to include both its formal and informal aspects and we ‘align’ these to ensure
positive cross-cultural interaction and engagement occurs as a normal part of every student’s university experience. (p. 657)

Tamsin Haggis (2006) poked at the notion that good teaching should address the diverse needs of today’s learners. She posited a middle way between old and new approaches that shifts the focus from the “diverse learner,” which can be a pathologizing construct in itself, to the foundational structures and approaches in the curriculum that create the conditions for the learner to fail. As she put it, “The question in relation to learning then changes from being ‘what is wrong with this student’ to ‘what are the features of the curriculum, or of processes of interaction around the curriculum, which are preventing some students from being able to access this subject?’” (p. 526).

Matthew Mitchell and Darcie Vandegrift (2014) tackled the often neglected intersection of internationalization, multiculturalism (signifying U.S. racial and ethnic diversity), and diversity by documenting student perceptions of the constructs. Mitchell and Vandegrift found a disturbing lack of multicultural competence among White students which they contrasted with the high enthusiasm those same students demonstrated towards internationalization and international students. They concluded that their findings negate the assumption that this multicultural discomfort can be attributed to discomfort with difference and recommended a curricular approach, which their college adopted, to tackle this gap directly.

The element of internationalization most at issue for student affairs practitioners is the engagement of students with the concepts, perspectives, and experiences that make their education global. How can we foster intercultural competence among students? How do our programs—from recruitment and pre-arrival outreach through orientation, peer supports, academic supports, health and wellness, leadership and involvement, coaching / mentoring,
career preparation, and alumni engagement—create an internationally aware and interculturally responsive learning environment for all students? At the heart of this discussion are the international students themselves, whose full participation can add tremendously to the life of the campus—if conditions exist for them to thrive.

2.2 International Students in the Context of Internationalization

In lists of elements necessary for internationalization, international students feature prominently (Francis, 1993; Knight, 1994). Tillett and Lesser (1992), reporting on a survey of Canadian international educators, noted the following benefits of international students to a college or university (and to Canadian society overall):

...a more diverse student body; an exposure of Canadian students to cultural differences; highly qualified graduate students who contribute to the research capacity of the institution; cultural enrichment of the community; a greater sense of the world of learning; and a window on the emerging global economy and its inherent challenges. . . .

International students are future competitors, customers, allies and resources for a less insular, less provincial Canada; they are necessary because Canada has to understand a rapidly changing and perhaps threatening world. (p. 9)

As Kira Espiritu (2009) reminds us, Ellingboe (1998) developed a conceptual model of university internationalization in her in-depth study of the University of Minnesota’s internationalization efforts. One of Ellingboe’s six necessary factors is “the integration of international students and scholars into the everyday campus life” (Espiritu, p.7).

International students are a key element in the success of internationalization of higher education (Knight, 1994, 2000; Schachter, 2007). Presaging the benefits listed by Tillett and
Lester (1992), Tillman (1990) wrote that international students promote valuable “cross-cultural learning” (p. 93) and represent a significant human resource to widen the world views of host national students and faculty. As researchers in Canada, the United States, and Australia have found, they also assist in teaching and research, contribute to campus diversity, sustain “otherwise nonviable graduate programs” (Burrell & Kim, 1998), and bring significant financial resources to their institutions and host communities (Schachter, 2007; Roslyn Kunin & Associates, 2012; International Education Advisory Council, 2013; NAFSA, 2015).

The benefits international students can bring are not, however, automatic, nor are they without cost. As indicated in a Canadian report on the 1988 OECD Seminar on Higher Education and the Flow of Foreign Students, “[foreign students] are full partners in internationalization and we should seek their satisfaction, not their gratitude” (quoted in Cunningham, 1991). Higher fees may mean that international students have higher expectations of the supports they receive, and if not satisfied, they may leave (Evans, 2006). If an institution invests heavily in overseas recruitment, the departure of a student can be costly in terms of human potential and the bottom line. Retention is the watchword at many Canadian institutions regarding international students.

In an article for University Business, Schachter (2007) counted the cost of the decline in international student numbers in the United States after September 11, 2001, including fewer full-fee-paying undergraduates, research assistantships unfilled and course sections uncovered, and loss of diversity in the student body. He quotes the president of the Institute of International Education as saying, “If American students don’t know how others from Brazil, Chile, or China think differently, they won’t understand how the world sees us or how to become citizens of the world themselves” (p. 42). Federal governments that discourage the flow of foreign scholars, through intention or perception, risk losing their status as world-class centres of academic excellence (Johnstone & Lee, 2014; Rostan, Ceravolo, & Metcalfe, 2014; Trilokekar, 2010).
International student flows and international student policies in Canada are in part a product of the context of post-secondary education in Canada (Tillett & Lesser, 1992). As Evans points out, “the meaning of internationalization is highly influenced by external environment” (2006, p. ii). In the late 1980s, led by the United Kingdom, institutions in a number of countries, notably Australia and the United States, began to develop aggressive strategies to attract international students for secondary, post-secondary, and English-language studies. In Canada, a combination of funding cuts to post-secondary education and the success of other host countries in attracting international students led to increased institutional interest in doing likewise. The number of international students in Canada jumped from 36,751 to 133,022 between 1980 and 2001 (Evans, 2006).

By the mid-1990s, attitudes toward international students in Canada were shifting. No longer seen primarily as goodwill ambassadors of their home country or disadvantaged students attempting to overcome the limitations of their home countries, international students were starting to be seen as sources of revenue generation (Fisher et al., 2006).

The financing of post-secondary education (PSE) in Canada, which is shared by the federal and provincial governments, is complex and controversial (Fisher et al., 2006). Federal funding for PSE has been on the decline in Canada since the introduction in 1977 and 1978 of the Established Programs Financing Act (EPFA). Between 1977/78 and 1995/96, the number of full-time students increased by 54%, from 615,000 to 964,000 (Fisher et al., 2006). From 1994/95 to 2004/05, the federal government reduced spending on PSE by almost 50% per student (Fisher et al., 2006). During the 1990s, tuition rose 126% across Canada, accounting for an average of 20% of institutional budgets nationally. This latter figure was to rise to 29.1% by
According to Fisher et al. (2006), “this rapid growth in tuition fees . . . is directly linked to decreases in government support” (p. 59).

At the same time as tuition fees were rising, there was public concern that international students were taking the places of domestic students and being subsidized by taxpayers’ money. It became apparent in many provinces that the provincial grant per student was not likely to apply to international students much longer. As Schuetze and Day observe (2001), “The questions of ‘who benefits?’ and ‘who should benefit?’ become less subject to debate and analysis, while ‘who pays?’ becomes the central question and issue” (p. 62).

In 1996, universities in British Columbia moved to a model of market-priced differential tuition for international undergraduates as the province began to phase out provincial grants for these students. The University of British Columbia (UBC) was the first institution in the province to voluntarily give up provincial grants for international students in exchange for the right to set and retain the differential fee. Internally this allowed for a trickle-down distribution of the differential fees such that faculties and service units received direct financial benefit from the presence of international students. In this way, according to Moran (1996), UBC attempted to balance objectives of students, the institution, the province, and the country and created “the correct conditions” for differential fees (p. 20). Evans’s (2006) extensive review of internationalization in the B.C. “university colleges” found that a similar policy of market-based differential tuition was established, but without the additional supports for students or the faculty or staff who work with them. Evans further found that the international student policies of the time negatively impacted the workplace and the learning environment at the institutions.

As evident in this historical overview, international students are a rapidly growing sector of the student population and are a critical element in the internationalization efforts of many
post-secondary institutions. But do the potential benefits of having international students at the institution necessarily become a reality? Does the presence of international students in the classroom automatically broaden the perspective of and contribute to teaching and learning for domestic students and faculty members? Do international and domestic students naturally find connection points and expand one another’s knowledge of the world and their place in it? Certainly there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the meeting of members of different cultures can end just as easily in mutual dislike as in mutual understanding (Allport, 1954/1979).

R. Lindsey Parsons (2010) undertook a study of 1,302 domestic undergraduate students at one Australian and two U. S. universities to investigate the claims that university internationalization produces certain desired outcomes for students such as world-mindedness, cross-cultural skills, and international behaviours. As she explains, “Although it was expected that internationalization would bring about positive outcomes in some areas, positive outcomes were in fact found for all of the primary elements of internationalization in almost all areas measured” (p. 328). Primary elements were defined as study abroad, contact with international students, and internationalized curriculum. Findings of Parsons’ study lend support to the increased attention on internationalization efforts at institutions seeking related outcomes for their students.

As encouraging as these findings are, in my 25 years as an international educator, I would say that mutual learning between international and domestic students does not always result from their shared presence on a university campus. My concern is echoed in Erlenawati Sawir’s (2013) qualitative study, which found that faculty members valued the contributions of international students to the internationalization of the curriculum but that they doubted domestic students noticed the educational potential of interacting with international students.
Interviews with academic staff in one university in Australia indicated that international students brought a diversity of cultures that inspired teachers in their teaching. While academic staff members positively value these potentials, they argued that domestic students remained neglectful and unaware of the changing cultural environment. It was a challenge for staff to get domestic students to utilise the cultural resources represented by the students. (p. 359)

2.3 International Students as a Research Focus

As to the state of the research into international students, Doria Abdullah, Mohd Ismail Abd Aziz, and Abdul Latiff Mohd Ibrahim (2013) conducted a meta-study of 497 journal articles about international students in higher education. They observed that:

The exponential increase of the articles within the past decade illustrates the heightened interest of higher education practitioners on issues and challenges concerning international students. (p. 241-242)

In addition to this intensified interest in international student research, they concluded that international students brought distinct benefits but that the research was stuck in a deficit model:

The international student population is the proverbial actor in internationalisation of higher education. As established through the 497 journal articles analysed, the students bring economic benefits to countries and higher education systems, introduce and strengthen diversity in higher education, globalising the curriculum and mindset of students, faculty members and the public at large. More often than not, they are also at a disadvantaged end of the spectrum, having being labeled as a “problem” for HEIs.
globally. The biased representation has to be reversed, after more than 30 years of research on international students—they bring much more than challenges and tuition fees to our shores (p. 248).

Researchers have positioned international students using a series of staged approaches over the past 60 years. Early research into the experiences of international students focused on difficulties adjusting to a new environment. “Migrants, foreign students, refugees, tourists, overseas business personnel, voluntary workers, missionaries, all those venturing into ‘exotic’ places were said to be at risk from culture shock (Oberg, 1954)” (Bochner, 1986, pp. 347–348). Lysgaard’s (1955) early research into Swedish students abroad resulted in the classic U-curve model of adjustment, in which the sojourner’s emotional state dips and recovers during the time abroad. These pseudo-medical models viewed the sojourner as psychologically deficient and in need of professional intervention.

The next generation of researchers into international student issues, including the Australians Furnham and Bochner (1982), objected to the medical model of “shock” and instead posited a model of culture learning. Under culture learning, also called Social Skills Training (SST), Bochner (1986) presented a more complex and useful construct by which one adds a new set of culture skills in order to become a “mediating person” between two cultures. The culture learning model takes into account the environment and implicates both sojourner and host.

Sojourners initially have to learn the rules of the game and then the game itself. This places the sojourner at a disadvantage, since the people with whom the game is being played already know both the rules and the moves, and expect everyone else to have that knowledge and those skills. (Bochner, 1986, p. 352)
Bochner’s metaphor of newcomers to the rules and moves of a game is useful for this study because it is a simplified version of Bourdieu’s habitus and fields. This emphasis on environment and the metaphor of culture rules are echoed in later research into international student experiences. Bochner also laid the groundwork for subsequent emphasis on intercultural skill-building as a core competency for a pluralistic society: “Insensitivity to cultural differences and an inability to communicate and work with culturally disparate persons is a major source of inter-ethnic discrimination, hostility, or at best indifference and avoidance, and hence a barrier to the establishment of pluralistic structures” (Bochner, 1986, p. 356).

The focus on sojourner stress continued in the early 1990s with three notable quantitative studies at large U.S. universities. Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) examined the stress and social supports of international graduate students in the United States (n = 272). Researchers combined several existing instruments and surveyed graduate students living in residence at a large eastern university. The study was particularly concerned with the role of various social supports and other factors in mitigating adjustment stress. Findings indicated that “social support, particularly from the academic program, is important to the well-being of international students” (p. 77). The results also indicated that international students tend to manifest stress through physical symptoms, a finding that has informed the approaches taken by counsellors and health professionals working with international students.

Mallinckrodt and Leong’s findings demonstrated the value of social support as a “powerful coping resource” for people adjusting to a new culture (p. 71). They supplied a rationale for providing social support for international students, particularly supports grounded in the academic community and involving faculty members. As they wrote, “Quality relationships with faculty, faculty interest in students’ professional development, and the quality of instruction
perceived by students can provide a strong protective function against the development of depression in international students undergoing stress” (p. 76).

Parr, Bradley, and Bingi (1992) administered their own survey instrument to international students at 100 randomly selected U.S. institutions to understand the nature and extent of international students’ feelings and concerns (n = 163). Key concerns of respondents were extended family (keeping in touch), cultural differences (such as American competitiveness), finances (including finding jobs), and school (such as finding an advisor and understanding lectures). The report characterizes respondents as “determined, thankful, happy, confident, cheerful, and cautious” (p. 23). The study suggests that international students are generally robust, their concerns are moderate, and their feelings are more positive than negative.

A quantitative study in the mid-1990s by Perrucci and Hu (1995) focused on one institution but employed a larger sample size than the previous studies. A survey was completed by some 600 international graduate students at a midwestern U.S. university. Designed to register students’ satisfaction levels as well as identify predictors of satisfaction, the study identified language skills, self-esteem, and a feeling of positive involvement with the social environment to be determining factors of satisfaction.

Huxur, Mansfield, Nnazor, Scheutze, and Segawa (1996) described their own experiences as international students in a variety of countries. Using the framework of culture learning, they contended that international students’ needs are under-reported and under-addressed by their host institutions. They concurred that adjustment stress is most pronounced early in the sojourn and that even realistic expectations cannot prevent problems. They emphasized that international students are at a particular disadvantage in understanding Canadian academic culture. Their
recommendations to host institutions included developing sound orientation and social supports for newcomers.

Another thread in this academic discourse is the question of how to describe Western academic culture to those who are already most familiar with it. Robinson (1992) and Burrell and Kim (1998) both set out key characteristics of a U.S. academic environment for their peers, who are, respectively, professionals in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and in learning assistance. Burrell and Kim (1998) emphasized that learning is culturally conditioned, that there are dangers in positioning students as deficient, and that “both [Chinese and American essay writing] styles are valid ways to present information but are not esteemed equally in either culture” (p. 91).

In a similar vein, numerous counselling professionals working in educational settings have summarized for their fellow professionals various introductions to the international student as “patient.” Arthur (1997) stressed the importance of culturally aware counselling, sensitivity to international student issues, and awareness of the impact of these issues on the counselling relationship. Popadiuk and Arthur (2004) further pointed out how limitations in the international student literature itself may have adversely affected the counselling of international students. Specifically they criticized the limitations of culture shock models, lack of methodological diversity, focus on group characteristics, and the continued emphasis on problems of international students. These concerns are echoed in the research previously discussed.

Continuing the theme of counseling interventions, Hemla Singaravelu and Mark Pope (2007) point to the connection between acculturative stress and psychological impacts, including sadness and depression, loneliness and social isolation, discrimination and prejudice, identity and values confusion, sense of loss and homesickness, somatic complaints, cognitive distress, and
uncertainty, fear, and anxiety. Wang, Lin, Pang, and Shen (2007) reviewed the literature on adaptation experiences, including common stressors, of international students from Asia. They pointed out that “the extensive reports of these common stressors have remained consistent during the last half of the 20th century” (p. 248). They further assert that “the common stressors facing international students during their cross-cultural transition are interrelated, which means a single concern cannot be completely separated from other adjustment concerns” (p. 250).

Social support and English language proficiency emerged as significant predictors of depression and anxiety in a study by Seda Sumer, Senel Poyrazli, and Kamini Grahame (2008).

Students with lower levels of social support reported higher levels of depression . . . and were more likely to have higher levels of anxiety, suggesting that higher levels of social support might enable international students to be more socially active and interact with people more often and, as a result, reduce the feelings of depression and anxiety. (p. 434)

Sojourner stress and the factors associated with it continue to be focus areas for research into international student experiences. However, by the late 1990s, studies began to appear that called for a shift in focus from problems of international students to ways they themselves could be successful. Purdie, O’Donoghue, and da Silva (1998) conducted interviews and obtained diaries and letters of advice from seven Indonesian students at an Australian university. Their study concluded: “The challenge for those involved with international students, therefore, is not to focus on the problems but rather to ensure that students engage in a process of appropriate goal setting and use effective coping mechanisms or self-regulatory behaviour in order to achieve their goals” (n.p.).


Subsequent studies underscored the importance of moving beyond needs assessment. The Australians Weiland and Novak (1999) used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to challenge traditional notions of academic learning needs of international students. The researchers concluded that performing academically is not the primary challenge for international students, but rather understanding the schema underlying the academic culture. Language, they argued, though often seen in the research as a key area of concern for international students, is not the real issue; the issue is language filtered through cultural schema. Their findings provided a powerful challenge to the previous research and set the stage for future studies.

Ridley (2004) added a critical dimension to the study of international students by involving the environment (in the form of faculty) and notions of capital rather than focusing only on student needs. Ridley used qualitative methods, including interviews, questionnaires, and various curriculum materials, to explore the literacy and learning experiences of one-year master’s students at a U.K. university. Perspectives of faculty members were also sought and provided a rich counterpoint to students’ voices. Findings from the study indicated that academic discourse can be “confusing and mysterious” to newcomers from a different cultural context (p. 91). “The confusion can be particularly great for students coming from cultural and language backgrounds that are different to those underpinning the dominant ideologies of higher education institutions” (p. 91). Ridley concluded that confusion was highest for students lacking the “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1984) that was valued in a particular educational context. She further stated, “I believe that it is those who are already confident insiders in academic discourse communities who are most likely to be in the position to change these dominant ideologies, and
we are doing those without the valued cultural capital a disservice if we do not consider ways of opening the doors to higher education discourses which may often seem to be locked” (p. 92).

It seems the construct of international student has become sufficiently mainstream to warrant critique, at least in Australia. In 2003, Devos published a Foucauldian policy analysis of the discursive construction of “the international student.” In early 2001, there was significant debate in the Australian media about grade inflation. Devos’s contention was that the conflation of international student with fee-paying student (which in Australia are not identical) and the subsequent characterization of international students as compromising academic quality reflected universities’ ambivalence toward internationalization and was a chance to engage sympathy for faculty. Devos contended that international students were set up in the media as the cause for declining standards, distracting from other possible causes, such as declining government funding. Devos’s work expanded the conversations about international students: learning is not only culturally constructed but socially and politically as well.

Kumari Beck’s (2008) qualitative study of international students at a single Canadian institution in Canada similarly took a critical stance toward students’ positioning within the institution. She described the resourcefulness of participants:

The key perhaps lies in something that was common among many of the students: a strong belief that, in spite of the difficulty (where these difficulties were expressed), the loneliness and isolation in particular, and the 'dark days,' the experience at GU was one of personal growth, change and increasing self-knowledge. (p. 271)

Continuing on the theme of students’ agency and resilience, in Peter Kell and Gillian Vogl’s (2010) edited volume on global student mobility in the Asia Pacific, Gail Baker described
her pre-departure interventions to develop resilience in international students preparing to study in Australia. From her long-standing experience as a practitioner, Baker identifies resilience as one of the most important capacities institutions can intentionally foster in students studying abroad.

One of the most interesting findings from recent research comes from Rebecca J. Bennett, Simone E. Volet and Farida E. Fozdar (2013). Noting institutions’ constant search for variables that will increase the development and sustainment of intercultural interactions, they observed that institutional interventions may play a role. Specifically,

“. . . the interview experiences may have contributed to the [intercultural] dyad’s friendship development. It could be argued that the interviewer role fulfilled the authority support condition of the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) by offering positive reinforcement for the dyad’s discussions of intercultural communication and by posing questions that encouraged the students to share their cultural perspectives and feelings about difference and diversity, and each other. . ..The deliberate attempt to create an environment of ‘authority support’ for intercultural communication competency development has the potential to encourage multiple situations for the coconstruction (sic) of narratives of positive intercultural relationship development, from the interpersonal to the institutional level, within a university context. (p. 548-549)

This observation from their research lends support to institutional efforts to shape new student communications and programming to intentionally message the value (and challenge) of and craft facilitated spaces for intercultural interactions at the interpersonal level.
2.3.1 **Chinese international students as a research focus.** A number of studies appeared more recently about Chinese international students, perhaps in response to concerns about implied homogeneity of international students in previous research. Zhou, Knoke, and Sakamoto (2005) looked specifically at Chinese students’ experiences of silence in the classroom. Ten graduate students in the Toronto area were identified through snowball sampling for in-depth interviews. The study challenged mainstream conceptions of Chinese students as homogenous and indelibly imprinted with Confucian academic perspectives—conceptions that disregard the role of the classroom environment. Findings indicated that students’ experiences do not fit with the literature about the “passive” Chinese student suffering from communication difficulties, foreign-language classroom anxiety, or Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) challenges (p. 288). Instead the study called for an awareness of power dynamics, “reciprocal cultural familiarity,” and “inclusive knowledge sharing” (p. 287). This study is useful in its challenge to traditional notions of monolithic culture. An additional strength was the option for students to be interviewed in English or Mandarin, depending on preference.

Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) also addressed Chinese international student issues but took a much broader approach. Using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, they queried Chinese students in a U.K. university preparation course about their adjustments to Britain (n = 136 for the survey, n = 20 for interviews in Chinese). The instruments they adapted had all been cross-culturally validated, and in addition they used grade point averages as comparisons. The study found that “the majority of students had few psychological or sociocultural difficulties” (p. 37). However, social contact with non-Chinese students was problematic and highly correlated with psychological stress. Also highly correlated with stress was difficulty in adjusting to daily life. End-of-course grade point average was negatively correlated with stress experienced toward
the beginning of the academic year. “Furthermore, psychological stress was very significantly positively correlated with perceived difficulty in sociocultural adjustment” (p. 45). This study is significant because it clearly documented the effect of socio-cultural adjustment on stress and the effect of stress on academic achievement. Along with similar results, these robust findings have broad implications for pre-arrival supports, orientations, peer programming, mentoring or coaching, and learning communities.

Elsie S. Ho, Wendy W. Li, Jenine Cooper & Prue Holmes (2007) conducted a large-scale study of Chinese international students’ perceptions of higher education experiences in New Zealand. Among the findings was the result that “students also talked about some of the problems they encountered with the education system here, for example – difficulty in attaining adequate English language skills; participating in classroom discussions; working on group projects or assignments that required them to make oral presentations” (p. iv). They further found that “Social support networks in New Zealand are significantly different for Chinese international students. They tend to rely on co-nationals or relatives for support and display reluctance seeking help from formal sources of support” (p. iv). “Friendships and intercultural communication with New Zealanders proved difficult because of language and cultural differences. Students also displayed limited knowledge of services; nor did they participate in the wider community” (p. v).

Picking up the thread of critique from Zhou, Knoke, and Sakamoto (2005), Zhao (2007) launched a fierce attack on the use of Chinese cultural patterns in working with Chinese international students. She argued that most research with Chinese international students was conducted with participants who were products of the Cultural Revolution, over 35 years of age, and hand-selected to study overseas for their loyalty to the Communist Party. The new
generation of Chinese students, she argued, has been attending westernized schools and is well adapted to American culture. An existing survey was administered to U.S. and Chinese graduate students in the pure and applied sciences and mathematics (n = 153). Results indicated more similarities than differences between U.S. and Chinese students’ beliefs about learning. The study suffers from the choice of disciplines, namely pure and applied sciences and math, in which U.S. and Chinese teaching and learning styles would be more similar than in other disciplines such as the humanities. However, it is notable for its departure from conventional wisdom and the findings of previous studies.

However, not everyone agrees that cultural differences encountered by Chinese international students should be downplayed. Emma Kingston and Heather Forland (2008) emphasize the need for higher education institutions to attend to cultural differences:

Therefore, it is essential that higher education institutions (HEIs) functioning within Western traditions and welcoming international students must become increasingly aware of these educational differences. In the absence of such knowledge, international students are in danger of being left culturally adrift and may, thus, fail to gain maximum benefits from studying abroad. (p. 205)

Gang Li, Wei Chen and Jing-Lin Duanmu (2010) add academic culture shock to the list of challenges Asian international students face. In their study of Asian international student experiences, they find that proficiency in English and high social communication with compatriots were significant predictors of academic success, and perceived significance of learning success (that is, pressure) by family members was a strong negative predictor of learning success.
2.3.2 Chinese cultural patterns. To understand the research around Chinese international students, it is valuable to “overhear” conversations describing Chinese cultural patterns for a Western academic audience. Pratt’s (1991) discussion of conceptions of self within China and the United States provided a scholarly introduction to Chinese cultural, political, and psychological ways of knowing, and he also used the discussion to describe two divergent foundations for adult education. Pratt pointed out that adult education, like every field of education, is “not simply a neutral body of knowledge and procedures” but is culturally constructed (p. 307). Tweed and Lehman (2002) also laid out key Chinese cultural patterns for the uninitiated, again in a scholarly discussion, but applied them more narrowly to pedagogy. They presented a framework for understanding Chinese and Western approaches to teaching and learning and suggested that both approaches are indicated in and add value to a traditional Western academic setting. They borrowed C. S. Lewis’s term chronological snobbery to describe the kind of blind faith that the modern must be better than the ancient (Tweed & Lehman, 2002, p. 16). They further pointed out that their framework is cultural, not racial—one cannot know the learning approach of a person by the colour of their skin.

Zhang and Zhang (2013) provided a useful summary of Chinese versus U.S. teaching and learning styles:

U.S. culture is predominantly generalized as individualistic and having small power distance, whereas Chinese culture is collectivistic and has a large power distance (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1991). These general cultural distinctions are inevitably manifested in educational practices in the classroom. The traditional Chinese teaching is typically delineated as placing a premium on authoritative information-packed lecturing, students’ concentrated listening and memorization (Biggs & Watkins, 1996; Hu & Grove, 1999),
and hierarchical teacher-student relationship with distinctive roles and responsibilities (Biggs & Watkins, 2001; Ho, 2001). The teacher is perceived as a parent, authority, and role model (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Pratt, 1991). By contrast, the typical U.S. teaching is perceived as being student-centered, emphasizing verbal skills, critical thinking, analytical capacities, and egalitarian teacher-student relationships (Gu, 2001; Hu & Grove, 1999). The instructor is deemed as a facilitator, organizer, and critic (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997). Authority and strictness are not highly recommended, since they might stifle students’ freedom of expression and threaten a relatively egalitarian teacher-student relationship (Biggs & Watkins, 2001; Ho, 2001). (p. 396-397)

These descriptions of Chinese teaching and learning patterns informed my thinking as I constructed the focus group schedule. I wondered to what extent such patterns would be relevant for the students in this study and to what extent these notions would prove to be overly generalized or belong to a previous generation, as Zhao (2007) asserted.

Through a wide variety of methods and approaches, working with large and small populations, multi- and monocultural populations, research into international students has reached a critical juncture: Will it remain a quiet specialization at the crossroads of intercultural communication, cultural anthropology, education (including foreign language acquisition and student affairs), and sociology, or will it merge with mainstream research into student experiences?

2.3.3 Research about international students and student engagement. In 2005, international students entered the mainstream educational research literature in another way. Researchers with the National Survey on Student Engagement, administered annually to students
at more than 1,500 colleges and universities in the United States and Canada, compared the responses of nearly 3,000 international students to those of more than 67,000 of their U.S. counterparts (Zhao et al., 2005). The study addressed the question of the extent to which international students engage in effective educational practices. The study compared responses to NSSE of international students with those of domestic students. Data were gathered in spring 2001 from 317 four-year colleges and universities (n = 175,000). This provided a rare opportunity to examine international student data in such large numbers, with about 4% or 2,780 identifying themselves as international students. This figure is consistent with the proportion of international students in the target population.

The study found that, with some exceptions, international students were more engaged than their American counterparts, particularly in the first year of studies. The study pointed to several areas for further research, including intra-institution comparisons, the experience of subgroups of international students, the impact of density (the concentration of co-national students) on arrival socialization patterns and satisfaction, and the unique experience of Asian students, who in the study were found to be quite social but less engaged. In fact, the study did not have access to students’ countries of origin; a study with such access could focus more effectively on subgroup and culture-specific patterns.

J. Paul Grayson (2008) was among the first to apply a college impact model to the experiences and outcomes of international and domestic undergraduate students in Canada. Using survey (n=1415), focus group, diary and interview techniques between 2003 and 2006, Grayson compared the self-reported involvement in campus activities to objective and self-reported outcomes of first year undergraduate students at the University of British Columbia, York University, McGill University and Dalhousie University.
Grayson (2008) found statistically significant results as follows: international students reported lower satisfaction with faculty, more difficulty making friends, were as or more involved, and had fewer social supports. In addition, international students reported statistically significantly more contact with faculty and staff members than did domestic students. International students reported statistically significantly more difficulty making friends than did domestic students.

After considering a number of factors, Grayson indicated that, “As a minimum, it is possible to conclude that, overall, international students are as likely to be involved in their studies as domestic students” (p. 221). However, Grayson went on to observe that international students appeared to be putting in more effort for less return than Canadian students, both in social interactions and academic effort.

Overall, the evidence presented so far suggests that international students interact with new friends as much as domestic students and are involved in campus activities as much as, and perhaps more than, domestic students. On the other hand, fewer international than domestic students have sources of social support, particularly support from others in the event of academic difficulties. In addition, international students display lower levels of educational outcomes than domestic students. (p. 222)

Perhaps most relevant to this study, regarding the applicability of student engagement to international students, Grayson (2008) says that “Regression analyses reveal that the amounts of variance in outcomes explained by variables in the college impact model are lower for international than for domestic students” (p. 215). This may suggest that college impact models,
of which NSSE is an example, have less predictive value for international students than for domestic students.

Interaction with students different than oneself is connected in the student engagement literature to desired outcomes. Mark Summers and Simone Volet’s (2008) often-cited study of culturally mixed group work provides a window into how past intercultural experience may enable or constrain future intercultural experience at university. They note that “the experiences students are having as they progress through their tertiary studies are not leading them to view mixed group work more favourably” (p. 362). They continue:

Overall, these findings are congruent with the view that past intercultural experience begets future intercultural collaboration, highlighting the importance of increasing students’ intercultural experiences at university. . . This lends itself to the interpretation that it was primarily the more negative attitudes of local students who favoured non-mixed group work that posed a barrier to international students joining mixed groups (p. 367).

When taken together, our findings provide support for the view that universities should take measures to promote culturally mixed group assignment work in order to achieve the educational and social goals of internationalization (p. 369).

Jeffrey Foot’s (2009) qualitative research studied the academic engagement patterns of new and experienced international students, using the NSSE framework as a data analysis tool. The results are important to consider as the methodology is quite similar to this study.
The findings revealed students are dealing with external cultural issues not measured by NSSE. These cultural differences are central to their experience and may impact their academic engagement in various ways. (p. 85-86)

Foot’s conclusion that international students were dealing with cultural differences not measured by NSSE validates the choice to conduct this study in home language and with home-country focus groups, facilitated by a home-culture research assistant, as these methods are expected to reveal students’ culture-based perceptions and ways such perceptions might impact their engagement.

Foot further strengthens the argument that home culture influences lead international students to be a heterogeneous group made up of cultural subpopulations. This further validates the approach taken in this study to consider the role of home culture in international students’ perceptions of their engagement.

A key finding suggests international students are not a homogenous group of students with simply different needs than the majority student. International students from various countries and regions will interact with faculty and access various academic support services in different ways from other international students from different regions, countries, and cultures (p. 89-90)

Finally, presaging the questions this study asked students about their experiences participating in class, Foot (2009) observed that “In general the students in this research were and continue to be nervous and scared to speak in class” (p. 91). He continued, “The importance of this finding suggests faculty control the environment to an extent and they have the power to
foster class participation from international students” (p. 92). We will consider whether the results of this study concur with those in Foot’s study.

Jane Njeri Irungu (2010) used the NSSE instrument, *The College Student Report*, to examine the five NSSE benchmarks relative to measures of student outcomes for senior international students at research universities. Irungu found that “engagement as a phenomenon had positive effects on perceived outcomes. All five engagement benchmarks recorded positive correlation between engagement and outcomes” (p. 131).

SCE as a benchmark recorded higher correlations with the desired outcomes. It is therefore right to conclude that, according to results from this study, international students thrive in a supportive campus environment. It is paramount that institutions create conducive environments because this, as results has shown, has a strong link to the outcomes that are vital to the success of international students. (Irungu, 2010, p. 125)

Irungu’s (2010) data mirrored an effect we will see in the UBC 2008 data:

The fourth major implication from this study is the revelation that international students did not have quality interaction with faculty especially on issues that were not part of classroom activity. Few of them engaged in research with faculty or discussed career plans with them. This is a weak point for international students given the importance of student-faculty interaction in the improvement of students’ college experience. (p. 125)

Philemon Kiprono Yebei (2011) examined background and demographic factors of international students to explain engagement as measured by the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ). Yebei found that “international students in their latter years in college are
less satisfied with the institution; therefore, student affairs practitioners and administrators in international student services should find ways to . . . take corrective action as problem areas are identified” (p. 145). Yebei noted that 32.4% of international students reported that they ‘never’ talked with a faculty member, counselor or other staff member about personal concerns. She concluded: “Higher education professionals could proactively avail themselves to assist international students, and not assume that students are doing well academically, socially, and psychologically, when they may in fact, be struggling with personal concerns” (p. 146-147).

Nadia Korobova (2012) compared the NSSE 2008 data by international and domestic student populations. Her findings were not surprising: international students indicated they were having more serious conversations with people very different than themselves than were American students. “Additionally, they feel more strongly than American students that institutions they are enrolled in emphasize helping them cope with their non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.) and provide the support they need to thrive socially” (p. 136-137). If we assume that fewer international students have a ready supply of people who are similar to them with whom to interact as compared to American students, then it seems reasonable that more of their conversations would have to be with people very different than themselves. In terms of supports, if we assume that international students may be less likely to come fully equipped with the resources and knowledge they need to be successful in a new environment, it seems reasonable that they would be particularly cognizant of supports that exist.

Interestingly, at UBC the attrition rates for international undergraduates were higher than for domestic students (14% versus 10%; internal memo). This raises a number of questions: Are UBC international students more engaged than domestic respondents, consistent with the 2005 study of Zhao et al.? And if UBC international students are more engaged, why are their
retention rates lower? What are the cultural schema that might underlie their understanding of the instrument and constructs related to engagement? If international students engage in more of the NSSE specified behaviours or engage in them more often, do those behaviours have the same meaning for them? And if we understand what behaviours might actually contribute to desirable outcomes for international students, what is the role of the institution to support those behaviours? This is the next evolution for international student research—to investigate international student experiences from a mainstream perspective but using all that we know about this population’s unique needs and perspectives. Such a study would contribute significantly to the literature on internationalization, student engagement, and international students as a population within post-secondary education.

2.4 Student Engagement

Over the past 50 years, tremendous effort has gone into measuring and ensuring the success of students in higher education, particularly in the United States (Tinto, 2006–07). The student development movement has its roots in early-twentieth-century psychological and sociological research into the college environment (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). As the work of Freud, Jung, and Skinner shifted the frame of education from moral upbringing to scientifically measurable human behaviour, institutions hired staff to attend to the personal and psychosocial development of students (Evans et al., 1998). Kurt Lewin (1936) laid the cornerstone for the scientific examination of student behaviour with his formula $B = f(P x E)$, where behaviour ($B$) is a function ($f$) of the interaction ($x$) of person ($P$) and environment ($E$). This interactionist and rather mechanistic perspective opened the way for decades of study of environmental and personal factors to determine which variables can help to both understand and predict student behaviour.
In the early days of student development research, Arthur Chickering (1969) posited a series of seven vectors of student development, which created a foundation for understanding the “person” in the person-environment interaction. The seven vectors were developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. In 1987, Chickering and Gamson published *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education*; these principles were contact between students and faculty, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, and diverse ways of learning. These seven principles were some of the first practical guidelines for application of student development theory. Chickering and Gamson went on to say that the responsibility for improving undergraduate education rests with teachers and students, but also with educational administrators, who create environments in which effective learning takes place (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

In the turbulent 1960s, the phenomenon of dropping out began to attract significant attention among those interested in U.S. research into higher education. In Alexander Astin’s classic work *Preventing Students from Dropping Out* (1975), he described the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), which had been incubated at the National Merit Scholarship Corporation and fully launched at the American Council on Education (ACE) in 1966 (Astin, 1975). Already by 1977, CIRP was “the largest ongoing longitudinal study of the American higher education system [. with] some 200,000 students and a national sample of more than 300 postsecondary institutions of all types” (Astin, 1977, p. 3). In 1968, CIRP had begun as an annual paper survey of 243,156 freshmen, taking a random national sample from within 300 participating institutions; four years later, 300 randomly selected respondents to the freshman
survey were selected from each participating institution to receive a follow-up questionnaire. Thereafter follow-ups occurred at four- and five-year intervals, with a response rate of 40 to 50% (Astin, 1977). CIRP was a direct antecedent to NSSE and continues today; in 2007, CIRP released its report on 40 years of findings.

The original CIRP questionnaire consisted of 175 items, including pre-college factors and self-predictions about possible college outcomes, even the possibility of dropping out. ACT and SAT scores were also used. Data were treated using a variety of correlational measures with comparisons made between dropout and non-dropout respondent data. By 1975, Astin had enough evidence from CIRP to comfortably predict which students were likely to drop out, and Preventing Students from Dropping Out included weighted self-check worksheets that students could use to calculate their likelihood of dropping out. This level of scientific certainty in the CIRP approach reflected the behaviourist attitude of the times. Notions of agency and attribution had not yet made it into the mainstream consciousness of higher-education researchers.

What a difference a decade makes. In 1984, Astin published his seminal theory of student involvement, postulating that the degree of involvement a student has with the programs and activities of the institution influences student satisfaction, academic achievement, and retention (see Astin, 1984, 1999). Astin defined involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (1984, p. 297). The best known of his five postulates is this: “The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program” (p. 298). This is counterintuitive for those academics who have long held that extracurricular activities and social development in higher education were extraneous to the primary mission of the institution. The positing of student as active agent—and
directing institutional energy to actively involve students—is one of Astin’s most enduring contributions to the field. His theory of student involvement took a significant step beyond predetermined predictions of failure and introduced a more fluid approach, showing pathways to desirable outcomes.

Nancy Schlossberg (1989) built on student involvement theory to address what encourages or discourages student involvement. Her constructs of mattering and marginality provided clues about what motivates or demotivates students to join and remain in activities and programs, particularly while in transition. Schlossberg contended that people in transition often feel that they do not matter. This marginality will either persist or transform into a sense of mattering depending on a number of factors, including the sense of welcome created by the institution. According to Schlossberg:

The creation of environments that clearly indicate to all students that they matter will encourage them to greater involvement. Such involvement should lead to the accomplishment of the goals with which Astin (1977, 1984) has challenged higher education. Institutions that focus on mattering and great student involvement will be more successful in creating campuses where students are motivated to learn, where their retention is high, and ultimately, where their institutional loyalty for the short-and long-term future is ensured (Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering, 1989). (p. 14)

Ernest Boyer (1990) kept the focus on the environment when he called for a greater sense of campus community. In his classic text, *Campus Life*, he identified five themes to guide campus governance: a purposeful community (“a place where intellectual life is central,” p. 3); a just community (“where the dignity of all individuals is affirmed,” p. 5); an open community
(“where freedom of expression is uncompromisingly protected,” p. 7); a disciplined community (“where individuals accept their obligations to the group,” p. 10); and a caring community (“where the well-being of each member is sensitively supported,” p. 12).

Ella Kahu (2013) very helpfully points out that the behaviourist tradition which gave birth to NSSE is only one of several approaches to student engagement in the research literature. Her article “reviews and critiques the four dominant research perspectives on student engagement: the behavioural perspective, which foregrounds student behaviour and institutional practice; the psychological perspective, which clearly defines engagement as an individual psycho-social process; the socio-cultural perspective, which highlights the critical role of the socio-political context; and, finally, the holistic perspective, which takes a broader view of engagement” (p. 758).

Recent research has refocused the scholarly discussion around student development on student engagement, namely, identifying student behaviours and campus environments that contribute to deep learning, personal development, academic achievement, satisfaction, persistence to second year, and retention to graduation. As the authors of Connecting the Dots declare, “Too many students who begin college do not earn a baccalaureate degree” (Kuh et al., 2007). Key questions addressed in the engagement literature are:

- How do students achieve desirable outcomes in college or university?
- How can their success (or likelihood of failure) be measured, predicted, and modified?
- What actions can be taken by the student and the institution to improve desirable outcomes such as increased learning, achievement, and persistence to graduation?
Kuh (2009b) summarizes student engagement theory for student affairs practitioners clearly in his classic article in the Journal of College Student Development. According to Kuh, “student engagement represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (p. 683).

The most powerful application of this theory is the National Survey of Student Engagement, which is a direct descendant of the quantitative tradition followed by Astin (1975) and others. NSSE consists largely of constructs that have been found to be related to desirable student outcomes; it is administered to students with a broad range of background characteristics at a broad range of institution types; it is administered to first-year and fourth-year students (with sufficient knowledge of the institution to make informed judgments); it is administered to large enough samples at each institution to allow for meaningful subgroup data analysis; it can incorporate local knowledge in the form of site-specific additional questions; and it is administered by an independent third-party survey organization (Kuh et al., 2001). As a quantitative research study, NSSE meets or exceeds commonly accepted standards for validity, reliability, and rigorous data analysis and interpretation within its target population.

McCormick and McClenny (2012) remind us that NSSE “sought to enrich the impoverished national discourse about college quality by shifting the conversation away from reputation, resources, and the preparation of entering students in favor of the student experience, especially activities and behaviors empirically linked to teaching and learning” (p. 309).

The 2001 version of NSSE introduced five institutional benchmarks of effective educational practice: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student–faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment
(National Survey of Student Engagement, 2001). According to Kuh (2001), the benchmarks did not represent underlying theoretical constructs; “instead, the benchmarks were conceived as clusters of student behaviors and institutional actions that represented good educational practices” (Pike, 2013, p. 152).

In *The National Survey of Student Engagement: Conceptual and Empirical Foundations*, Kuh (2009a) explains:

NSSE at the outset used a combination of empirical and conceptual analyses to identify a small number of clusters, or benchmarks, of effective educational practice. . .This was necessary because talking in any comprehensible way about several dozen individual questionnaire items would not encourage instructive, reliable benchmarking against peer institutions or further another important goal of the project, which was to shift the nature of the national conversation about what constitutes quality in undergraduate education. (p. 13)

The following summary of the five NSSE benchmarks is abbreviated from Kuh (2009a, pp. 16-18). Level of Academic Challenge refers to challenging intellectual and creative work that is understood to be central to student learning and collegiate quality. Active and Collaborative Learning posits that students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and asked to think about what they are learning in different settings. Student-Faculty Interaction reflects the way students learn firsthand how experts think about and solve practical problems by interacting with faculty members inside and outside the classroom. Enriching Educational Experiences describes complementary learning opportunities in and out of class to augment academic programs. Supportive Campus Environment speaks to the idea that students perform
better and are more satisfied at colleges that are committed to their success and cultivate positive working and social relations among different groups on campus.

In addition to statistical validation, focus groups and cognitive interviews were built into the NSSE research protocols. The Centre for Post-Secondary Research at Indiana University defined cognitive interviewing as “a methodology that examines how respondents comprehend, interpret, and answer survey questions” (2007, p. 4). In the initial validation of the instrument, researchers conducted three to six focus groups at each of eight institutions across the country in March and April of 2000. The purpose of the study was to “discover the meaning students make of the items on the NSSE College Student Report” (Kuh et al., 2001, p. 34). Students were asked to describe how they interpreted the survey items, the meaning they made of the frequency ratings used in the instrument (very often, often, sometimes, and never), whether the items were clear and easily understood, and whether the items represented their own perceptions of the college experience (Kuh et al., 2001). A number of changes were made as a result of the focus groups, including deletion of some items and rewording of others, but in general there was a strong consistency between the meaning students made of the survey—and their behaviours in college—with those expected by the design team. The newly revised survey was then presented to students at a single institution through cognitive interviews. Again, the responses of these students indicated a high level of consistency between their perceptions and the intentions of the framers.

This study followed the NSSE approach by examining the quantitative responses of international students as compared to domestic students and moving on to focus group research, with interviews offered to focus group participants, to gain a clearer understanding of how international students interpret the instrument and perceive the behaviours it describes.
2.4.1 A critique of NSSE and student engagement theory. Perhaps it is premature to level any substantive critique at student engagement theory. NSSE leaders Alexander C. McCormick, Jillian Kinzie, and Robert M. Gonyea (2013) declared that, “At barely over 10 years old, student engagement as a framework for understanding the quality of undergraduate education is in its infancy” (p. 85).

However, Nick Zepke (2014) levels a number of critiques at student engagement as an educational orthodoxy:

Various critiques have emerged about the way engagement is conceptualised. McMahon and Portelli (2004), for example, raised concerns about the operational nature of engagement research. They, as well as others (Solomonides, Reid, and Petocz 2012a; Báez 2011; Barnett and Coate 2005), suggested that a more critical and democratic dimension needs to be inserted into engagement research. They regret the emphasis on behaviours and neglect of ontological and emotional dimensions in the learning experience. Yet, despite these specific critiques, the construct as an entity and the research that feeds it have escaped general criticism. (p. 700)

Zepke continues:

Engagement researchers could recognise contextual and personal diversity when researching engagement pedagogy. Thomas (2002) suggested that students who arrive in a tertiary institution with cultural capital or ‘familial habitus’ congruent with the existing institutional habitus, are likely to be ‘fish in water’ and succeed. Where learners think their cultural and personal practices are incongruent, they are likely to feel like ‘fish out of water’ and not engage. Engagement researchers need to keep in mind more the impact
of ethnicity, age, gender, socio-economic status, lifestyle and beliefs on engagement.

(p.704)

However, George Kuh (2009a) acknowledges these limitations and urges researchers to be vigilant against monolithic thinking:

While it is gratifying that engagement is widely recognized as a desirable educational condition, the construct can be misinterpreted and misused. Indeed, proponents of popular ideas sometimes adopt a hegemonic, one-size-fits-all way of thinking. Student engagement is too important, as well as too complicated, for the educational community to allow this to happen. For example, as with other college experiences, engagement tends to have conditional effects, with students with certain characteristics benefiting from some types of activities more so than other students. In addition, the variance within any group of students, such as men and women or African Americans and Latinos, is almost always greater than between the groups (Kuh, 2003, 2008). We must be ever vigilant to be sure we are interpreting and using engagement data appropriately and continue to learn more about what forms of engagement work best under what circumstances for different groups of students. (p. 15)

Hatch (2012) addressed the “black box” of student engagement when he critiqued the frequent citing of institutional programmatic interventions as leading to desired student outcomes in the student engagement literature. Referring to the relative lack of research into what it is about certain interventions that leads them to be associated with a plethora of outcomes, he says, “Though the systemic relationship of institutions and individuals with respect to engagement is tangled and immensely multifaceted, we can no longer shy away from the challenge of prying
open the black box it remains today” (p. 911). Similarly, my study was designed to peek inside the “black box” of student engagement, not in terms of programmatic elements that build to student gains, but in terms of the experiences of, and therefore the interactions between, international students and the student engagement behaviours the research indicates should be beneficial.

A number of concerns arise in considering engagement as a broad theory to drive institutional change. First, it appears to privilege certain outcomes (increases in grade point average, retention, and satisfaction), which are not universally understood to be the primary aims of education. Second, it appears to privilege certain types of student characteristics, such as the financial freedom to pursue extracurricular activities. Third, it seems to conflate behaviour with learning, as if the act of writing a 20-page paper or participating in a community service learning project in themselves constitute a set of student outcomes. Engagement theory may play an important role in reducing the curricular or co-curricular barrier at higher-education institutions, but it may not apply equally well to all students, even among U.S. students.

A further concern about engagement is the temptation to mistake measures of self-reported student behaviour as institutional rankings. Numerous institutions that participate in NSSE now publish their findings and encourage prospective students and others concerned with institutional reputation to examine and compare their scores with those of peer institutions. George Kuh, founding director of NSSE, said he was “dismayed” that Maclean’s magazine used some NSSE results in its rankings of Canadian institutions in 2006 (quoted in UBC, 2006). He stated: “Rankings are inherently flawed because they reduce complex dimensions of university life to a single number. . . . Rankings may sell magazines but they do little to help the public understand what makes for a high-quality undergraduate experience” (quoted in UBC, 2006).
Simon Marginson’s 2006 talk at the OECD/IMHE conference of university rectors presented a substantial challenge to the international ranking of higher education institutions, particularly by Shanghai Jiaotong University and the *Times Higher Education Supplement*. He asserts, “They rework the opaque and complex inner workings of institutions into the simplified language of a football competition” (p. 1). Writing later with Marijk van der Wende (2007), Marginson observes that the existing league tables privilege English-speaking research institutions that are strong in science and describes the potentially devastating effects of global rankings on universities in countries where the hope of recognition of extant quality in terms of rankings is slim indeed. Marginson and van der Wende call for “‘clean’ rankings, transparent, free of self-interest, and methodologically coherent, that create incentives to broad-based improvement” (p. 306).

Though NSSE leadership disapproves of the use of their results for ranking purposes, the year the top research universities in Canada participated in NSSE as a group (2006) is the same year that many of them refused to participate in the *Maclean’s* ranking process. Care must be taken to use NSSE results for institutional improvement and assessment without mistaking them for easy inter-institutional comparisons.

There are important limitations to NSSE, the research on which it is based, and the decision by Canadian institutions to participate in NSSE. However, since 2000, countless student affairs professionals across North America have been tasked with overhauling programs and services to line up with NSSE principles and findings. At UBC, a number of units have undergone strategic realignment in response to NSSE results. In many instances, NSSE has provided a defensible rationale for making the kind of changes that administrators would want to make in any case.
Educational leaders have an obligation to question the policy events and power structures that led to the creation of their institutions as they are currently constructed (Ozga, 2000; Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997). On one level, the policy decision to administer NSSE to UBC students fits neatly into Harman’s traditional definition of policy: “the implicit or explicit specification of courses of purposive action being followed or to be followed in dealing with a recognized problem or matter of concern, and directed toward the accomplishment of some intended or desired set of goals“ (quoted in Taylor et al., 1997, p. 24). A purposive action, to participate in NSSE, was taken to address a set of recognized problems. In the case of UBC, the problems facing the university administration included dramatically decreased funding to post-secondary education in Canada; a shrinking population of traditional-aged post-secondary applicants from within Canada and heated competition for international students; growing interest across Canada in fostering students’ extracurricular skills and experiences of community (“student life,” in contrast to sink-or-swim) and in the profession of student affairs; the perceived failure of existing national ranking systems to accurately and transparently measure educational quality; and dawning recognition of the need to overhaul undergraduate teaching and learning.

Foucault’s power-knowledge nexus is apparent in the NSSE policy: “policy-making as an area of struggle for meaning” (quoted in Taylor et al., 1997, pp. 27–28). The meaning contested here is the aims of education. For NSSE architects, the aims of education include “high levels of learning and personal development” (Zhao et al., 2005), as measured by retention from first to second year (and eventual graduation), student satisfaction as reported on the survey, and grade point average (GPA). These aims and measures of education are highly problematic. High levels of learning what? NSSE does not measure content or construct learning. Personal development to what end, and for whose benefit? NSSE does not measure readiness to contribute to one’s
community, knowledge of one’s cultural context, environmental consciousness, political engagement, or readiness to create a more equitable society. NSSE does not measure the respect, reciprocity, and responsibility toward community that embodies “the goodlife” for some Aboriginal communities (Toulouse, 2001). NSSE measures only aggregate student behaviour, from which we are to extrapolate learning, personal development, campus environment, and ultimately, institutional quality. Even the smallest example shows the faith required to make this leap: high rates of self-reported participation in community service (particularly in the absence of reflection, evaluation, and action planning) may indicate civic-mindedness or may instead indicate resumé-padding. Behaviour, like experience, does not equal learning.

Do retention, satisfaction, and GPA represent universal aims of education? They do not. Retention has been big business in the United States since the 1960s, when dropping out became de rigueur. However, in Canada, retention rates at research universities have typically been much higher than in the United States. From a duty-to-care perspective, dropping out can be disruptive to the individual, particularly as it is often accompanied by some sense of failure. But there is also the institutional consideration that it is far more costly to recruit a student than to retain them. Fit and retention have an uneasy relationship. If a student attends a large institution but believes they would be better suited to a small college, is retention in the best interest of that student? To hold up retention as an aim of education makes sense from an economic and institutional perspective, but it may not reflect what is best for students’ learning and development.

GPA is a tidy way to measure academic achievement. But GPA is not a measure of academic rigour at the institution or of quality of instruction; it does not distinguish between more- and less-demanding academic programs; it does not indicate readiness for the world of
work nor the possession of realistic career goals; and it does not necessarily measure learning. Can what we value about student outcomes really be expressed in a grade alone?

Satisfaction as an outcome of education seems an odd fit. U.S. higher education has long had a tradition of educating the whole person; Canadian higher education has been more closely influenced by the German model of the research institution, in which higher education engages the mind but the rest of one’s time is spent separate from the “campus life.” What is the relationship between rigour and satisfaction? Is the positioning of satisfaction as a desired outcome of higher education pandering to students and their parents, particularly as NSSE results are designed to be used in attracting students to the institution? Or is satisfaction a useful proxy for the development and maintenance of socio-cultural supports that may have impacts on academic success?

Certainly every research undertaking comes with inherent biases, and NSSE is no exception. NSSE is administered by an independent third-party organization, but the analysis is conducted by the institution that elected to participate in the study. Given the power of the instrument to affect the institution’s reputation, especially if the results are used for ranking purposes—as they are increasingly in the United States—there is always a danger of bias in the analysis. A further concern with the research side of NSSE is the potential for demand characteristics in that questions have high face validity and students may exaggerate their responses to boost institutional reputation.

A word about power structures is appropriate. First, there is tremendous positional power in a survey developed by top U.S. researchers. To challenge any one part of NSSE or the research behind it means poking at a massive and complex scaffolding of interconnected studies stretching back over 50 years. Although NSSE does provide the option to tailor questions to suit
institutional or consortium needs, tailoring questions is not a straightforward process. For example, the NSSE demographic questions about race and immigration status are not useful in a Canadian context, so for the 2006 survey, UBC worked with other Canadian institutions to add a question to NSSE from the Statistics Canada census. However, at the last minute the U.S.-based researchers were unsure about the question and excluded it. UBC deliberately oversampled its population in 2006 but could not sort the data by race or ethnicity as the necessary question had not been asked, and the effort to reconstruct the ethnicity data has been imperfect and time-consuming. Change does not come easily in such a massive structure.

In terms of policy outcomes, careful attention must be paid to how the results are used. Standardized testing carries with it the danger of distorting the educational process. Teaching to the test can be intensely motivating—if what we want to teach is what is being tested. It is unclear whether UBC has asked itself: Is NSSE the test to which we want to teach? At UBC, key watchwords around the student experience include \textit{global citizenship, transformative student experience, sustainability, community-engaged learning, research, teaching, and learning}. Are these captured in NSSE? Is NSSE’s depiction of what student life ought to be appropriate for UBC students? This study helped to recognize and clarify the limitations of the instrument and find ways to include student voices not heard in the survey.

\textbf{2.4.2 Student engagement and the aims of education.} Egan’s (2001) work on the fundamental ideas about education provides a useful framework for examining perspectives on student engagement. Egan argues that thinking about education in the twentieth century involved three fundamental ideas: socialization, Plato’s academic idea, and the developmental idea of Rousseau. Egan’s work is particularly salient because it focuses on the underlying assumptions
around education. It is worth taking time to use Egan’s framework to examine the construct of student engagement in post-secondary education today.

2.4.2.1 Socialization. Egan describes socialization as starting with our hunter-gatherer ancestors who told stories to their young “to create for the hearers a conceptual image of what we may call the meaning of life” (p. 924). Socialization according to Egan has the advantage of fixing our values about the world, which then “become the things people think with, not think about” (p. 926). However, there are significant drawbacks of education for socialization, including the development of an “us” and “them” mentality and the value-laden nature of any socialization.

Student engagement is a particularly powerful mechanism for socialization. The vision statement of the University of British Columbia states that UBC “will prepare students to become exceptional global citizens” (Toope, 2006, para. 3). A proponent of education as socialization would argue that student exchanges, community service, and participation in civic clubs and organizations are part of shaping the student-citizen of the future. Additionally, socialization is about creating a sense of “us.” For instance, in Korea, a main purpose of higher education is cementing one’s professional network of like-positioned peers who will ensure one’s success after graduation; grades become secondary once one has been admitted to the right university.

The socialization side of engagement also includes orientation, transition programs, and other elements that create a supportive campus community. For example, in UBC’s International Peer Program for new undergraduates, student leaders intentionally created the kind of supportive community they hoped would set a direction for participants to continue after they left the program. Under my leadership, every event they offered had to meet three values criteria:
Does is build community? Does it contribute to student success or learning? Does it respect the intercultural nature of our interactions? Socialization happens whether we plan it or not, but we can make choices about the kind of socialization we want to see.

However, socialization as a purpose of engagement is troubling on several levels. First, there is a very real danger that we create too narrow a sense of “we.” Education cannot be about simple replication of what is but must also be about equipping students to engage in critical reflection and engage in social change. Second, student engagement theory flows out of institutional concerns that certain student outcomes be achieved. As such, it is an institutional solution applied at the individual level. This is problematic in that one size does not necessarily fit all. Engagement in the abstract is fine, but when it is measured by institutions, decisions have to be made about what will count: Will off-campus activities be valued as highly as on-campus? How about social activism? What about religious activities that clash with the dominant values of the institution? We must be careful what we measure—and that we not discount behaviours that are relevant for students just because they do not fit neatly into our theories. We dare not draw the boundary around “we” too tightly.

2.4.2.2 Plato’s academic ideal. The second of Egan’s fundamental ideas about education is based on Plato’s approach to learning in an age of literacy. Plato taught that the mind is transformed when one learns the best knowledge available in written form. The traditional approach to post-secondary education in Canada, one might argue, has been largely curricular. Learning the best knowledge available in one’s field has been the path to a degree and a good job. The big news of student engagement theory is its stark opposition to the brain-in-a-box approach to learning. The professor who thought she was teaching chemistry now finds she is expected to teach the whole student.
So the dialogue continues. Is engagement an alternative to academic rigour? Do engagement activities dilute a traditional mission of post-secondary education (i.e., the creation and transmission of knowledge)? Are academic behaviours sufficient basis on which to gauge learning? Does writing a 20-page paper mean that the student has now achieved a certain mastery of research and academic writing? We all know cases where this is simply not true. Some have observed that students at Canadian institutions are more engaged now than ten years ago—but they also seem to be more tired, under more academic pressure, and overburdened by a full slate of commitments. In the past decade at UBC, a key message to students has changed from “get involved” to “choose wisely.”

2.4.2.3 Development according to Rousseau. Egan’s third idea about education stems from the Enlightenment work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). Rousseau argued that human beings, like the rest of the scientific world, undergo a natural process of development that can be observed and understood. Building on the work of Plato, Rousseau concluded that real learning takes place only when consideration is given to the stages at which the learner can best learn different kinds of knowledge.

Student engagement theory is a direct descendant of student development theories, which have served as an antidote to the heavily curricular approach noted above. Well-roundedness, focus on the whole person, and attention to students’ developmental needs are hallmarks of student development approaches to education. More than just helping students learn to work and play well with others, student development is about re-creating the institution so that students develop the skills they need to be successful after graduation.

There are significant challenges with the developmental underpinnings to engagement. First, the development of the whole person is not universally recognized as the purview of the
institution. Proponents of the sink-or-swim model would argue that development happens with or without the institution’s interference. Second, engagement theory has a subtle age and socio-economic bias. It offers far less for students with family obligations and those who have neither the time nor the financial freedom to join campus activities. The implication is that undergraduate education is designed for a certain type of student and the rest are left out. So the theory may accurately reflect a certain approach to post-secondary education, but that approach may still privilege certain types of students. Third, measuring behaviours is not the same as measuring learning. We can imagine a student who participates in community service but returns to campus with reinforced stereotypes about the people she served. She has had the experience, but has learning occurred? We must be careful not to lean too heavily on the findings of such measures, particularly in drawing conclusions about individual student experiences.

U.S. beliefs about the responsibility of the higher-education sector to provide whole-person education are not universally shared outside the United States. To the extent that other national post-secondary systems are able to get along just fine without student engagement, we must question the prescriptive value of student engagement theory. If we want an educational experience that is similar to that on which student engagement is based, then adopting student engagement theory wholeheartedly to guide our institutional planning makes a lot of sense. But if there are elements of that system that do not work for Canadian institutions, either from an institutional perspective or in considering the makeup of our student populations, then we need to think carefully before applying engagement as our measure of institutional quality and of the student experience. Much more investigation is needed to understand the extent to which student engagement applies to Canadian contexts and to the varied student populations within them.
2.4.2.4 Learner reflexivity in modern times. Martin Dyke places this conversation squarely in our times as he writes about the heightened need for learner reflexivity in these times of high modernity (2009). In describing education that is suited for our times, he writes:

It will need to be an education that enables students to navigate their way through a diverse world that is full of manufactured risks, where there is a lack of certainty and ambivalence; where knowledge is contingent, transient, subject to change and judged as valuable only for as long as it is useful in practice. It will perhaps reflect the distinction that Bauman makes between ‘legislators and interpreters’ (1987), an education that does not legislate but rather offers alternative interpretations that people can accept, reject or adapt; in the end they need to make up their own minds as to how to proceed. Therefore, a task for education is to enable students to make more knowledgeable decisions in a world of rapidly changing and often contradictory information. (p. 292)

2.5 Hofstede on Cultural Difference

National cultures are not monolithic but may consist of subcultures within a given country or region, as well as generational, gender, socio-economic, class, religious, and individual differences within the same context. When referring to North American culture, I refer to a necessarily overgeneralized kind of mainstream white European cultural context, which is recognizably only a part of the picture. I assert that culture acts as a kind of inexorable undercurrent pushing and pulling us in ways of which we are largely unaware, and I recognize the added complexity of individuality and of intersecting and multi-layered identities. Finally, while cultural difference often assumes a level playing field, I recognize the complex and constraining influence of power in intercultural interactions.
One framework stands out as particularly applicable as a jumping-off point for understanding a broader range of descriptors of culture. Geert Hofstede’s research into national cultural difference, while having weathered fierce critique, is intriguing for two reasons: it provides numerical comparison points for nationality groups on five dimensions, and it is based on a naturalistic approach of “found” data. In other words, it has both specificity and an air of authenticity. Hofstede’s country ratings and new online bi-country comparisons set the stage for country-specific analysis of the international student experience of NSSE. Do students’ perceptions of NSSE (the instrument, the behaviours, and the outcomes of education) reflect in any measure the kinds of polarity we might expect based on Hofstede’s dimensions? Just as Hofstede used the “found” IBM corporate survey responses to uncover his then four dimensions of national culture, so we will “find” international students’ responses to NSSE and from them explore what lies underneath in a cultural sense.

Hofstede’s work was particularly helpful to get at issues of representation and sampling. As our working theory is that international students’ home cultural conditioning may affect their perceptions of student engagement as measured by NSSE, then it is a logical step to expect that students whose home cultures are more distant from one another according to Hofstede’s ratings might also experience greater difference in their perceptions. The application of Hofstede’s dimensions to the study would suggest that examining student responses in national groupings might bring to light national trends that will be instructive; the dimensions were also useful in selecting which cultural groups to select, given the scope of the study and the limited representation of some national groups in the available population.

Where I departed from Hofstede is at the heuristic level. Rather than take the dimensions as definitive or focus on further statistical manipulation of the data, I took the view of Hampden-
Turner and Trompenaars (1997), who saw their quantitatively adduced dimensions as starting points for discussion. This study focused on the experiences of students. If there is a commonality of experience between students who share a home culture, that commonality might provide yet another jumping-off point for further research.

2.6 Summary of the Literature Review

I will now summarize the literature review of the internationalization of post-secondary education, international students’ experiences, and student engagement, with reference to dimensions of culture.

Higher education administrators and researchers view internationalization as normative and increasingly mainstream, but there is potential for the vast activity associated with internationalization to further social inequities if we are not mindful of the ultimate consequences of our actions. The most important benefit of internationalization, according to universities around the world, is students’ awareness of global issues, and the greatest institutional risk is that not all students will realize this benefit. Intercultural understanding as a student outcome and an institutional way of thinking is now emerging to take its place in the literature with globalization and internationalization. Internationalization at home focuses institutional efforts on critical pedagogy and the assumption that all students are international, in the same way that all people have an accent – when considered from someone else’s point of view. By shifting the focus away from the diverse learner, one can probe what about the curriculum makes the material inaccessible to certain students, flipping traditional diversity approaches on their heads. Internationalization of post-secondary education is big business, carries high institutional risk, and if undertaken mindfully, can realize the tremendous promise that it holds. Further study is needed to ensure internationalization moves along a path on which
we are “mindful of the larger philosophical questions about why and what we were doing and the ultimate consequences for humanity and our planet” (Knight, 1999, p. 16).

In the research, we see that international students are a key element to the internationalization of post-secondary education. However, the benefits they bring, while myriad, are not automatic. The rapid increase in numbers of international students at Canadian institutions arises from a specific historical and political context which has led to international undergraduate students being the bearers not only of cultural knowledge and academic broadening but also of much-needed economic influx in an era of declining public funds for post-secondary education. The recruitment and retention of international undergraduates has becomes big business. The danger, then, is to deeply undervalue the enormous contributions international students make in Canadian academic communities and to offer them customer service and isolated edu-tainment rather than full participation and learning in its broadest sense.

The role of international students in the internationalization of the institution merits closer attention.

In the research about international students’ experiences, we see a progression from adjustment models focused on the deficiencies of sojourners to a culture learning approach characterized as learning the rules of the game. Culture learning introduced the role of environment and the value of intercultural communication skills as core competencies for people crossing cultures. Subsequent research has shown time and again the importance of social supports and socio-cultural success, including its impact on acculturative stress and on academic performance. Valued social supports were shown in some studies to include relationships with faculty members.
International students have been shown to be generally robust and emotionally positive, but a long list of specific needs or concerns has been identified, including language (more recently focused on underlying cultural schema), cultural differences, academics, socio-cultural issues, and practical concerns. The argument has been made that international students are underserved by their institutions and that the most critical time for supports is during the initial adjustment phase.

Gradually, the research began to turn away from needs of international students and focused on how they can be successful, emphasizing goals and coping strategies. More recently, the role of culture has been foregrounded: cultural schema, culturally mediated academic experiences, and the need for mutual cultural understanding in the classroom. Researchers are split over the question of how Chinese international students make sense of their sojourn and how they can best be supported: as products of Confucian-heritage cultures or as a new generation of students who believe the label of passive receptacles of professorial wisdom. And finally, the research suggests that learning is socially constructed and that underlying discourses and power dynamics are a critical element in the understanding of international student experiences. Further research is needed into international students’ perceptions of their own role in navigating the complexities of their experiences.

Regarding student engagement, the behaviourist tradition of student engagement research in post-secondary education grew out of early attempts to measure, predict and improve student success. Grounded in the observation that student effort and institutional intervention are essential elements of student success, student engagement research in the US now represents over 50 years of quantitative studies. The National Survey of Student Engagement, launched in 2000 as a joint effort by the key thinkers in this tradition, has become the pre-eminent research...
undertaking in post-secondary education today with more than 1,500 institutions in the U.S. and Canada participating since it started. This study followed the NSSE validation protocols by reviewing institutional comparative data and digging deeper with focus groups and the offer of interviews. This study further followed recommendations by Zhao, Carini and Kuh (2005) by investigating specific cultural groups of Asian international students at a single institution, to better understand and contextualize the institution-level data.

Hofstede’s evocative work with national cultural difference provides a useful jumping-off point for this study’s discussion of international student’s perceptions. Given the increasing focus on intercultural understanding in institutional research and culturally constructed understanding in international student research, it is important to create spaces in which the influence of national culture may act as an unseen undercurrent enabling and constraining the agency students are trying to exercise. This links us conceptually back to Bourdieu’s work on habitus, the ways we embody the understanding of valued capital and fields on which we pursue it. There is a need to explore the role of culture in enabling or constraining international students’ perceptions of their engagement with their university and in understanding how they and their institution can enable their success or mitigate their failure.

In the following chapters, I will present the methodology and findings of the study, followed by discussion and conclusion in the final chapter.
Chapter 3.
Methodology

3.1 Design Considerations

The purpose of the UBC study was to provide recommendations for practice for faculty and administrators in higher education regarding how international undergraduates interpret select questions in the National Survey of Student Engagement and how they perceive select behaviours identified in NSSE, including both student behaviours and institutional practices. This study was developed in concert with and received support from the Office of the Vice President, Students at UBC Vancouver, which acted as project sponsor. The challenge was to build a clearer picture of students’ responses to NSSE itself and how they make meaning of the constructs addressed in the survey. To accomplish this task, the existing data set of NSSE responses for UBC was considered and used to inform qualitative data collection and analysis. Qualitative design elements included focus groups and follow-up interviews, which were made available to focus group participants but which participants chose not to access. After some deliberation, the specific focus was determined to be first- and fourth-year students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. For comparative purposes, I facilitated focus groups with Canadian students. Data were analyzed using open coding. Subsequently, the work of Geert Hofstede (2001) and Pierre Bourdieu (1986) informed the final analysis and discussion.

3.1.1 A qualitative approach. Quantitative survey research has the advantage of generating a large amount of factual data from a dispersed population in a short period of time. However, surveys are not necessarily designed to show the meaning behind the responses. According to Kirk and Miller, “qualitative research is a particular tradition in social science that fundamentally
depends on watching people in their own territory and interacting with them in their own language, on their own terms” (1986, p. 9). To understand students’ responses to NSSE, it was necessary to learn about their views in their own words.

In numerous validation studies, NSSE researchers have used focus groups and interviews to explore the meaning behind NSSE responses of students at U.S. institutions. Both these methods are well suited for studies into people’s perceptions, as they allow participants to express their views in their own words. The goal of focus group research is not to infer from factual data but to understand the real meaning of participants (Krueger & Casey, 2009). For the NSSE validation studies, most of the participants were U.S students. The UBC study was unique in that it built upon the NSSE validation work but with international students in single-country groups using home-culture facilitators and home language.

In her study of the applicability of NSSE benchmarks to international students, Irungu (2010) points out that, “as noted by Kinzie and Pennipede (2009), there is need for qualitative analyses that goes beyond the numbers thus ‘adding respondent voices and institutional contexts’ (p. 88) and helping to make ‘findings more credible and meaningful’ (p. 88)” (p. 130).

As stated in the Introduction, this study was guided by the following research questions, which arose from the need to qualitatively interrogate the perceptions of international and domestic students who take the NSSE survey:

1. How do UBC international undergraduate students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan interpret select NSSE questions and perceive select NSSE behaviours? How do these interpretations and perceptions compare to those of Canadian undergraduate students?
2. How do UBC international undergraduate students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan perceive their engagement with their host university? How do these interpretations and perceptions compare to those of Canadian undergraduate students?

3. Regarding UBC international and domestic undergraduate students’ perceptions of select NSSE questions, select NSSE behaviours, and their engagement with their university, how do first and fourth year students’ perceptions differ? How do students’ perceptions differ in light of residence status, faculty, and gender?

3.1.2 Focus groups. For more than 50 years, focus groups have been used effectively in the military, marketing, medicine, and the social sciences (Berg, 2007; Parker & Tritter, 2006). Focus groups can be an efficient mechanism to gather rich data about a handful of participants’ deep-level life structures (Denzin, 1989). Focus groups yield relatively large amounts of data from relatively little face-to-face contact with the researcher. They are often seen as adaptable and cost-effective (Parker & Tritter, 2006), though costs increase if one is outsourcing facilitation, note-taking, transcription, or coding. Focus groups can also be an effective way of capturing perspectives within populations that experience constant turnover, such as students. Authors in The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research summarized risks and benefits of focus groups by saying that they can be used strategically to inhibit the authority of researchers and to allow participants to “take over” and “own” the interview space (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005).

As Krueger and Casey state, “Focus groups work when participants feel comfortable, respected and free to give their opinion without being judged. The intent of the focus group is to promote self-disclosure among participants. We want to know what people really think and feel”
(2009, p. 4). For the UBC study, focus groups were conducted using standard protocols from the social sciences (Krueger & Casey, 2009). To increase the authenticity of responses (specifically limiting language, culture, and “host” filters), each focus group consisted of students from the same year and country and was facilitated by a bilingual undergraduate research assistant.

For this study, focus groups provided an invaluable way of gathering authentic perspectives of small groups of students who had a common cultural background as a way of highlighting cultural commonality. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) have pointed out, “Group participants can stimulate each other to articulate their views or even to realize what their own views were” (p. 109). Participants may or may not be conscious of the cultural patterns with which they have been raised. Therefore, the cultural homogeneity of the focus group, including both its composition and the language(s) in which it was conducted, becomes an important part of the research design. Conducting groups in a home language was intended to serve three purposes: to reinforce for participants their cultural connectivity, to reduce reluctance students might have about speaking openly about their host culture, and to facilitate discussion about concepts that were culturally embedded and difficult to convey to outsiders.

Many pitfalls await the unwary researcher who employs focus groups. In theory, focus groups create a safe space for sharing of authentic perspectives. However, it was unclear whether this sharing happens more authentically in the anonymity of strangers, as in random sampling, or in the intimacy of friends, as in certain types of convenience sampling (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996; Wilson, 1997). We show ourselves differently in public than in private spaces (Wilson, 1997), and this distinction can be profound in certain cultural contexts. Bias on the part of the interviewer can skew the choice of questions, the direction responses take (response effect), and the subsequent analysis (Borg & Gall, 1989). The synergy
between participants that was so lauded in focus group research can take the conversation onto tangents so that key points are missed entirely. Dominant speakers, whether from personality, race, gender, or other power base, can silence the less verbal and the underrepresented (Parker & Tritter, 2006). Those who honour silence may find it extremely difficult to compete with those who fear it, as the latter tend to fill silence with words (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Participants may feel cornered into giving a response and so produce a nicety rather than “natural language” (Wilson, 1997). Over the course of the discussion participants’ views may shift, so that when a statement is made and by whom is more telling than what was said (Parker & Tritter, 2006).

3.1.3 Interviews. Individual follow-up interviews were made available to participants. Offering individual interviews acknowledged the cultural limitations of focus group work and was intended to respond to those who for a variety of reasons might prefer one-on-one conversation. Optional follow-up interviews can mitigate socio-cultural pressures on students to speak freely and increase the likelihood of authentic utterances. In certain tight-knit cultural communities, students might prefer the anonymity of a personal interview. Participants from countries that rate low on the individualism index (IDV) might be reticent to express views contrary to those of their fellows in a group setting. Participants from countries that rate high on the power distance index (PDI) might find it difficult to contradict the opinions of more powerful members of the group as determined by age, class rank, gender, race or ethnicity, or socio-economic status. Likewise students from both cultural groups above might find it awkward to express a dissenting opinion or one that might embarrass the host institution in the person of myself, as I was present for each focus group but would not attend the interviews. For this study, interviews were offered to participants at the end of each focus group session and were to be arranged individually with the research assistant. Interviews were to last 30 to 45 minutes, be
conducted by the same facilitator as the associated focus group, and follow the same semi-structured question schedule as the focus group. No focus group participants accepted the offer of an interview.

### 3.1.4 Role of culture and language

This study followed the recommendation of NSSE researchers Zhao, Kuh, and Carini (2005) by interrogating international student perceptions of NSSE on a single campus while distinguishing between cultural groups. The study was delimited to a single campus of a single institution. This reflects the exploratory nature of the study and minimizes variances within the data related to location, institution, or host country / culture. This is particularly appropriate given that the results of the study are intended to inform policy and program development at the campus or institution that hosted the research.

The construct of home language is incredibly complex, and this discussion cannot begin to cover the issue. Yet a few comments are necessary to clarify terms and acknowledge limitations. First, in many countries more than one language is spoken. It was therefore possible that the students selected for the focus groups based on common citizenship might not have had a common home language. Second, if they did have a common home language, it might not have been a language with which they had an equal level of comfort, in either linguistic or socio-political terms. A language with which a student has a facility from a home, school, or national context might not be their first or primary language. Third, political and ethnic divisions exist in many countries, such that students might have felt they had less in common with fellow nationals than they did with students from other countries, and in fact more than one participant mentioned this. Fourth, a number of students arrive at UBC having lived most of their lives outside of their country of citizenship. To address these issues, cultural informants were consulted when crafting invitations for participation to ensure that country-specific sensitivities were considered.
Which cultural groups to study? In shaping this study, target countries for focus groups were identified in part by considering frequency in the target population and culture distance (Evans & Mavondo, n.d.), a construct that refers to the relative dissimilarity between cultures on a variety of values continua. Values continua include individualism / collectivism, high-context / low-context, large power distance / small power distance, and masculinity / femininity, among others (Hall, 1994; Hofstede, 2001; Ting-Toomey, 1999).

At UBC in 2007/08, the largest country and regional groups by declared citizenship were, in descending order and including all registered undergraduates at UBC Vancouver: the United States, China, Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Mexico, the United Kingdom, Taiwan, and Saudi Arabia. The largest cluster of culturally similar countries or regions in the most frequently occurring list for UBC Vancouver was China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan; Hofstede’s values scores for those countries are markedly distant from those for Canada on scales such as power distance index (PDI), individualism index (IDV), and uncertainty avoidance index (UA) (Hofstede, 2001), but not in uniform directions; it made sense on many levels to include students from these five countries in the study.
Accordingly, the study included first- and fourth-year international undergraduates registered at UBC Vancouver in 2008/09 who identified as citizens of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, or Japan. Students from the selected countries and regions accounted for 1,596, or 40.8% of UBC Vancouver international undergraduates at the time the study was designed (UBC PAIR, 2008). This grouping allowed for multiple but related viewpoints (as per cultural dimensions in Hofstede, 2001), creating a greater depth of field than a single-country study and presenting stronger results for policy implementation. See Table 3.1 for a breakdown of international students at UBC for academic year 2007/08 from countries and regions targeted by this study.

Certainly no one group can represent the perceptions of all international students. A study of this scope cannot begin to do justice to the rich panoply of perspectives represented within the
international student population at any given institution. At UBC, even the domestic population is remarkably diverse in terms of ethnic makeup. According to results of the *New to UBC Survey* in 2014, as many as 39% of undergraduates at UBC Vancouver learned Chinese (Mandarin or Cantonese) as a child and still speak it proficiently (internal memo). Selecting groups that were well-represented and culturally distant enough from the domestic population to garner useful data made for meaningful discussion.

**Table 3.1 Undergraduates at UBC Vancouver from target countries / regions for 2007/08**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citizenship</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1,596</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Percentage of international undergraduates at UBC Vancouver in 2007/08 (n = 3,912)


Control groups were not warranted due to the exploratory nature of the study. However, for comparative purposes and at the request of the institutional sponsor, focus groups were also held with first- and fourth-year undergraduates who identified as citizens or permanent residents of Canada.

### 3.1.5 Delimiting the target population.

The population was carefully delimited. To recognize the diverse nature of culture, particular country or region groups were selected for focus group
research. To acknowledge the importance of local context, the study examined perspectives of students at one campus of one institution. NSSE and the theories on which it was based deal with undergraduate degree-seeking students, so this study sampled undergraduate degree-seeking students whose academic home was UBC. At UBC this excludes, for example, students in visiting or incoming study abroad programs, incoming exchange students, unclassified students or EAL students, or those registered in a diploma- or certificate-granting program.

An important characteristic of the target population was their level of expertise with the host institution and/or host culture. The study design allowed for inclusion of novice and experienced members of the student population. Several ways to measure expertise were considered, including length of time in the host culture (i.e., Canada); length of time in the host academic culture (i.e., Canadian higher education); and length of time in the particular institutional context (i.e., UBC). In the end, the most important measure was similarity to the population that participates in NSSE, namely, students in the first and fourth years of their academic programs. This choice mirrored NSSE’s selection process and allowed for a selection of participants based on available data. (Researchers did not have access to conclusive data regarding students’ length of time in Canada or length of study in Canada.) As such, the study is not a representation of new-to-Canada / not-new-to-Canada student perspectives but rather of first- and fourth-year student perspectives, as is NSSE. The study did not address issues of acculturation or differentiate between transfer and direct-entry students (those who were admitted to the university based on secondary school completion).

To further reduce skewing, this study considered those demographic factors that have been significant in the UBC NSSE results. At the request of the host institution, smaller faculties, whose students they understood to have very different experiences of engagement as
demonstrated by their previous NSSE scores, were not included. Accordingly students were selected based on gender, whether they lived in university residence or were a commuter, and by faculty (area of study).

“International student” is expressed in the UBC student records by the inaccurately named code “student visa,” a self-declared field that indicates the student is neither a citizen nor a permanent resident of Canada. Regarding citizenship, although students may have multiple citizenships, the UBC database has room for only one, which again was self-identified by the student.

Taken together, the target population was all first- or fourth-year international or Canadian undergraduates in the UBC student database currently registered at the UBC Vancouver campus in a degree program in a faculty with large undergraduate enrolment (delimited to Bachelor of Applied Science, Arts, Commerce, or Science), and self-identified in the student record system as a citizen of Canada, China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, or Taiwan.

3.2 Procedures

The study began in summer of 2008 with a review of the 2008 NSSE data for international and domestic students at UBC. Data had already been analyzed by the institutional research office using factor analysis. In fall of 2008, ethical clearance was granted for focus group and interview research. Based on results of the survey data, I developed protocols for focus groups and interviews in consultation with my thesis supervisor. In early 2009, I selected and trained a team of undergraduate research assistants to schedule, recruit for, facilitate, transcribe and translate the focus groups and interviews. I led the team of research assistants to pilot the protocols and revise the protocols as needed. In spring 2009, at the same time NSSE is normally administered, 18 bilingual focus groups were held in homogenous groupings by citizenship and year in program.
Participants were welcome to speak in the designated home language or in English, and many students switched between the two languages during the session. For instance, the Hong Kong groups were led by a facilitator who spoke in Cantonese most of the time, and the participants spoke in Cantonese, English, or a mix of the two. Each group was facilitated by an undergraduate research assistant facilitator from the same cultural background. Individual semi-structured interviews were offered to participants of focus groups, although no participants took up the offer. The audio and video recordings were transcribed in their original language and translated into English. Open coding was used to analyze the data. In early 2010, results were shared with practitioners and policy-makers from the host institution through a written report and several presentations.

3.2.1 Analyzing NSSE data. The first step in the research design was to examine the results of institutional analysis which compared UBC NSSE 2008 responses of international students to those of domestic students. The NSSE 2008 instrument is comprised of 28 multi-part questions which together form five benchmarks, as explained in the literature review. In addition, NSSE researchers have developed 19 scales and subscales, such as deep learning, personal social gains, and satisfaction. Analysis focused on benchmarks, scales and subscales. Rather than selecting a sample of the first- and fourth-year student population as NSSE recommends, in 2008 UBC significantly oversampled by inviting the entire population of registered undergraduates to participate in the survey (personal correspondence); the response rate was 27%. This large amount of data lends itself well to examination of specific datasets. As NSSE researchers commonly observe, there was often more variation within an institution than between institutions, so the survey lends itself to analysis of variance by subpopulation (UBC PAIR,
Means were compared for individual questions, subscales, and benchmarks as identified in NSSE protocols.

3.2.2 Engaging research assistants. In January and February 2009, five undergraduate research assistants from the target countries and regions (four international students and one permanent resident) were interviewed and selected. Staff from each of the target culture groups assessed the applicants’ ability to translate sample text. I hired and trained to facilitate, transcribe, and translate academically rigorous focus groups and interviews. Four of the research assistants were from the same citizenship as their student participants, and the assistant for the students from China was a citizen of Singapore.

Training included completion of the introductory tutorial for the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS).

3.2.3 Holding pilot focus groups. Facilitators held six pilot focus groups, after which scripts and protocols were revised. Once the population was identified, 6 to 12 students from each target country or region were invited to participate in a pilot focus group, regardless of year level. One pilot group was held for each country or region in the study. Results from the pilot were used to modify the focus group design as needed, including question wording, order of questions, location, audio equipment, and approaches taken by the facilitator.

3.2.4 Selecting the sample. Students were randomly selected using a stratified random sample in proportional representation based on citizenship (Canada / China / Hong Kong / Japan / Korea / Taiwan), year level (first / fourth), residence status (resident in UBC-operated housing / commuter), gender (male / female), and faculty (Applied Science (Engineering) / Arts / Commerce / Science). All participants were currently registered undergraduate degree-seeking
students at the UBC Vancouver campus. All participants were coded in the student record system as international, with the exception of participants selected for the Canadian student focus groups.

Parker and Trotter (2006) identify careful sampling as a crucial element in focus group research. This study employed a *stratified purposive sample* (Vaughn et al., 1996, p. 58), including members of specific groups from within layers of the population (see Table 3.2). Within each of these subpopulations, such as first year undergraduate degree-seeking students from China, students were selected using randomly sorted lists (provided by the institutional research office). A list of demographic characteristics of participants by focus group is found in the appendix.

**Table 3.2 Research phases of this study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantitative phase</th>
<th>Qualitative phase</th>
<th>Focus group(s)</th>
<th>First-year students from China</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Focus group(s)</td>
<td>Fourth-year students from China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Focus group(s)</td>
<td>First-year students from Taiwan</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Focus group(s)</td>
<td>Fourth-year students from Taiwan</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Focus group(s)</td>
<td>First-year students from Hong Kong</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Focus group(s)</td>
<td>Fourth-year students from Hong Kong</td>
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<td>Focus group(s)</td>
<td>First-year students from Korea</td>
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<td>Focus group(s)</td>
<td>Fourth-year students from Korea</td>
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<td>Focus group(s)</td>
<td>First-year students from Japan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Focus group(s)</td>
<td>Fourth-year students from Japan</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Focus group(s)</td>
<td>First-year students from Canada</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Focus group(s)</td>
<td>Fourth-year students from Canada</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviews offered to participants

I excluded students from the target populations if any one of the following statements were true:
They had participated in the pilot focus groups because they would not be responding as spontaneously as the others and their responses might be coloured by comments made by other students during the pilot. Approximately 6 students per country or region participated in the pilot focus groups.

They had been or were at the time employed by International Student Development at UBC because I oversee all staff in the department, and the employer relationship might have biased employees’ responses or my analysis. At the time of the study, approximately 30 students were employed by this department each year.

They were under the age of 19, the age of majority in British Columbia. Minors were excluded due to the difficulty in obtaining consent from parents abroad.

In the end, two students were excluded based on the above criteria. Both were replaced by participants with similar selection criteria (year in program, citizenship, etc.). Exclusion of the two students is believed to have had minimal impact on the outcome of the study.

Participants were assumed to be competent by virtue of their status as currently enrolled students at UBC who were over the age of 19. No special accommodation was provided regarding competency (such as additional measures to ensure informed consent).

The steps I took to select participants were as follows:

1. Requested from the UBC Office of Planning and Institutional Research (UBC PAIR) a randomly sorted list of currently registered UBC students (Session = 2008W, Registration type = REGI) coded as international or Canadian (Visa type = STUV or CDN) degree-seeking undergraduate students in the faculties of Arts, Applied Science, Science, and the Sauder School of Business at the Vancouver campus (Program type = BA or BASC or BSC or BCOM) who were citizens of the target
countries or regions (Citizenship = CANA or CHIN or JAPN or HGKG or KOR or CHTW) in the desired year levels (Year level = 1 or 4).

2. Submitted the resulting list to UBC Student Housing and Hospitality Services (UBC SHHS) so each student could be coded as a resident of university-operated housing or not.

3. Preserved randomness by numbering each student in the order they appeared on the random list prior to any sorting.

4. Divided the list into 12 homogenous groupings by year in program and citizenship (e.g., first-year China, fourth-year China, first-year Japan, fourth-year Japan, and so on).

5. Within each group, determined the ratio of each demographic factor to be considered (male / female, living in residence / commuter, and Arts / Applied Science/ Sauder / Science).

6. Determined proportional number of “seats” per demographic factor based on 12 students per focus group.

7. Determined students to be excluded and remove them from the list (e.g., participated in the pilot; see list above).

8. Within each group, selected students from the top of the randomly generated list to reflect appropriate proportion of “seats” in each group.

9. Once a certain demographic category is filled, skipped down the list until the next candidate appears who met the required criteria—these were the initial invitees.
3.2.5 Recruitment and incentives. Recruiting focus group participants for this study was extremely challenging. This section outlines the recruitment requirements and methods used and includes a brief discussion of the challenges.

Twelve is the maximum number of focus group participants generally recommended in the literature; this allows for authentic discussion while still capturing a range of student perceptions. Six was the minimum number of participants proposed for each of the 12 subpopulations to ensure a reasonably broad sampling of student perspectives; given that some subpopulations had as few as 12 students in total, a reasonable percentage was deemed acceptable even if raw numbers were low (see appendices for attendance figures). The research proposal called for a minimum number of six confirmed participants or the group would be rescheduled; once the challenges of recruitment became clear, if non-responders or refusals could not be replaced in time, the focus group still ran with as few as three confirmed participants. Response rates were low and the window of time required to book new meeting spaces (up to a week) and re-advertise (up to two weeks) was too short to make rescheduling practical.

The timeline was tight as focus groups could not start until the research assistants were trained, pilots had been held, protocols were revised, groups were scheduled, and recruitment had taken place (late January). They also had to be completed before the exam period (mid April).

Two of the focus groups were cancelled and rescheduled due to low numbers of confirmed participants. In most cases, some confirmed participants did not attend. It soon became clear that gathering the minimum of six participants per subpopulation was not going to be possible in certain cases; therefore in some cases three focus groups were held for the same
subpopulation (e.g., first-year Canadians) to achieve the desired minimum total number of participants in the available time frame. As mentioned, to honour participants’ commitment and move the study forward, focus groups with at least three confirmed participants ran regardless of the number of participants who actually attended; one group ran with one participant and six ran with two participants. However, for each of the 12 subpopulations, at least six students participated in the study.

Students in the random sample were invited by email to participate in a focus group with other students from their country or region and year level. I consulted with cultural informants (the research assistants, student leaders, and pilot participants) to determine the best approach to take to encourage maximum participation. They advised that

- the email should come from an authoritative source so students would believe it was a legitimate invitation and not a scam
- the source should be recognizable and evoke interest to increase the likelihood students would read and respond to the invitation
- it should be clear that students’ privacy was not compromised (i.e., that the sender had legitimate access to their contact information)
- the invitation should subtly convey that the sender was supportive of students even beyond the study

Accordingly, the email invitation came from a UBC address on letterhead from Student Development & Services (SD&S), which is a directorate overseeing several central units serving students. SD&S is the most senior office directly related to the study and involved in policy application, for credibility. SD&S has a positive or neutral connotation for most students at UBC Vancouver. Students expect SD&S will have access to their contact information since they
receive email frequently from SD&S units. Using SD&S letterhead subtly conveyed that this office was supportive of students and interested in their success.

In addition to heeding tips from the cultural informant, the researcher sent messages from a UBC email address students were likely to respond to (reach10@students.ubc.ca) while ensuring that bad addresses (in the form of bounce-backs) could be tracked. The most official UBC email address is message@ubc.ca, but students said they did not read messages from the university, and that account does not capture bounce-backs. It was important to avoid drawing attention to my presence, as my perceived power over students might have affected authenticity of responses. For this reason a UBC email address was used but not my work email; for follow-up correspondence (e.g., responding to those with questions about the study), I used a UBC email address in my maiden name, which was not recognizable to students.

Random selection provided an important safeguard against selection bias. The study design sought to preserve randomness by limiting mitigating factors such as bad addresses, interest in participating, or likelihood to respond quickly. Bad addresses (i.e., potential participants who had multiple email bounce-backs) were kept to a minimum by phoning students whose email addresses bounced back. Bias from interest in participating was mitigated by inviting only selected students and not advertising the study openly. Bias from likelihood to respond quickly was mitigated by persistent recruitment techniques described below. However, if sufficient numbers did not respond for a particular group, I invited up to the full population of international students or up to 100 Canadians who matched the characteristics of that group (e.g., fourth-year Canadians).

One participant did hear about the session from a friend and was not on the invited list. This was not apparent until after the session. As this participant’s contributions were consistent
with and integral to the group dialogue, and as her selection characteristics (residency / gender / faculty) did not negatively impact the group’s makeup, her comments were included in the results.

I expected that students would not respond to email the first time and that reminders and substitutions would be necessary. Persistent non-responders, bad addresses, and refusals were replaced by the next student in the random list that fit their demographic (e.g., female first-year Japanese student in Sauder living in residence). Bounce-backs were phoned and an invitation sent to their new email address if possible. Invitees were given a deadline for response. Non-responders were sent up to five reminder emails in English; if they still did not respond and their group was undersubscribed, they were phoned in English, then emailed with a subject line in their home language, then phoned in their home language. To encourage participation, responders were sent a confirmation email plus one to two reminder emails. In one group, students were able to recite the recruitment email address by heart as they had received so many messages from it. Some students indicated that they attended only because they had received so many invitations.

Incentives were provided to encourage focus group attendance, as low attendance has been a problem with student focus groups in the past. Incentives offset the inconvenience, time, and effort to attend the focus group; enticed students to follow through on the commitment to attend without inappropriately swaying their decision to accept the invitation; and were consistent with the purpose of the study (e.g., support student learning). Gift certificates to the UBC Bookstore were offered as incentives, with higher dollar values and food offered to populations with persistent under-attendance. In the end, the most challenging groups to recruit were offered a full meal, a gift certificate for each participant, and a prize draw for an additional
gift certificate. No additional incentive was offered for interview participation, as interviews were seen as extensions of the focus groups; only students who felt they had more to say needed to volunteer.

3.2.6 Response. Between 6% and 24% of the invited sample attended each group, with between 25% and 100% of attendees recruited in the first round of invitations (see appendix). Participants were roughly proportional by residence and gender, with a slight overrepresentation of females. Students from Canada and Hong Kong were the least likely to respond to the invitation and required multiple emails, phone calls in home and host languages, and multiple incentives. By contrast, students from China, Korea, and Taiwan were quick to respond positively to the invitation, and no repeat groups were needed. See Table 3.3 for response rates by year/citizenship subpopulations.

Table 3.3 Number and percentage of participants by focus group, citizenship, year, and initial response rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Focus Group Date</th>
<th>Attendees</th>
<th>Initial Response*</th>
<th>Expanded Pool†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Invited</td>
<td>Attended</td>
<td>Invited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4-Mar</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30-Mar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9-Apr</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5-Mar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16-Mar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1-Apr</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2-Mar</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9-Mar</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Focus Group Date</td>
<td>Attendees</td>
<td>Initial Response*</td>
<td>Expanded Pool†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Invited</td>
<td>Attended</td>
<td>Invited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26-Feb</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10-Mar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13-Mar</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25-Feb</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12-Mar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6-Mar</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26-Feb</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3-Mar</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27-Feb</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11-Mar</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Initial Response—Attendees were among the 24 participants based on proportional representation within the subpopulation.

†Expanded Pool—Attendees were not among the 24 but were invited when the full subpopulation was invited (exception: Canada: first random 100 were invited for each year).

### 3.2.7 Conducting focus groups.

Eighteen focus groups were held in February, March, and April 2009, with a total of 77 participants. See Table 3.4 for the number of participants by citizenship, year, and percentage of the invited population.
### Table 3.4 Number of participants by citizenship, year, and percentage of invited population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Total Year 1 Population of this Citizenship</th>
<th>Year 4</th>
<th>Total Year 4 Population of this Citizenship</th>
<th>Percentage of Population*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>100†</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100†</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>34</strong></td>
<td><strong>n/a</strong></td>
<td><strong>43</strong></td>
<td><strong>n/a</strong></td>
<td><strong>n/a</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentage of all 2008/09 registered UBCV international students in this year and citizenship, Canada excepted.

†Only 100 Canadian students were invited for each year level.

During the focus groups, the facilitators informed participants of the nature of the study, assured them of the confidentiality and anonymity of their data, and required participants to sign waivers to show consent (see appendix for copy of participant waiver form.)

The focus groups were recorded, as recommended in the focus group literature. According to Kreuger and Casey (2009), “The audio recording indicates that the researchers are carefully and respectfully listening to what is being said” (p. 96). Audio- and videotaping enhances accuracy of transcription and translation due to complexity of group interaction (e.g., clarifying to whom a student was pointing when she said, “I agree with him”). The recordings were not intended to be used for any other purpose and were handled in accordance with institutional ethics requirements. In case tapes failed, a home-language student note-taker was...
hired for each focus group, and the facilitators also took notes during each session. In two
groups, one or both recordings failed, so note-taking proved invaluable.

In each group, facilitators asked participants to complete NSSE questions 1, 8, and 10
and in addition to rate each completed item on its importance to their success as a UBC student. I
created the importance scale because I wanted to know if there was a difference between
students’ participation in an activity and their perception of its value to them. Facilitators asked
participants to rate each item using a 4-item scale of very important, important, not important or
definitely not important. Although this was an informal scale, participants demonstrated its
usefulness by using all four ratings in turn. Questions were asked about NSSE in general;
specific NSSE questions and the behaviours they describe, which includes both student
behaviours and institutional practices; and what positive outcomes a home-country student was
achieving at a home university and at UBC. Students were also asked number of omnibus
questions: What is difficult or disappointing about your life at UBC? What is going well in your
life at UBC? What can UBC do to help you? How can UBC provide a more supportive campus
environment for you? and What is the most important thing that was said here today? The latter
question was answered by each participant in turn at the close of each focus group.

No participants responded to the offer for an individual follow-up interview, which I take
to indicate satisfaction with the opportunity to express their perspectives during the focus group.
Student facilitators, who also functioned as cultural informants, indicated that a high level of
authenticity was achieved in every group, hence they were not surprised that no students opted to
be interviewed. On several occasions, the groups had to be asked to leave the space half an hour
after the focus group ended, as they were still engaged in lively discussion. One group stood in
the hallway and formed a Facebook group on the spot so they could stay in touch. Students in
another group commented that they had not talked with other students from their country about their experiences at UBC and expressed surprise at how meaningful it had been for them. The most commonly occurring response to the closing question, “Of all the things that were said here, what do you think was the most important?” was the research study itself. Students seemed to be surprised and pleased (with two exceptions noted below) that the university had created the opportunity for them to meet, reflect, and provide feedback to improve the experiences of international students. In light of these indicators, the lack of interview participation could be interpreted as further validation of the findings from the focus groups.

In a few particular instances, the research assistants and I found it challenging to determine whether participants were expressing their perspectives authentically. One participant spoke rarely despite repeated invitations from the facilitator. This participant presented as someone unlikely to speak in social settings in general; the research assistant invited her privately to an interview but the participant seemed uninterested in pursuing the topic. One respondent expressed hostility toward the researchers and the study; she was still highly vocal about her perspectives and participated actively in the discussion, despite her disagreement with the premise of the study. In one group of Japanese students, comments frequently were greeted by the group by nodding in unison and verbal agreement. I asked the research assistant to review the video- and audiotapes again and differentiate in the transcript which comments were genuinely supported by the group and which were affirmed only out of social convention. After careful review, the student facilitator determined that nearly every instance of the public affirmation also signaled individual agreement.

3.2.8 Transcription and translation. As the focus groups concluded, the data were recorded and stored to ensure accuracy and security. Research assistants created the transcripts through
multiple checking against the audio and video tapes to ensure accuracy. Transcripts were to provide a clear understanding of the participants’ utterances without the distraction of incidental and non-substantive words or audible utterances. For example, if a participant said, “So, like, um, the … not sure… what was your question?” it might be transcribed as, “So, not sure… what was your question?” In addition, relevant non-verbal actions were noted in square brackets, such as “[nods]” and “[turning to Ian]”. It was very important for application of the study that the translation be accessible to the audience. As far as possible, students’ utterance could be captured with the equivalent fluency in English and formality register as they employed in the home language.

The role of the research assistants as expert informants is critical to highlight. Although I was in the room, no one was better positioned to understand and interpret what was said and not said in each focus group than the research assistant. In each case they had the experience of being a student at a similar level of study on the same campus and shared a similar cultural and linguistic background to the participants. They were able to capture nuances of language, including slang, which would have eluded researchers of a different generation, culture, or campus experience. Through the audio and video tapes, it was possible for them to relive the group discussion many times and be absolutely sure they had captured the students’ utterances in the transcript and the translation. The positionality of the research assistants was key to ensuring the accuracy of the transcripts and subsequent translations.

After the research assistants and I had reached agreement about the translations, these were considered to be drafts. The translations were not ready for analysis until approved by certified translators. One translator was found in the researcher’s department, which increased the likelihood of an accurate and contextual translation as the translator had professional
expertise in working with the population under study. The other translators were secured through a local translation service. In the end, the certified translators made no more than a dozen corrections to each translation, and all of the changes were minor points of grammar. This further validated the choice to have the research assistants conduct the initial translation, as there were no substantive differences between their draft translations and the final translations from the certified translators. Although professional translation might have resulted in more precise translations, the value of the research assistants’ cultural informant contributions was a more important consideration.

3.2.9 Coding the data. For this study, I decided to create and manage the coding process by hand. This allowed for a thoughtful, iterative process of reviewing the data, considering possible codes, testing the coding schemes against the data, and revising the codes, all with a close feel for the data. Throughout the coding process I watched for the frequency of the data; the distribution of the data across individuals, groups, citizenships, and year levels; and the significance of the data in terms of stated importance, unsolicited mention, and strength of emphasis placed on the topic by the participants.

The first step was to read over all of the transcripts in one sitting to gain a feel for the material as a whole. After such painstaking editing of the transcripts and translations, and after iterative revisions of the same in collaboration with the research assistants and certified translators, I was already very well acquainted with the data. On the second reading through the data set as a whole, I took notes on each transcript in a notebook and began to note observations of patterns within each group. This allowed for initial impressions and observations about patterns based on citizenship. Many of the national cultural patterns from the sensitizing
framework were played out at first blush within the groups, but variations and inconsistencies were already apparent.

It was then important to start identifying specific codes which would be used in the first analysis. I created a separate notebook to identify initial codes. In this second notebook I began to write analytical notes to answer questions of “So what?” and “Then what?” It became clear that structural codes were needed (Saldaña, 2012) to identify responses to each focus group question, such as PRESENT for answers to the question, “Let’s look at item XX. What is like for you to make a presentation in class? What makes this harder or easier to do? How important is it for your success here at UBC?”

Simultaneous coding (Saldaña, 2012) became a key approach to understanding the data. The responses to each omnibus question were grouped into descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2012). Through this process, broader themes began to emerge, such as SOCIALNT for references to social networks, which emerged despite that fact that we did not ask about social life per se. Finally, a third pass through the data allowed for the updating of all coding, with further analytical memos to capture impressions and ideas.

At this point the data, which by now had been entered into Excel with room for five simultaneous codes per utterance, were sorted electronically using a macro, such that all data related to each code-subcode pairing were sorted into one section. Because the coding process had been sufficiently thorough, little adjustment was made to the coding system while writing the findings section.

3.2.10 Types of responses: Framing versus factors. During coding, I was struck by the distinction between ways students perceive or frame the NSSE behaviour at issue and factors
that enable or constrain the students’ participation in it. The organizing framework of framing and factors continues in the remainder of the thesis.

Many of the focus group questions focused on specific NSSE items and the behaviours they describe. This section explains the broad approach that was used to develop the focus group questions about specific NSSE items and behaviours and the categories of responses that emerged when analyzing the data.

An interesting pattern emerged in the focus group questions as they were refined in conversation with the research assistants and then piloted with students. My original questions about NSSE items and behaviours were variations on “What do you think about [insert behaviour here]?” Students seemed puzzled by the questions, which failed to elicit fruitful conversation. After some reflection, I realized I wanted to know what it was like for them to do the behaviours, how they thought and felt about the behaviours, and what made it more or less likely that they would engage in the behaviours. Working in translation, the research assistants and I experimented with different approaches, such as, “If you were describing the behaviour to a younger cousin who was coming to UBC, what would you say?” In the end, the questions that produced the most evocative comments were these:

- “How important is [insert behaviour here] to your success at UBC?”
- “What is it like for you to do [insert behaviour here]?”
- “What makes this [insert behaviour here] harder or easier to do?”

These became the focus group questions for the NSSE items and behaviours. Often in describing the importance of a certain behaviour, students contrasted their importance rating with the frequency score they had given the item on the survey, so this question in some cases elicited importance as well as frequency.
When analyzing participants’ responses to specific NSSE items and the related behaviours, I noticed a particular pattern of responses. Even in groups where we did not ask all of the questions, the answers seemed to fall into one of three categories:

- Does the behavior happen and how important is it? (code: HAPPENS)
- What is the behaviour like to do? (code: FRAMING)
- What enables or constrains the behaviour? (code: FACTORS)

In the end, the analysis of how often students engage in a behaviour proved less fruitful because these were largely binary data (yes / no), making them best suited for counting purposes. Also, there were not enough responses across the groups and the behaviours to produce complete counts. Focus group responses are generally poor sources of complete numerical data sets, in that not every participant answers every question. Given the research question, which focuses on students’ perceptions rather than their behaviours, I decided to focus on FRAMING and FACTORS.

FRAMING refers to students’ perceptions of the item or behaviour. For example, Miu framed staff members as “elders” (Taiwan, year 4). From this description, we gain a rich understanding of the student’s perceived positionality in their relational context with staff members and can guess at some of the expectations the student might have when relating to staff members. This way of framing staff members also helps us understand other students’ expressions of disappointment when describing their interactions with staff members; through the lens of “elder,” we are alert to the possibility that staff members did not fulfill the disappointed students’ expectations of attentiveness, wisdom, guidance, and care.

FACTORS constitute the elements that enable or constrain the item or behaviour. Factors is a critical way of looking at the data because it takes us beyond the current state and points at a
directional future. Student engagement theory is normative; in the main, more engagement leads to better student outcomes. Without knowing what enables or constrains the item or behaviour, we are left without insight into how to move toward increased engagement and with it improved student outcomes. The factors are a combination of human and contextual actors, but arguably all can be manipulated in service of greater engagement. Knowing what they are and how they interact with student perceptions allows us to model student engagement not only descriptively but also prescriptively.

A given factor has the potential to both enable and constrain. Simply knowing that students commented on class size, for instance, tells us little about the extent to which class size is a barrier versus a help. However, the participants were generally in agreement about when each factor enabled and when it constrained behaviour. This acted as confirmation of the basic assumption of the study: international students’ perceptions of NSSE behaviours are distinctive and problematic compared to Canadian students.

These two elements, FRAMING and FACTORS, form the organizational approach in Chapters 5 and 6, which contain the findings related to NSSE items and behaviours.

During open coding, consideration was given to frequency of mention, specificity of detail, intensity of emotion, and extensiveness across participants, countries / regions, and years (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The student research assistants contributed to the identification of relevant themes and robustness of each theme. Data were held in secure on-campus locations according to best practices. The study was conducted in a way that met or exceeded institutional standards for ethical practice in research, and ethical clearance was given by the institutional review board.
3.3 Positionality of the Researcher

In order to limit bias, it is important that I acknowledge my positionality as the researcher. First, my cultural orientation is primarily U.S., despite spending half my life in anglophone Canada. My cultural lens differs from those of the participating international students. Despite years of study into Asian cultural patterns and norms, my understanding is academic. There may also be generational biases, since the participants were half my age. More subtly, generational differences likely exist between my knowledge of traditional Chinese, Japanese, or Korean culture and the ways those cultural norms play out among young people today. My experiences abroad have been extensive but always temporary; it is hard for me to relate to global nomads whose experiences transcend essentialist notions of home and host country, as was the case for some of the participants. I can apply my technical understanding of cultural norms to students’ comments, but I will never fully understand “where they are coming from.” I do not walk in their shoes. For this reason cultural informants played a particularly vital role in this study. These cultural informants included undergraduate research assistants from students’ home cultures, staff from the students’ home cultures, and students who participated in the pilot focus groups.

Second, I have long been a student of culture and have spent many years studying and working abroad. I have had profound experiences of culture clashes, painful cultural transitions, and life-changing moments of insights into the role of culture in my own life and the lives of students which whom I have interacted. As such I have a pronounced bias to view behaviour and perception as deeply culture based; I do not share the view that our differences can be accounted for entirely as individual expressions of free will. This assumption of the study became apparent when Yasmine, a first year student, became hostile to the premise of the study (but highly verbal)
and said, “I think it depends on the person’s personality so I don’t like judging people ‘just because they’re Japanese.’”

Third, as a student affairs administrator, I think programmatically. I was tempted to discount findings that cannot be accommodated by designing a program or service. I was tempted to be defensive toward student criticism of the programs in which I am invested. I found it hard to take seriously student requests for programs and services the university already provides. However, I recognized my obligation to hear past the surface suggestions for “more programs” and listen more mindfully to what students were really saying. Not every issue can be solved by creating a new program. Life is more complex than that; students’ experiences are more complex than that.

Despite these limitations, my role as an international educator in higher education created a moral imperative to undertake this study and to investigate the role of culture on international students’ engagement with their institution, specifically their perceptions of the NSSE survey and of NSSE behaviours. In considering my moral obligation to investigate my practice in this way, I take encouragement from Richard Keeling (2014):

Is it morally and ethically acceptable for institutions to assume that the possibility of responsive, empathic relationships between individual members of the faculty or staff and students relieves them of any human obligation to students as individuals or as a community? The assumptions and consequences of such commitments as “engaged learning” and “student success” demand that the answer is “no.” No college or university can at once claim to value and act according to principles of engagement and student success while neglecting students as whole human persons and without accepting certain obligations and accountability in relation to those persons. (p. 143)
If the fundamental approach to student services work in North America is a poor match for the large number of international students who attend North American institutions, and if the retention and student learning of international students is negatively impacted as a result, students should have an opportunity to voice their perspectives and administrators and policymakers should have an opportunity to hear them.

3.4 Reliability

One of the key concerns of the researcher is quality or “goodness” of the research (Scaife, 2004, p. 65). By what commonly agreed-on criteria will the research be judged? If over dinner one Sunday I ask my family about their political views and then publish my findings, few will consider this to be “good” research. Research that is not credible to its audience is rarely worth the effort. Two ways that quality can be measured are reliability and validity.

Let us start with reliability. As Hammersley (1987) has pointed out, there is great variation in how the term reliability has been used in the literature. However, repetition and consistency are common themes, as in this definition by Wellington: “the extent to which a test, a method or a tool gives consistent results across a range of settings, and if used by a range of researchers” (quoted in Scaife, 2004, pp. 65–66). Following Wellington, Scaife, and others, the focus of reliability is the data-gathering process rather than the data itself (Scaife, 2004). In qualitative research, reliability is not merely replicability. Reliability also includes the reduction of unexplained and unrelated variables which may affect the results, such that the findings relate more to the variables than to the topic of the study. According to Kirk and Miller, “reliability is the degree to which the finding is independent of accidental circumstances of the research” (1986, p. 20). For instance, if the focus group facilitator unintentionally attended to only positive
comments and ignored critical comments, the findings would likely be skewed toward the positive and the reliability of the data-collection method would be compromised.

Here, then, are the key threats to reliability and how the study addressed them. The purpose of this study was to ascertain perceptions of certain international undergraduate students at a particular university campus toward behaviours identified in NSSE. To safeguard reliability, I followed standard protocols for focus group and interview research as put forward in the educational research literature (Kreuger & Casey, 2009). I documented each step taken in the study to ensure that others pursuing similar studies could replicate this study in different contexts.

Stratified random sampling strengthens reliability of the study as it can be replicated by future researchers, reduces self-selection bias, and increases the likelihood that the views of the sample will represent the views of the target population. All members of the population were pulled from the university’s student database. Within the population, two groups were identified: students in the first year of their academic program and students in the fourth year. Within each group, students were selected randomly and invited by email to participate in the study. Multiple contacts were made to non-responders to encourage participation. For each student who declined, the next randomly selected student within their subgroup was invited to participate. In this way self-selection bias was kept to a minimum. Cluster, convenience, or snowball sampling were not used, as any of these might skew the data to one particular subset of students and might therefore weaken the reliability of the study.

For purposes of reliability, the study followed standard focus group and interview protocols, including:

- crafting questions that were free from bias,
• structuring the schedule of questions to encourage authentic responses on the part of participants,
• creating a comfortable setting to encourage participants to be forthcoming,
• carefully selecting and training the facilitators,
• ensuring that participants had a chance to give informed consent,
• obtaining permission for audiotaping and note-taking,
• assuring participants of the voluntary nature of the study, and
• facilitating the focus groups in a non-judgmental, non-leading manner.

A qualitative study is only reliable if the results are accurately recorded. For this reason, all focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed. Transcribing all of the audio tapes was one way to safeguard that certain items or themes were not overlooked in the coding process. Translation was double-checked by a third party (certified translators) to ensure accuracy. Third-party verification promotes reliability of translation.

One of the greatest threats to reliability in the study was the researcher’s role as an outsider in relation to the population. Although I have been an international student in Canada and elsewhere, that was many years ago. Although I have made some study of Chinese cultural patterns, I am only a novice. I have no knowledge of the home languages used in the study, aside from English. I am an authority figure representing the host university and am a member of the host culture. My facilitation of the international student focus groups might have reduced the authenticity of responses, as participants might have been concerned about giving offence to a representative of their host university. To address this concern, undergraduate student home-culture facilitators conducted the international student focus groups and were prepared to conduct follow-up interviews.
3.5 Validity

Recognizing the contextual nature of knowledge and perception, the focus of the study was not primarily to produce generalizable findings but rather to ensure that the particular slice of life under scrutiny was accurately portrayed and that the claims I made about it were substantiated in the data. This was of the understanding of validity behind the study. Kirk and Miller’s shorthand definition of validity is “the degree to which the finding is interpreted in the correct way” (1986, p. 20). Wellington puts it more clearly: “Validity refers to the degree to which a method, a test or a research tool actually measures what it is supposed to measure” (quoted in Scaife, 2004, p. 68). In this sense it was not the data-collection method itself which was the focus of validity, but the relationship between the claim and the result of a data-gathering method (Scaife, 2004). It is legitimate to study a sample of one, but validity would be questionable if such a study claimed broad generalizability for its findings. Conversely, a claim may be valid but might not be substantiated by the particular findings at hand.

What, then, were the threats to validity and how did this study address them? Focus groups and interviews were chosen as the methods most likely to produce valid results (i.e., an accurate recording of participants’ perspectives on the NSSE behaviours). It seems reasonable to believe that focus groups and interviews in their home language facilitated by a member of their home culture would produce more authentic responses than focus groups in the host language facilitated by a member of the host culture. This was important because meaning and language are closely interconnected, such that certain “native” ideas may be lost in translation. In addition, members of societies with a strong emphasis on harmony and a strong distinction between in- and out-groups are likely to modify answers to avoid offending a host. This might
apply to people from countries that rate low on the individualism index (IDV). These limits to validity were addressed by using students’ home language and a home-culture facilitators.

Furthermore, this approach was designed to create a culturally safe space and encourage students to attend to their commonalities, which include their cultural background. Claims about the cultural relevance of participants’ perspectives have greater validity if the method encourages culture-based reflection on the part of participants.

Using a stratified random sample increased the validity of claims that speak more broadly to the population of international undergraduates on the campus studied.

Focus groups were administered in such a way as to increase the chances that findings were accurate representations of participants’ perspectives. Threats to validity could include bias in the selection of leading questions; awkward ordering of questions; an uncomfortable, imposing, or distracting setting; selection of a facilitator who is seen by participants as unapproachable or unable to manage the conversation; coercion to participate or continue participation; unauthorized recording of the sessions; and facilitation that was judgmental or leading. To address these concerns, the focus group procedure was piloted with a similar group of students to check for suitability of questions and their order as well as participant comfort with the setting. Facilitators were selected who were not in a marked power imbalance with the students (e.g., not an older student in consideration of participants from countries that rate high on the power distance index [PDI], not a faculty member as the students might be unduly intimidated, not a well-known member of the university staff as this might discourage confidential utterances). The facilitators were trained in standard qualitative research protocols, and participants were informed in advance and during the session of the nature of the study, the intended use of findings, the anonymity and confidentiality they were afforded and the voluntary
nature of their participation, and they were invited to sign a waiver indicating informed consent. Participants were asked whether they agreed to audiotaping and note-taking during the session; and the pilot focus groups were used by facilitators to rehearse non-leading and non-judgmental facilitation.

The timing of the focus groups was crucial to the validity of the research claims. Many students leave campus for summer (May to August), so a summer sample would have limited representation. New students do not necessarily have enough experience with their new environment to have useful observations in September and October, and such an early date would make it difficult to identify the sample, administer the pilot, and make any adjustments to the research design. mid- to late-December and mid- to late-April are extremely busy time for most undergraduates, so students would likely fail to respond, fail to attend if they had responded, or resent the time away from studies if they did attend.

The National Survey of Student Engagement is administered in February and March. An understanding of students’ perspectives on NSSE at the same time of year as it is administered is critical. This does not allow much time for transcription, translation, and coding before undergraduate research assistants are unavailable during the summer. For these reasons, data were collected from late February to early April. This allowed for the most accurate representation of perspectives relative to the administration dates of NSSE, the most representative sample, the greatest likelihood of attendance by those selected, and perspectives least clouded by exhaustion or exam stress.

The validity of findings is strengthened by paying particular attention to prior research claims. This study was designed to ascertain the perceptions of certain NSSE behaviours of particular groups of students. However, NSSE behaviours were identified based on student

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outcomes (GPA, persistence to second year or graduation, and student-reported satisfaction), not on student opinions. NSSE researchers do not claim that students value these behaviours or these outcomes. So to strengthen the validity of the findings, the research design and resultant claims needed to recognize the particular kind of data being collected. The study would not test the NSSE hypotheses but aimed to add a richer understanding of the experiences of certain students related to the NSSE behaviours. Depending on findings, future studies might take up the challenge of testing NSSE hypotheses (i.e., that students who engage in these behaviours were more likely to have higher GPAs, retention, and satisfaction) with this particular population.

As with the classic story of the blind men examining an elephant, I assumed that these findings would indicate only a piece of a larger whole (Kirk & Miller, 1986). The challenge was to situate the findings within the broader range of research and to ensure that any claims were also appropriately situated. This was particularly important for the data analysis. One way to strengthen validity was to ensure that student perceptions, which might be culturally contextual, were clearly explained. This involved careful transcription, translation, and third-party verification of translations.

In terms of validity, it is both a blessing and a curse to be an outsider to the cultural context of the students. Rapaille (2007) described this as he attempted to identify the primal emotional associations or “culture code” members of a society have for an object or idea. As a perpetual outsider, he was able to ask, for instance, how the participants would explain coffee and whether coffee might be something you wear. Sometimes the “stranger” can most clearly see what those who are members of the culture take for granted. This point was clearly made by Hammersley and Atkinson in 2007, citing Schutz from an earlier work.
Schutz argues that by virtue of being forced to come to understand a culture in this way [as an immigrant], the stranger acquires a certain objectivity not normally available to culture members. The latter live inside the culture, and tend to see it as simply a reflection of ‘how the world is.” They are often not conscious of the fundamental presuppositions that shape their vision, many of which are distinctive to their own culture. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 9)

3.6 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter outlined the methodology of the study, including purpose, design considerations, procedures, positionality of the researcher, reliability and validity. In this section I will provide a summary of the chapter and preview the chapters that follow.

The purpose of this study was to provide recommendations for practice to practitioners and administrators as to how international undergraduate students interpret select items from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and perceive select behaviours identified in NSSE, which includes both student behaviours and institutional practices. I first reviewed existing factor analyses from the institution’s NSSE 2008 results comparing international and domestic student responses. Based on those institutional findings, and with attention to Hofstede’s dimensions of cultural difference, working with the host institution and my doctoral committee, and in collaboration with undergraduate research assistants, I constructed a qualitative study to probe more deeply into international students’ interpretations and perceptions. In autumn 2008, I selected, hired, trained and supervised five undergraduate research assistants. Between February and April 2009, I and the research assistants facilitated 18 focus groups with 77 participants. Following recommendations by Zhao, Kuh and Carini (2005), this study considered perspectives of Asian students clustered by subgroup on a single campus.
This study also extended the NSSE validation protocols for focus groups and cognitive interviews by asking participants to complete part of the NSSE instrument and then asking their interpretations and perceptions of the items and the behaviours they describe.

This study was unique as it employed focus groups grouped by single-year and single-country with home-culture facilitators in home language. For example, one group included only first-year students from Taiwan, facilitated by an undergraduate research assistant also from Taiwan. The use of single-country groupings and home language were designed to elicit the cultural connections group members had in common, reduce any reluctance to reference home culture, and encourage them to share ideas that might not translate easily for cultural outsiders. Research assistants added tremendously to the study as cultural informants, schedulers, recruiters, facilitators, transcriptionists, and translators. Proofreading by certified translators confirmed that the research assistants’ translations were extremely accurate, requiring no more than a dozen minor edits per 90-minute transcript.

Participants were selected through a stratified random sample based on self-declared citizenship, year in program, faculty, self-declared gender, and status in university residence (resident or commuter). Citizenship was used as a proxy for cultural affiliation as we were interested to know to what extent their cultural background might affect their perceptions of select NSSE behaviours. Year in program was a proxy for new-to-UBC as the study deliberately excluded acculturation, length of time in Canada, or familiarity with Canadian educational practices.

As a researcher, I was gratified to see several indicators that the focus groups had been successful. First, several groups lingered in the room long after the focus group ended, in one case starting a Facebook group on the spot, in another commenting they had never talked with
people from their home country and were interested to stay in touch. Second, the invitation to a follow up interview which was made at the end of each focus group was never taken up. From the demeanor of the group members, according to the research assistants, participants seemed satisfied that their viewpoints had been heard. Third, in response to the final question about what was the most important thing each person thought was said in the focus group, the clear majority of responses was that this study itself was the most important thing, and that it mattered that the university ask international students their perspectives and act on the information conveyed.

Focus groups were conducted according to best practices in the social sciences, and data were coded by hand using a mix of structural and descriptive codes. This study was conducted in accordance with the Tri Council’s Guidelines of Ethical Practice and ethics approval was obtained for this study.
Chapter 4.

Examining NSSE as a Survey

This chapter presents the context and findings of students’ perceptions of the National Survey of Student Engagement itself. This chapter addresses the first part of the first research question:

1. How do UBC international undergraduate students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan interpret select NSSE questions . . . ? How do these interpretations and perceptions compare to those of Canadian undergraduate students?

The chapter first addresses the UBC 2008 NSSE findings which pre-dated and informed the study. Findings of this study related to NSSE as a survey fell into three areas:

- students’ general impression of the survey,
- their perceptions of the response options, and
- their interpretations of the actual meaning of the survey items.

The remaining findings are presented in subsequent chapters.

4.1 What Was Learned From UBC 2008 NSSE Results

Material for the following section came from notes from meetings and personal correspondence with the director of the UBC Office for Planning and Institutional Research (PAIR) between 2007 and 2014.

In spring of 2008, 244 international students (ISI) and 2338 non-international students at UBC completed the NSSE 2008 English version online. ISI is a derived variable based on student records that includes, generally speaking, students who are neither Canadian citizens nor
permanent residents of Canada and were registered in a bachelor’s program which is open to students applying directly from high school (*direct entry*). All registered undergraduate students in first- or fourth-year standing in a degree program at the university were invited to participate, yielding an overall response rate of 27%. NSSE researchers recommend inviting a random sample of first- and fourth-year students. However, UBC researchers were particularly interested in understanding experiences of international and commuter students. A census of all first- and fourth-year students was used to provide sample sizes sufficiently large for comparison.

PAIR researchers compared demographic characteristics and responses from NSSE 2008 using factor analysis. Results were compared based on ISI/non-ISI, language first learned as a child and still understood, living on or off campus, self-declared ethno-racial category, gender and year level (first or fourth). PAIR compared responses across five benchmarks and 19 scales and subscales.

In terms of benchmarks, only student-faculty interaction showed a statistically significant difference between ISI and non-ISI, controlling for differences in other variables. ISI students reported significantly higher levels of student-faculty interaction (*p*<.05). See Table 4.1 for items that roll up to this benchmark.

**Table 4.1 NSSE 2008 items included in Student-Faculty Interaction benchmark**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. n.</td>
<td>Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. o.</td>
<td>Talked about career plans with a <strong>faculty member</strong> or advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. p.</td>
<td>Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with <strong>faculty members outside of class</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. q.</td>
<td>Received prompt written or oral feedback from <strong>faculty</strong> on your academic performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. s.</td>
<td>Worked with <strong>faculty members</strong> on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7. Which of the following have you done or do you plan to do before you graduate from your institution? (Done, Plan to do, Do not plan to do, Have not decided)

|   | d. Work on a research project with a faculty member outside of course or program requirements |

Note: Bolded items indicate wording international students misinterpreted during the focus groups.

The other four benchmarks showed non-significant differences:

- Active and Collaborative Learning,
- Level of Academic Challenge,
- Enriched Educational Experiences, and
- Supportive Campus Environment.

Results on three scales showed statistically significant results between ISI and non-ISI students. See Table 4.2 for items that rolled up to these three scales. *Diversity* focuses on contact among students from different backgrounds. *Use of Technology* measures students’ use of electronic media for communication related to an assignment or with an instructor. *Out of Class Interactions with Faculty* captures activities, research, and career conversions with faculty members outside of course or program requirements. ISI students reported significantly lower *diversity scores* (p=0.029), significantly lower *use of technology* (p=0.031), and significantly higher *out-of-class interaction with faculty* (p=0.028) than non-ISI students.

**Table 4.2 NSSE 2008 items included in selected scales**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diversity</th>
<th>Had <strong>serious conversations</strong> with <strong>students</strong> of a different race or ethnicity than your own</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Had <strong>serious conversations</strong> with <strong>students</strong> who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encouraging contact among <strong>students</strong> from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Technology</td>
<td>Used an electronic medium (listserv, chat group, Internet, instant messaging, etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Used e-mail to communicate with an instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-Class Interactions with Faculty</td>
<td>Talked about career plans with a <strong>faculty member</strong> or advisor</td>
</tr>
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<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Worked with <strong>faculty members</strong> on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work on a research project with a <strong>faculty member</strong> outside of course or program requirements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** **Bolded items** indicate wording international students misinterpreted during the focus groups.

Institutional researchers were surprised that international students, who do not have a reputation for engaging professors easily, would report higher numbers of interactions with professors in general and out-of-class specifically. They were surprised that international students, most of whose contacts would likely be with people different than themselves, would score lower on diversity. And they were further surprised to see no significant differences regarding *active and collaborative learning*, a stereotypical “pain point” for international students, and *supportive campus environment*, which would seem important for a population known for its unique “needs” for support. These unexpected results informed the questions and areas of exploration for the focus groups in this study.

International students’ reportedly lower use of technology was not of particular interest to institutional sponsors at the time, as the NSSE items touched on only a few elements of the exponential increase in technology applications students faced. Use of technology was already being considered elsewhere in the institution for its impacts on student wellbeing and student communications. For these reasons the significant difference in use of technology as reported in NSSE 2008 was not included in this study.

At the same time, institutional sponsors were surprised to see no statistically significant differences on benchmarks related to active and collaborative learning and supportive campus environment. Active and collaborative learning activities were stereotypically those which instructors and international students would bemoan as impenetrable to international students,
and a supportive environment was thought to be of particular importance to newcomers. The PAIR analysis showed statistical differences and surprising similarity where difference was expected, but institutional researchers did not know whether the differences or the similarities were most important. For this reason, questions were added to the focus group script to explore active and collaborative learning and supportive campus environment concepts more deeply.

4.2 What Students Told Us About NSSE

The findings in this section relate to students’ responses to the focus group question: “First, what is your impression of the survey so far?”

4.2.1 Impressions: International participants. International participants’ first impressions of the survey were that the instrument was unremarkable. The most common response for international participants was silence. Most other focus group questions elicited almost immediate responses, so the lack of comment to this question was notable. If students did comment, their most common response was that the survey was “general,” “ordinary,” or otherwise similar to other surveys they have completed. This latter response was somewhat more common for Taiwanese students. No international student indicated that their impression of the survey was a barrier to giving authentic responses. This focus group excerpt is an example of the common reaction to the question posed above.

Miu-FAC: It’s a very ordinary survey.

Miu-FAC: There’s nothing special, it’s pretty similar to other surveys, like the ones we get from the school.—Taiwan, year 4
Since students’ demographic characteristics may be relevant to understanding their comments, I have displayed each student’s gender, faculty and residence status immediately following their name in cases where a transcript format is used. For example, we see that at the time of the study Miu (a self-selected pseudonym) was a female student (F) in the Faculty of Arts (A) who commuted (C) to the university rather than residing in a university student residence. In transcript excerpts where there is no such three-letter label, the speaker was a member of the research team. Following each transcript excerpt is the name of the home country and year (1 or 4) of that focus group participant at the time of the study.

A cluster of comments indicated the survey inaccurately focused on some and not on other elements of student life. Participants felt opportunities to give detailed answers about social groups and peer programs were lacking, there was an overemphasis on academics and there were not enough specific questions about satisfaction with facilities. International participants who commented seemed to say there is more to student life than academics and that the survey should reflect that.

4.2.2 Impressions: Canadian participants. Canadian students’ first impressions of the survey were the same as for international students but more so: over half of the comments about their impression of the survey indicated that it was not remarkable.

Michelle: So if you’re talking to someone who has gotten the email saying they should fill it [NSSE] out but they haven’t decided whether they should do it, what would you tell them? . . .

Georgia-FSR: I’d encourage them, because, it’s four minutes of their time, nothing bad is going to come, it’s going to finally help UBC make university what they probably hope
it’s—what their opinion of it was before they got here. It’s just going to keep making UBC better for future students, so you might as well take what you have and what you’ve learned for future generations, help them out.—Canada, year 1

Canadians commented less on the aspects of student life missing from the survey but instead focused on how the survey could help UBC improve. This was the first of many indications that Canadian students were less attuned to the holistic university environment but more attuned to political considerations than the international participants.

Not everyone approached the survey with equanimity. When asked her impression of the survey, one Japanese first-year student, Yasmine, objected to the items about serious conversations with people who are very different. Her reaction to these items was strong enough that for her it overshadowed every other item on the survey. This reaction merits further scrutiny in Chapter 6 in the discussion of findings related to serious conversations and diversity more broadly.

4.2.3 **Response options: International participants.** The second most common observation students made about NSSE concerned the response options for each NSSE item. This was striking as it was unsolicited.

Hannah-FAC: Since questions don’t really distinguish between different situations, it’s really hard to answer it with a single number or a choice.—Korea, year 4

Yvonne-FSC: Depends on the classes. If it’s for your major or not… If it’s a large class or not . . . —Korea, year 4
4.2.3.1 Responses were context-dependent. Fourth-year Korean participants had a lengthy conversation emphasizing that their answers to the survey were inaccurate approximations of the plurality of their experiences. They might participate often in a small English class but not in larger classes; how should they answer the question about contributing to class? Students said they were frustrated and felt their opinions did not matter to the university. Factors influencing their responses included class size, whether it was a required or major class, and how the items were interpreted. Specifically they said that after first year they would be less scared and have more contact with professors and more comfort with peers; that they would be more engaged in small classes than large ones; that they would work harder in classes that were difficult, required, or in their major than in classes that were electives; and that they would be closer to students in their major than to other students.

4.2.3.2 Missing option. Three international students from three different groups wanted a response option between never and sometimes (e.g., rarely, to describe items they had done once or twice). One participant felt so strongly about it that he brought it up three times during the focus group. When this option was lacking, these students felt frustrated and unable to answer the questions.

Waka-FAC: For the answers, if there was a choice between “sometimes” and “never,” it would’ve been easier. [Everyone agrees.]—Japan, year 4

Interestingly, international students wanted only one more option, and it was a different option than Canadian students wanted.
Misa-FAC: When I was completing the questionnaire, I was stuck because I don’t know what difference is between “often” and “sometimes”. . . I don’t know where to draw the distinction. It goes the same for the ranking that we were asked to do. This is why I think it is better to just voice out our thoughts, like what we did for the last question.—China, year 1

One student commented that focus group discussions were better than surveys in capturing their experiences. It seemed the discussion allowed for more detailed explanations than did the survey.

4.2.4 Response options: Canadian participants. The response options for NSSE questions was also a popular topic among Canadian students.

Hailey-FAC: I would have liked for some of the questions if there was a “not applicable” . . .—Canada, year 4

4.2.4.1 Missing option. Two Canadian participants in one group spoke at length about the need for a response option such as don’t know or doesn’t apply. They gave the example of the item asking if they take time caring for their dependents, which they don’t have. If they don’t have dependents, they argued, it would be inappropriate to say they spent no time caring for them, but they saw no other way to answer the question.

4.2.4.2 Responses were context-dependent. In every first-year Canadian group, someone commented that variation in classes made it difficult to answer the survey accurately.

Bubble-FAC: The answers provided . . . the options may be a little vague, because we might do different things in different classes.—Canada, year 1
In one group, two students had a lengthy conversation about this topic. Some participants indicated that the variation was by faculty, citing the large lectures in Science versus the small classes in Arts, such as English. Some pointed out, though, that faculty is too broad a division, as students take classes outside of their faculty. There was a suggestion that the survey specify whether the classes were large or small. They indicated that in small classes they would make more presentations, send more email to professors, talk more with professors, and ask questions in class more often. A further refinement was to consider course content, such as English classes, where discussion is appropriate for the subject, as opposed to physics, where the content may be less negotiable. Because of this variation in classes, students said that their answers to the survey were not accurate but were approximations of their actual experiences.

4.2.5 Meaning of items: International participants. The most dramatic differences between international and Canadian participants’ perceptions of NSSE were in the meanings they attributed to certain items. These included faculty members, outside of class, relationships with faculty members, administrative personnel and offices, and students. The items that were most revealing in terms of UBC NSSE responses were those related to faculty members. The standard meaning for the term faculty members as used in NSSE would be professors. However, in this study, some participants took faculty members\(^1\) to mean fellow students in their faculty, that is, fellow students in their field of study. Several students commented that they would score higher on their contact with faculty members if they interpreted it to mean other students in their faculty and lower if they interpreted it as professors.

\(^1\) Faculty member appears in items 1O, 1P, 1S, and 8B of NSSE 2008 U.S. English (paper version).
This misunderstanding would not happen in the US, where a disciplinary body is generally called a *college*, as in the College of Education, and the term *faculty* refers solely to teaching professionals. However, in Canada, the term *faculty* refers both to the professoriate and to the disciplinary entity, such as the Faculty of Education. It seems that some international students were misinterpreting the meaning of those items referring to faculty members.

International participants from every citizenship commented on how to interpret the term faculty members, and the participants were evenly split as to whether the term meant professors or students, with a handful of participants thinking it referred to teaching assistants (TAs) or staff. Of note, only the Chinese students consistently used the standard Canadian interpretation, that is, professors. The Taiwanese participants were four times more likely to interpret *faculty members* as students than as professors or instructors. Every Hong Kong participant who commented on it saw faculty members as students. Below is an example of one such exchange.

Kerry: What do you think “faculty members” are?

Geoff-MAC: People in my faculty.

Kerry: So your definition is . . .

Geoff-MAC: The people in Arts.

Kerry: Okay. Is your definition different from his?

Rae-FAC: I also think that it means students. I think of classmates, but not teachers.

Kerry: So you think faculty members are classmates?

Rae, Geoff-MAC: Yes.—Hong Kong, year 1

In short, in nearly every country or region group there was either confusion or misinterpretation about the definition.
Chloe-FAC: “Faculty members” is referring to students? Or?

Alice: When you were filling out the survey, were you . . .

Chloe-FAC: I thought it was students.

Cath-FAR: I thought it was professors.

Alice: [to Cath] You think it’s talking about professors, and [to Chloe] you think it’s talking about students.

Michelle: Does it change the answer you would give, if you have a different definition?

Chloe-FAC: Yeah.

Michelle: Can you talk about that a little bit? . . .

Chloe-FAC: If it’s faculty members who are students, I think there are more interactions. With professors, you have to arrange office hours with them and so on, it’s kind of troublesome, and there are less chances.

Alice: So with professors it might just be “sometimes” [referring to the survey choices]? And with students it might be “often”?

Chloe-FAC: Yeah.—Taiwan, year 4

In addition to differences in understanding relating to the term *faculty members*, international students held a broad range of interpretations for *serious conversations*, which they felt meant anything from confiding personal problems to contributing to class discussions to enlightening others about Chinese politics. Because the question was asked in every group, serious conversations were discussed by every group. Only two international groups questioned the meaning of the items but in those two groups there was lengthy, animated discussion. In the

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2 *Serious conversations* appears in items 1U and 1V of NSSE 2008 U.S. English (paper version).
fourth-year Japanese and fourth-year Taiwanese groups, students said they could see different ways to interpret the items and that their survey responses would differ based on the interpretation they chose. In each group at least one person indicated they would answer differently after hearing the discussion.

Japanese students made it clear that they would indicate more frequent conversations if serious meant “in class” rather than personal conversations and if people meant “friends rather than strangers.” The Taiwanese group problem-solved at length to identify an interpretation that matched their experiences. One student answered based on “very deep conversations” with their close friends, but when confronted with the second half of the items (“with people different / very different . . .”), they were at a loss to answer. They then shifted focus from personal conversations to sensitive topics such as “race, sex, gender . . .” In this way they seemed to shift the context as they considered their interpretation. In the end one student deconstructed the second question to the point that it became unanswerable and therefore meaningless:

Cath-FAR: But I think everyone has his own personal values, so everyone is different. So to what degree do you mean… different?—Taiwan, year 4

The phrase administrative personnel and offices was unclear to a first-year Korean student, who asked what the phrase meant. Several students complained that the question about staff did not sufficiently differentiate between counselling staff, academic advisors, and other categories of staff. In short, their interpretations of this phrase varied and as such the reliability of their responses to this item is questionable.

Another ambiguous term for international students was students. Three students asked the facilitator what it meant and one said it was students who joined the same clubs she did, in
contrast to faculty members, whom she considered to be students in her faculty. Other students said they would answer the questions about students differently if they interpreted it to mean international students, domestic students, or students in their faculty; or close friends versus students they know versus the whole student body.

Additionally, outside of class\(^3\) was interpreted in unexpected ways, such as “students who were not taking the class.”

Kerry: So you meant asking your friends, who are in a different class, questions.

Rae-FAC: Yes.—Hong Kong, year 1

This interpretation of outside of class would compound the confusion over the term faculty member, as they appear together in the item 1P: “Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class.” This is broader than the standard interpretation referring to having discussions about course content with professors at a time the class is not scheduled to meet. Even terms like during class were taken in unexpected ways, as two fourth-year Korean students (one in Science and one in Arts) wondered aloud whether this referred to the time when the professor was actually lecturing or to class discussion.

4.2.6 Meaning of items: Canadian participants. Canadian students interpreted faculty member as professors or instructors, which is the definition we expect was used by the NSSE framers.

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\(^3\) Outside of class appears in items 1H, 1P, and 1T of NSSE 2008 U.S. English (paper version).
Samantha-FSR: I would have rated completely differently as well, depending on what “faculty members” meant. And depending on how I interpreted it.—Canada, year 1

One exception was a permanent resident who had immigrated to Canada from Taiwan the year before the study, who saw faculty members as “class mates… my Science members… people in same faculty” (Rachel, Canada, year 1). A second student, also a permanent resident from Taiwan, had a similar view:

Bubble-FAC: For number 8A, it says other students, I would interpret that as my friends that are in the same faculty. But this one [8B, “faculty members”] would be people in the same faculty, but not necessarily friends.—Canada, year 1

Canadian students’ interpretations of the items referencing serious conversations showed surprising variation. Mirroring the international student’s concerns about the serious conversations items in NSSE, one Canadian said his first impression of the survey was to be “put off” by those items in the survey. Diversity items were troubling for this one international and one Canadian student.

Jenny Jones (year 4) commented that the items were too long and double-barreled so she hadn’t read them fully, and Hailey (year 4) thought they referred to conversations about race, which she said never happen. Two students interpreted serious conversations as arguments, disagreements, and fights, which they said happen rarely. One student said she has not found students of very different political or religious views at UBC so there are not many conversations with them. Others thought serious conversations referred to academic matters such as school, homework, assignments, faculties, and majors, because they talk to people different than themselves only at school, that is, when forced to do so. In this same vein, two students said
conversations are never that serious, so they answered based on any conversations with people different than themselves. However, the most telling comment was that “serious conversations are happening more with people from different races because race doesn’t matter” (my summary of student comments, to which they then agreed). This was echoed in a number of first- and fourth-year groups.

The term students was also ambiguous for Canadian students. One answered the survey item as if it meant “close friends from high school,” and a second said it was “everyone, everyone within all your classes” (Fagan-MAC, Canada, year 1). Some students thought students referred to the group of students with whom they felt a level of comfort. The student with close friends indicated that she had a group of close friends from high school who were in all the same classes together, so we can assume this is a comfortable group for her. The third who talked about “everyone” made it clear he was intentional from the first day to be open and meet many people; his reference point was broader than the first student’s, which was reflected in the scope of his response.

Canadians mentioned two other difficulties in providing an accurate answer to the NSSE questions. First, two participants in different groups assigned nearly opposite interpretations to the question on “relationships with faculty members.” In their minds the question did not clarify whether it referred to the characteristics of the faculty members or to students’ actual interactions with them. One student gave the highest score, 7 on a 7-point scale, because he had the impression that faculty in general were “available, helpful, sympathetic” (NSSE, 2008) but if asked about his actual experiences with them, he said he would score that 4 or 5 out of 7. The other student took the opposite interpretation: she supposed faculty to be generally helpful but she had little contact with them in her primarily lecture classes, so she scored the question as 2.
Second, in some cases Canadian students said they would change their answer if they had heard a particular anecdote before instead of after filling out the survey. Rachel (Canada, year 1) shared that her labmate used to say “I don’t care” and leave halfway through the lab. When Daisuke (Canada, year 1) heard this, he indicated he would change his answer to the question on “relationships with students” based on Rachel’s story.

Two more students, one a first-year Canadian student and one a fourth-year Hong Kong student, had unexpected definitions of relationships with faculty members. They reasoned that since they had no arguments with professors and the faculty were available, helpful, and sympathetic in theory, they rated them with a 7 and 6 out of 7, respectively, but this was not an indication of their personal interactions with them. Almost no student referenced a personal relationship with a faculty member; some students mentioned that the concept of relationship with faculty members was puzzling and that they couldn’t understand the premise of the item.

Several participants appreciated the reflective element of the survey to help them think back on their time at UBC. Some observed a difference between their NSSE response and their response to the importance rating, which led them to question why they did not engage in important behaviours more often.

4.3 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter presented the context and findings of the focus group participants’ perceptions of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) as a survey.

The chapter started by looking at the NSSE 2008 UBC data which had been analyzed by the institutional research unit using factor analysis to compare international and domestic student responses. Of the five benchmarks and 19 scales and subscales examined, only one benchmark and three scales were found to be statistically significant for international versus non-
international students. The benchmark was *student-faculty interaction* (higher for international students), while the scales were *out-of-class student-faculty interaction* (higher for international students), *use of technology* (lower for international students), and *diversity* (lower for international students).

Regarding NSSE as a survey, international and Canadian students agreed: it was unremarkable.

Both international and Canadian participants were vehement about the response options to the NSSE items (e.g., never, sometimes). International and Canadian students commented that their answers were context-dependent and that they would answer differently depending on the context they were thinking about at the time.

The most striking finding of the study was the misinterpretation by international students of certain key NSSE terms. Notably, some took *faculty members* to mean fellow students in their faculty, or staff, instead of professors. *Faculty members* is a key term in NSSE, referring to professors or course instructors, yet most international participants were either confused about its meaning or had an inaccurate interpretation of the term.

An additional misinterpretation was noted: *outside-of-class* as meaning a person not related to my class.

A third and far more complex misinterpretation of NSSE terminology was the widespread confusion among international and Canadian students about the meaning of *serious conversations*. Students discussed a wide range of interpretations of these NSSE items.

The next chapter describes the findings related to one particular NSSE item related to participating in class, as a way to introduce key themes that arose from the study.
Chapter 5.

Findings Related to Participating in Class

This chapter presents findings arising from international and Canadian students’ responses to questions asked during the focus groups which related to *asking a question in class* or *contributing to a class discussion*. This chapter also begins the discussion of findings related to *active and collaborative learning*, of which participating in class was the first to be discussed by the focus groups.

This chapter begins to address the second part of the first research question:

1. How do UBC international undergraduate students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan . . . perceive select NSSE behaviours? How do these interpretations and perceptions compare to those of Canadian undergraduate students?

The first group of findings relate to the ways students perceive or *frame* the NSSE behaviours at issue. The second group of findings relate to *factors* that enable or constrain participation in NSSE behaviours. The findings for international students are presented in their entirety before the Canadian students’ comments are presented. Further, the findings for international students are presented in order of robustness, as are the findings for Canadian students. Robustness was determined by the frequency of mention, the distribution of support for the idea between people and between groups, and significance in terms of the unsolicited nature of the comments, and the importance students attributed to the topic directly, such as identifying it as the most important thing that was said in the focus group.
Item 1A on the National Survey of Student Engagement reads, “In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following? Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions” (NSSE, 2008). I selected this item for discussion in the focus groups for reasons related to my professional practice as an international student advisor. My experience as an international educator working with international students over the past 25 years suggested it might be an issue for participants.

In narrowing down which NSSE items to explore with participants, participating in class discussions and asking questions in class were chosen in part because they are areas of academic social practice that I as a practitioner often hear students describe as puzzling and inaccessible. I have heard students describe them as hard to engage with linguistically and conceptually. Past students have described these situations as emotionally unsettling and anxiety-provoking. Finally, students have said that both the practice and the content are unintelligible. I hear this most often from students who are new to Canada and students talking about the time when they first arrived in Canada, particularly if their schooling immediately prior to entering the Canadian institution took place abroad.

Active and collaborative learning as a NSSE benchmark is based on the understanding that students’ active engagement with their learning, and their engagement with others as part of their learning, is a predictor of academic success, satisfaction, and persistence. The work of Pierre Bourdieu is particularly instructive in anticipating the perspectives of international students relative to active and collaborative learning behaviours. A level of expertise accumulated by an individual, which Bourdieu might call “form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body”, or , cultural capital in an embodied state (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243), would be valuable for newcomers in the field to effectively engage or strive with others. If we think of
academic success, satisfaction, and persistence to graduation as the desired outcomes in a Bourdieusian field of Canadian academic higher education, then the desired forms of capital to achieve those outcomes will be of importance to our work with international students.

Newcomers to the field would naturally bring forms of capital that were esteemed and valued in their previous field but which might be less valued in their new field. Examples include embodied cultural capital such as expertise and understanding of societal expectations, behavioural norms, world view, and ability to “pass” as a local, as well as academic skill and an understanding of the academic cultural environment. Social capital would include a network of relationships and connections that could be exchanged for advantages when needed.

Newcomers to the Bourdieusian field of Canadian post-secondary education could expect to find themselves at a distinct disadvantage. Those with the desired forms of cultural capital, which we would expect some domestic students to exhibit, would have the advantage when it comes to working as a team and collaborating with others in active learning activities. It was expected therefore that international students, as relative newcomers to the field, might struggle to understand the expected behaviours, such as contributing to a class discussion, asking a question in class, making a presentation in class, and working with students in or out of class. Such activities, which are understood in the engagement theory to be predictors of and contributors toward desired outcomes, require sophisticated understanding of a particular set of social and cultural skills and habits of mind specific to a Canadian context which many international students will not necessarily have had the opportunity to acquire prior to coming to Canada.
5.1 Framing of Class Participation by International Students

First- and fourth-year international students from four countries or regions said they do not ask questions in class or contribute to class discussion. Many students commented on this while answering unrelated questions, which indicates this is a topic of particular interest to them. Two students within one group said it happens around them but they do not contribute. Hannah was the only exception:

Hannah-FAC: Well, for me discussions are important. It’s impossible to just sit there and not say a word during a discussion. It is designed to be extremely interactive and my ideas could expand in the process or accept other people’s ideas as well.—Korea, year 4

Again, “FAC” behind Hannah’s name tells us she was a female student (F) in the Faculty of Arts (A) who commuted (C) to the university rather than residing in a university student residence. Two other fourth year students, Kelvin and Stephen from Hong Kong, described their experiences with raising questions in class during this exchange:

Kelvin-MSC: So far, I think I did not ask questions [laughs]. I asked questions in tutorial and during discussion. But I rarely asked questions in front of 200-something people. I should say I never did.

Stephen-MSC: I only asked for once or twice. I usually ask questions after class.

Kelvin-MSC: I remember I asked questions in smaller classes, like around 30 students.—Hong Kong, year 4

In the focus groups, we asked: “Let’s look at item 1A. What is it like to ‘ask questions in class or contribute to class discussions’?”
International students’ “framing” responses about participating in class fell into three types of perceptions, in order of robustness:

- references to emotions
- references to learning
- references to the broader range of sources for academic information-gathering

5.1.1 Emotions. The most common framing comments related to asking questions in class or contributing to class discussions were references to emotions. These comments came from the greatest number of international participants from the greatest breadth of country or region and year groups: three first-year groups and four fourth-year groups from every country or region commented on an emotional element. The discussion of emotions was the most heated among first-year students from Japan.

By far the most vehement and widespread comments related to anxiety, used in a non-clinical sense to refer to nervousness, embarrassment (a mix of fear and shame), uncertainty, discomfort, worry, and so forth. Students said that asking a question in class or contributing to class discussions triggered anxiety, which in turn limited participation. There were numerous references to uncertainty about what was expected or what to say. Students said they were not confident about their questions, not confident about their English abilities, afraid to ask a stupid question and be the target of laughter, not brave enough to ask a question, embarrassed, nervous, scared, and not comfortable. They were afraid no one else had the same question (which we might interpret as a fear of displaying ignorance), afraid of speaking in front of large groups, afraid to make fools of themselves, afraid of being looked at “in a funny, awkward way” (Geoff, Hong Kong, year 1), and afraid of saying something wrong. They mentioned fellow students, older students, and teaching assistants as the people whose reaction they feared. As a result, they
said, “a psychological barrier keeps building up” (Geoff, Hong Kong, year 1) which prevented them from participating.

Amanda-FAC: That means we are not confident of our own questions because we do not know if we are the only ones who have the questions or if others have the same questions. Secondly, we are not confident of our English-language abilities so we do not have self-confidence in our classroom performance, and therefore we don’t want to ask questions in class. . . —China, year 1

Other feeling-type responses included a few students saying that participation improves one’s self-confidence, helps one feel more comfortable in class, and helps one feel more comfortable making presentations in the future. A few students said that participation increased with interest or curiosity. Students indicated that they would participate more in discussions that interested them and that they would approach professors when they were curious about something.

5.1.2 Learning. After emotions, learning was the second most common topic related to international students’ perceptions or “framing” of asking questions in class or contributing to class discussions. This topic was not introduced by myself or the research assistants and was not an expected result. These comments came from both year levels but predominantly from fourth-year students, including a Korean fourth-year student, both years of Japanese students, and both years of Taiwanese students. There was especially strong agreement on this topic among fourth-year Japanese students:

Yolanda-FAC: It’s easier to learn when there is interaction.
Kacey-FAC: By interacting . . .

Yolanda-FAC: I feel like I’m learning [laughs].

Kacey-FAC: I can motivate myself and I can learn that specific material . . . it sticks in my mind.

Ian-MAR: Right.

Kai-MAC: We can also get to know people. [Everyone nods and agrees.]—Japan, year 4

Students listed the specific benefits of class participation as helping students understand, providing motivation to learn, helping certain ideas to stick in one’s mind, expanding their ideas or helping them accept the ideas of others, providing immediate feedback to students on their understanding, and helping professors gauge student learning.

Cath-FAR: I think it is like a reflection. You can see how much you understand, and the professor can know how well he teaches.—Taiwan, year 4

5.1.3 Other sources. The third most frequent way of framing the NSSE behaviours of asking questions in class or contributing to class discussions was related to other sources for academic information-gathering. This was mentioned by first-year students only: seven students commented across four first-year groups (every country or region group except participants from Korea). This topic was not introduced by myself or the research assistants and was not expected. Participants indicated that asking questions in class or contributing to class discussions was not their preferred source of information. Other sources included classmates, friends, the textbook, and the Internet. Most participants who commented on other sources said they preferred to get their information from classmates or friends.
Riceball-FCC: I think it’s pretty important, but I think people rarely do it. Because . . . because they don’t want to be targeted. Because it feels like all the attention would be drawn to them, therefore they do not want to grab attention. So they would rather ask colleagues, students, like friends, instead of asking instructors. . . .—Taiwan, year 1

Some participants expressed a reluctance to ask questions in class or ask a professor a question. They referenced perceived “pressure” from peers and not wanting to be “targeted.” One student said he would rather “hide it and ask my classmates later on” (Geoff, Hong Kong, year 1).

No fourth-year students commented on using other sources of information.

5.2 Factors Affecting Class Participation for International Students

After the question of perception and framing, I was interested to know what factors enable or constrain students’ engagement in the behaviours of asking questions or contributing to class discussions. The related question in the focus group script was “What makes this harder or easier to do?”

Responses about factors fell into several groupings, in descending order of frequency. Factors can enable or constrain students’ engagement. Consequently I have indicated each factor below and noted the predominant enabling or constraining observation made about it by students:

- An open social environment enables participation.
- Large classes constrain participation and small classes enable it.
- The professor has the power to enable participation.
- Home culture can constrain participation.
• Participation is constrained by the fact of being in first year or being new to the behaviour.
• Students are more likely to participate in classes related to their major.
• Language difference constrains participation.

In fact, the first-year students from China summarized nearly all of the above factors as a syllogism:

Jiefang: Do you all have the same experience? Is your experience the same? They speak too fast or you cannot catch up?

Naomi-FAC: I do. I think there is a process. Obviously, it is so different between the first year, second, third and fourth year. In my first year I took a philosophy course, which was like listening to someone giving a lecture in Greek to me. When I was reading it was like reading Greek. When I was in class it was like listening to Greek. It was the same in the psychology course in my first year. . . .

Dimple-FAC: I think it depends. I think it is more difficult to speak in large classes than in small classes. . . . Also sometimes when there are so many students in the class we Chinese are a bit shy, especially like me, prefer sitting at the back of the classroom. So when you speak or ask a question, students sitting in front of you will all turn back to look at you, so I feel embarrassed to ask questions.

Naomi-FAC: Chinese students usually do not like people to interrupt in class when the professor is giving a lecture, and we have a habit of raising a hand, waiting for the professor to ask you so that you can speak. . . .

Pleasant-FCC: I think this is also a process of adaptation. I didn’t feel comfortable to speak in class when I first came to UBC, but professors here at UBC emphasize class
participation and especially they encourage you to participate in class. . . . So I feel that my experience in this aspect is positive.

Lewes-MEC: I am an Engineering major and I also think it is a process of adjustment. Many of us didn’t understand what people were talking about in classes in the first year. Even if you asked, you still didn’t understand what the answer was. When you were gradually adjusting in this language transition and you were trying, slowly, to ask the first question, and then you would have a breakthrough in the language [practice]. After that you would have confidence in asking questions in class and you would continue the process. After the first time, you would feel it was a bit easier later on.—China, year 4

To summarize: First year students in the study were unfamiliar with asking questions in class and contributing to a class discussion so they find them more difficult to do; first year students have mostly large classes, which makes the behaviours even harder to do; cultural expectations from home get in the way of doing the expected behaviours, and language makes it hard to understand what is going on or respond appropriately; but an open social environment and approachable professors make it more likely that students will engage in the behaviours eventually. In the following section we will consider more closely each of the factors in the bulleted list above.

5.2.1 Social environment. The social environment emerged early as a leading character in international participants’ stories of asking questions in class and contributing to class discussions. This topic was unsolicited and unexpected. Social environment was a frequently occurring response, mentioned in eight of the 10 groups, and sparking lengthy conversations in the fourth-year groups from Hong Kong and Japan.
Geoff commented that “it is pretty hard for a student to ask questions” (Hong Kong, year 1). Other students said they spoke in class if classmates spoke, waiting to see if others would speak before they spoke and not asking questions if others were silent. They commented on pressure they believe comes from other students. They worried that their questions may not be “good” or “reasonable.” They mentioned feeling “targeted” and not wanting to “grab attention.” The people whose ridicule they feared were classmates and teaching assistants. Students are unsure how to participate, which is compounded by their fear that others (who are like “brothers and sisters”) will target, laugh at and ridicule them, which forms a “psychological barrier” (Geoff, Hong Kong, year 1), which makes it hard for them to participate in class. They said they were nervous and afraid of saying something wrong and of being laughed at. However, they said that if the “atmosphere” was good they would speak up in class.

Yulia-FAR: Not because I’m an international student, but when I ask questions I wonder if everyone else feels the same way [everyone nods and agrees] or if it’s just me, so when I don’t understand something I wait until the end of class. Sometimes my professor tells me that I should’ve spoke out in class but it depends on the atmosphere too. [Everyone nods and agrees.]—Japan, year 4

Kerry: So did you ever ask a question in class?

Rae-FAC: Yes, but usually I thought about it for a long time first. I would consider if the question is reasonable or not. [All laugh.]

Kerry: And after you think for a long time, the topic [which the prof was talking about] is gone, right?

Rae-FAC: Yes [laughs].
Juliana-FCR: If everyone asks questions, then I would think it is OK to ask questions.—Taiwan, year 1

Negative incidents or actual disapproval from others in the classroom were rarely mentioned, yet the fear of making a fool of oneself was a consistent theme. This was not an individual students’ paranoia or anxiety; this was a widespread conviction that the classroom was a risky place where asking the wrong questions would lead to ridicule.

5.2.2 Class size. The second most common factor to inhibit or foster participation was class size. Class size was identified as a factor by students in every group except first-year students from Korea. The fourth-year students from Japan all agreed that class size had the power to enable or constrain participation. General consensus was that large classes inhibit participation and small classes foster it. Class size was an unexpected finding. The volume and vehemence of students’ negative comments about large class sizes was surprising. This factor was not introduced by myself or the research assistants yet it came up repeatedly in this and other sections of the focus group transcripts.

Amanda-FAC: Here in UBC, first, there are so many students in class, and in addition we are not confident in our language abilities so we don’t want to ask questions in class. We are more likely to ask the people sitting next to us, “Do you know what it is about?” This is why we prefer attending classes with friends because we can help each other. I would say that the help we get from those sitting near us is greater than the help we get from the professors.—China, year 1

Alice: So you think this is really important but the classes are too big.
Senhaneko-FAR: Really important, but it’s really too big, so there is no way.—Taiwan, year 1

Students said that large class size negatively impacts the precursors to asking questions: it exacerbates insecurities related to language competence, increases pressure to formulate “good” questions, and creates “pressure” for students sitting at the back, who feel they have to shout to be heard. They said that large class size constrains their access to help: it drives them to depend on friends and classmates, decreases access to professors, and relegates questions to after class. They said that large class size has a discouraging effect even on students who are motivated to participate in class: it precludes people from asking questions even if they believe doing so is “really important,” and it discourages people who do ask questions from asking questions in future. They referred to the physical location in the room (feeling intimidated by the distance from the professor) and the number of people and size of the room (making oneself heard across the room, avoiding intimidation based on number of people, feeling intimidated by the size of the room). Finally, they said that large class size decreases the likelihood of asking questions and inhibits asking questions in class. International participants found large class size to have a universally negative impact on their ability to participate in class.

To increase international students’ participation in class, the effect of class size will be a critical factor. As we will see throughout the study, the perceived negative impact of large class size reaches far beyond class participation to affect nearly every part of international students’ engagement.

5.2.3 Role of the professor. The third most common factor to influence participation in class was the role of the professor. Six groups from every citizenship except Hong Kong mentioned
this factor, and fourth-year students from China had a lengthy discussion about the role of professors in influencing their participation. Professors had already been introduced into the discussion through the NSSE items participants filled out as the focus group started. However, their role in enabling or constraining participation was introduced by participants, not by myself or the research assistants.

Jiefang: Let’s look at question 1A. What is it like for you to “ask questions in class or contribute to class discussion”?

Bobo-FAR: I think that for Chinese students, we are used to getting information from the professor, like reading a book or stuff like that. When it comes to asking questions in class, we don’t know what to ask or ask questions after the class. I think that’s a problem that at least I am facing right now. I want to change it but the thing is I have got used to it, so . . . —China, year 1

Jiefang: Can you explain this in greater detail? I am not from China so maybe you can try telling me what school is like for students back home in China.

Amanda-FAC: It has always been the teacher doing the talking since we started school at a young age. Teachers encouraged you to raise your hand before asking questions. As that student has just talked about, teachers also encourage in this regard. However, we are more used to accepting what teachers said rather than asking for something [information / ideas] from teachers. It was like we accepted whatever teachers taught us. When we had some different questions, we asked teachers in person. Teachers also told us to raise our hands when we wanted to ask questions and they would then find a more appropriate time to let us ask the questions and they would then answer.—China, year 1
Students from China said they were used to seeing professors as sources of information, “like reading a book.” They described accepting from a young age whatever the teacher taught, not asking the teacher for information. From early years they expected the teacher to decide when to allow questions by calling on students who raise their hands. They said they were used to asking professors questions in person, that is, not in class.

Participants suggested ways professors can assist students in participating in class. They indicated that if professors asked questions of the students, rather than just asking if the students had any questions, it would assist students still learning how to formulate a question and therefore facilitate in-class discussion. They described a system of email triage in which the professor would identify the common questions and address those with the class. This is a less threatening way to ask questions from a student perspective, particularly with the language concerns they cite. They also commented on the interplay of class size and the role of the professor, observing that professors are usually more amenable to questions and discussion in smaller classes, where the curriculum is less rigidly scheduled.

5.2.4 Culture. The fourth most common factor to arise regarding students asking questions in class and contributing to discussion was what I have called culture. There were references to not knowing the culture, “we Chinese,” and similar acknowledgements of a particular identity or behaviour pattern that is shared within a group of people. The common theme was that the way of participating in class was different in the home country. These comments came from five groups across the Chinese-heritage students (China, Hong Kong, Taiwan) and included first- and fourth-year students.

This was a factor I expected to see. Although the focus group questions rarely mentioned culture, the grouping of students by citizenship and the invitation to speak in their home
language in fact introduced the idea of culture from the beginning. As such, it is less important to note that culture was mentioned but more important to focus on the impact students say it has on their participation.

Their cultural context seemed to play a role with regard to contributing in class. Specifically, they commented on ways they would approach participation in China that are different from “here”: they were used to raising their hands and waiting until the professor called on them.

Leveosa-FAC: It is tough when you first come to Canada because you don’t know this culture, or the Canadian academic structure. It was hard to know a direction in which you can move forward. You are not sure about everything. So it’s really important for us to know more about the information in the academic area. The university should give guidance.—China, year 4

Several students commented about things they did not know about their new context. They “don’t know the culture,” don’t know “the Canadian academic structure,” don’t know which direction to “move forward,” and were “unsure about everything.” Specifically, they do not know what to ask in class. They knew they did not understand but did not know how to ask the specific questions that would help them understand. They also said the university should give guidance about academic information, which they said was “really important.” This implies that they did not know enough about academic expectations at the university and believed this was information the university held and should provide to them, rather than being readily available or something they could figure out themselves.
Participants’ attitudes toward their situation seemed to be frustration and chagrin rather than blaming or resentment. They stated that being able to participate in class was important and that it was really important to know academic information. They talked about coping strategies they use, such as asking questions after class. They also coped by being more likely to ask classmates than professors, therefore preferring to take classes with friends where possible, as they found classmates of more help than professors. Interestingly, there was no mention of Canadians excluding them. Their frustration was not about being singled out or treated poorly; rather, the reaction seemed to be related to a gap between the behaviour expected of them by others in Canada compared to the behavior that was expected in their home country.

5.2.5 Year level. The fifth factor to surface among international student participants with regard to classroom participation was year level, with the consistent assertion that participation is harder in first year and becomes easier over time. This was raised by first- and fourth-year participants in four groups from three countries or regions, and at least two students mentioned it each time it came up.

Students said that there are differences in participation between first, second, third, and fourth years. They said that in first year things are unintelligible and they did not understand what people were talking about in class. They said they did not feel comfortable in their classes at first. They mentioned that listening in class and reading in first year was “like Greek” to them. They said they “didn’t understand what people were talking about in classes in the first year.” They mentioned a “psychological barrier” (Geoff, Hong Kong, year 1) that would build up for first-year students in a third-year class if their comments were not well received by the upper-year students. They said they were “really scared” of being laughed at or not comfortable “asking anything” of professors in their first year.
However, they said that by fourth year they could ask whatever they needed to, because they had gotten used to asking questions. They described it as a process of adaptation and adjustment that was gradual and slow. They singled out language transition in particular. Asking the first question “leads to a breakthrough,” they have more confidence as a result, and the behaviour gets “a bit easier” later on. They said it is a “process” or “process of adaptation.” They talked about “gradually adjusting.” Fourth-year students said they were not scared because time had passed and because they had “done similar things so many times.” One fourth-year student said, “Things have changed quite a bit.”

This forms an interesting parallel to comments about the physical campus. Students said that in their first year, “UBC was huge,” and they got physically lost on the campus. The size of the institution seemed to play a role in their initial experience of university life, and the fact that one could get lost seemed to emphasize that point. This could serve as a metaphor for contributing in class: it is a huge landscape, confusing, in which one can get lost, but that one learns to navigate eventually over time.

Yvonne-FSC: I didn’t necessarily think my answers would differ depending on the courses, but rather depending on my year in UBC. . . If I remember correctly, when I was in first and second year, I thought UBC was huge and I even got lost! It’s not just about the size of the school; there are 400 people in one class so it’s not that easy to talk. But since I know everyone in my major, it’s easier. Also, I learned how to talk to my instructors over time. I can see the difference clearly because I’m taking first-year physics right now and I noticed that first-year students are really scared to ask anything to the instructors. Some of them are not so much scared but not exactly comfortable with it. I don’t have a problem with it now since I’ve done it so many times.
Lucia: So since time has passed . . .

Yvonne-FSC: That, and also because I have already done similar things for the past years, I am not afraid to be laughed at and I don’t think of it that way anymore. Simply, I ask what I want to ask during class or go to his or her office hours. I didn’t do that when I was in first year. But now, when I am curious about something, I would email or go and see them. Things have changed quite a bit.—Korea, year 4

5.2.6 Major. The sixth factor to come out of the focus groups with reference to class participation was students’ major, or area of study. This was mentioned in four groups across three countries or regions, with a lively conversation among fourth-year students from Korea. Students indicated they are more likely to participate in classes (a) that are in their major, (b) that are required, (c) in which they believe they have the ability to excel, and (d) in which participation is expected.

Based on students’ responses, I developed the analytic code major which refers to a class (e.g., BIOL 150), program of study (e.g., Bachelor of Biology), academic department (e.g., Biology Department), or faculty (e.g., Faculty of Science).

Major appeared to interact with class size in that certain subjects were named as having mostly large classes, which led students not to participate. Students singled out math, economics, physics, and engineering as classes in which they have no space for participation, given the predominance of lecture-style delivery, large class sizes, and a fast-paced curriculum. It is here that major and class size interact; students in these majors report rarely participating.

These comments bring into sharper focus the type of situations in which international students find it particularly hard to participate in class. Major acts as an enabling factor for class participation for some students. One student said she considers courses more important, must
spend more time on the course material, and “attempt[s] to participate more actively” (Hannah, Korea, year 4) if the course is required or difficult.

Lucia: So you’re saying that answers will vastly differ depending on the courses?
Hannah-FAC: Yes, exactly.
R.-MAR: I think she’s right. For me, I really don’t put much effort into my literature course because I don’t want to be in the top 5% of the class. But for Economics or Math, I do things differently. I really try hard in every other course except Literature, and that is partly because I do not have the ability to really excel in that course and therefore I don’t expect much from myself.—Korea, year 4

5.2.7 Language. The seventh and final factor to be mentioned by international students in relation to asking questions or contributing to class discussions was language. This was not a topic introduced explicitly in the focus group questions, but holding focus groups in students’ home-country language made it likely participants would raise this topic. Looking at the research into international student experiences, and based on my experience as a practitioner, I expected students to say that being a speaker of English as an Additional Language (EAL) was a moderate to significant concern for them and had a negative impact on their ability to engage academically and socially.

In the international focus groups, there was a sense that language holds participants back from participating in class. This was discussed in first- and fourth-year groups from China and Korea. The strongest support for this idea came from fourth-year Chinese students. This may not be a distinct factor, as the students from China who mentioned it also mentioned cultural differences (discussed previously). As with cultural differences, it is relevant that fourth-year
students were as vocal about language as were first-year students, implying that this is not a simple matter of skill development but is a persistent and impactful barrier to participation for students throughout their degree. Students struggled with the conceptual analysis (what to express), conversational turn-taking and timing (when to express it), and syntax (finding the words). Note this conversation among fourth-year students:

Nicole-FSR: And it’s kind of like we know we don’t quite understand some points but we don’t know how to ask specific questions about this point.

Amanda-FAC: . . . We may ask questions in person after class because interrupting the professor’s lecture in class is not something that Chinese students are good at because . . .

Jiefang: Do you agree, everyone? Now let’s look at question 1A. To you all, what kind of experience do you have in terms of “ask questions in class or contribute to class discussion”?

Leveosa-FAC: Very difficult. They speak very fast.

Jiefang: What do you mean by “they”? Do you mean professors?

Leveosa-FAC: Yeah, I mean all of them, professors and students, speak very fast. For example, if I have an idea [and I want to talk about it], it takes more time for me to translate into English and ask in class, right? When I was about to speak out they have already moved on to the next topic.—China, year 4

Students said they did not know what to ask in class and did not know the specific question to ask even if they knew the topic they wanted to ask about.

Language appeared to be highly interactive with other factors aiding or constraining class participation. One student outlined a causal chain between lack of confidence in English-
language ability, lack of self-confidence in classroom performance, and decreased desire to ask questions in class. Another student mentioned large class size as an exacerbating effect on lack of confidence in language abilities, leading to a lack of desire to ask questions in class.

5.2.8 Summary of findings related to class participation for international students. International students perceived asking a question in class or contributing to a class discussion not as an intellectual exercise but as a social practice deeply embedded in the emotions, relationships, and context of the classroom. They framed this as an emotionally risky undertaking and one that gave rise to considerable anxiety in a non-clinical sense. They described academic expectations as foreign to them and positioned themselves as outsiders to these practices.

They did, however, see this behaviour as a learning activity that could provide understanding of the material, motivation to persist, expansion of ideas, memory aids, exposure to others’ ideas, and a feedback loop between professors and students.

Given the barriers to participating in class, international first year students said they found other sources for class material, such as friends and classmates, textbooks, and the Internet.

International students were clear about what makes it harder or easier to ask questions in class or contribute to class discussions. They pinpointed the following seven factors. First, when the social environment in the classroom is fraught with pressure from other students and a high degree of uncertainty, as they say it normally is, participating in class is highly unlikely. Second, large class size suppresses the precursors to classroom participation, limits their access to help, and discourages even motivated students from participating. Third, professors who bridge the gap between students’ embodied realities and Canadian classroom expectations are some of the
only factors that can mitigate the negative effects of chilly classroom environment, large class size, and cultural and language isolation. Fourth, Chinese-heritage students found participating in class confounding as it bore no resemblance to their classroom expectations though a lifetime of schooling back home, and this was as true for fourth-year as for first-year students. Fifth, class participation for first-year students is uncomfortable, full of unclear expectations and even frightening, whereas fourth-year students have become largely accustomed to it over time and through practice. Sixth, international students were more likely to participate in classes in their major, classes that were required, or classes in which they expected to excel or in which participation was expected, while electives, large classes, lecture-style classes, and fast-paced discussions were the least likely sites for class participation. Seventh, lack of confidence in English-speaking ability led to lack of self-confidence in classroom performance and to decreased desire to ask questions in class. The effects of these factors were compounded; for instance, students felt less confident about their language ability in large classes, and first-year students were more at a loss to grasp cultural expectations of the classroom.

5.3 Framing of Class Participation by Canadian Students

Compared to international students, how do Canadian students perceive the NSSE items and behaviours related to asking questions in class and contributing to class discussions? This section answers that question, considering first the framing responses and then the factors that enable or constrain class participation.

In the focus groups, we asked: “Let’s look at item 1A. What is it like to ‘ask questions in class or contribute to class discussions’?”

In the analysis, Canadian students’ “framing” responses fell into three types of perceptions, in order of robustness:
• references to learning
• references to the broader range of sources for academic information-gathering
• references to emotions

Note that these were the same three ways of framing class participation as international students identified, but the emphasis is dramatically different. Learning was strongly emphasized by Canadian students, whereas the emotional elements of participating in class was almost an afterthought.

5.3.1 Learning. Canadians were more focused on the learning associated with participating in class than were international students. Six participants from both years made a surprising 21 comments in six conversations, so this was a topic that came up repeatedly. This topic was not introduced by myself or the research assistants. Canadian participants saw a clear connection between engagement and learning. They said they learn more if they are engaged, participating, “into it” (Daisuke, Canada, year 1), and it is fun. They said that “asking questions helps you understand the subject” and that talking about an assignment in class might help them understand the material better. One student said you can “put your own piece in it” (Samantha, year 1), suggesting a sense of ownership or personal connection to the course content through class discussion in a way that is distinct from other modes of classroom learning. In addition to student learning, they pointed out that asking questions helps the professor know what students are learning about the subject and the assignments.

Canadian students framed participation in more nuanced ways than international students. Canadians said they ask questions to learn more about the subject, out of interest. They said that asking questions in class can be to clarify a point, but more importantly it can also be to explore
something that interests them. This was a way of learning through value-added class participation that international students did not reference.

Canadian students observed that participation does not always signal learning. Canadians saw a more nuanced interplay between participation, engagement and learning. For example, one participant said the goal is not participation but engagement with one’s learning. In other words, it is possible to participate without engaging. Another student mentioned UBC’s Student-Directed Seminars, an initiative whereby students propose and teach undergraduate courses for credit under the guidance of a professor, in which he said discussion is engaging. He then contrasted these with other classes where students may be restating the obvious and not taking the topic to a new level, participating just for marks (Gabriel, Canada, year 4). For these students, participation was a pro forma activity for marks and was disconnected from engagement and learning. Canadian student participants also noted that it is engagement that impacts learning, and that participation may aid engagement. So participation becomes a tool to engage, which in turn aids learning.

Samantha-FSR: No, you have no idea if you’ll get a bad class or a good class. And it really affects how you feel in the class, too. Because you’ll enjoy it more and take more material away from it if you’re engaged and you’re participating.

Daisuke-MSC: You can learn way more if you’re into it and if it’s fun.—Canada, year 1

MS: So people give answers they think that are expected? For the sake of getting a grade?

Gabriel-MSC: Yeah, yeah. You can tell sometimes, when people’s comments are just. . . . They don’t really have any value to them. It’s just like, “Oh, I noticed this.” It’s not, “What do you guys think about this? How would you change this?” It’s like, “I notice
this is what the paper is trying to say.” Not that it never happens but I think that it’s not optimal.—Canada, year 4

5.3.2 Other sources. Like international students, Canadians saw participating in class as only one source for gaining information related to their coursework. This was a common topic across four conversations, involving 14 mentions by 7 people. First- and fourth-year Canadian students mentioned consulting alternative sources on information when talking about class participation. This is distinct from international students, among whom only first-year students raised these issues.

Gabriel-MSC: It might be a function of science classes. All the notes will be posted later and I’ll have a textbook that I’ll have to buy that was $100. I can always read that if I don’t understand something. In terms of learning itself, it’s obviously important to be engaged in class. If you need to ask questions to do that, then that should be done more.—Canada, year 4

Canadian students said that they accessed information very differently in technical classes such as chemistry than in classes such as English. In technical classes, they said the main reason to speak up in class was to clarify something, not to give their opinion, and that asking a clarifying question was likely to disrupt the professor and other students, so they instead would find the information from other sources. The sources they cited were Google, the textbook, and classmates. In classes like English, they said, they were expected to “wonder, interpret it, and analyze it,” so they participated in class more often rather than going outside for the information. Not all information could be found from alternative sources. One Canadian student described situations in technical classes in which the only way to clarify a point from a lecture was to ask
the professor. These comments came just after references to people in his classes being too shy to ask a question, so we see that even if students do not feel comfortable asking a question in class, there may be situations in which not asking can have negative consequences.

5.3.3 Emotions. The emotional context associated with participating in class was a significant issue for Canadian students but not as significant as it was among international students, for whom it was the most commonly discussed way of describing participation. Seven Canadian participants from both years commented on emotions. A few students said that they needed to feel comfortable to ask questions and feel that others would be able to discuss their ideas with them. Others talked about not wanting to feel their question was silly or feel stupid for asking a question. One student said she did not feel comfortable asking questions in class and would only participate when forced to for marks. She resented the requirement to participate because it did not yield her true opinion but forced her to give the expected answer.

However, unlike any international participants, two Canadian students said they felt safe in class and that they could ask what they wanted “without being scoffed at.” They appeared to feel quite at home with classroom participation.

Mr. Big-MAC: People are pretty receptive, I’d say. You can say pretty much anything without being scoffed at regardless of how ill thought out your point is. It’s pretty safe in class. [Silence.]
Michelle: Agreement? Disagreement?
Jenny Jones-FAC: I don’t feel like I talk much in class. I just don’t do it. But I would agree. I never feel judged or stupid, I just don’t talk much. . . .—Canada, year 4
This sense of comfort was completely absent from the responses of international participants. Further, one Canadian participant said repeatedly that she liked participating in class, and another Canadian student said repeatedly that this behaviour was important and it was helpful to clarify his understanding. This enthusiasm was entirely lacking for international students.

5.4 Factors Affecting Class Participation for Canadian Students

Next we will consider the factors Canadian students said enabled or constrained their participation in class. They were more likely to participate, in order of significance, in classes in their major, small classes, classes where others participated, and classes where the professor actively facilitated participation. The nature of the comments was similar to those of international participants, but there were shifts in emphasis and a few items were missing completely. Specifically, the significance of major was much greater for Canadians and class size was somewhat greater, but the role of the emotional context was reduced and the mention of culture, language, and first year were completely absent.

5.4.1 Major. The discussion of major and area of study was similar for Canadians as for international participants, but there were far more comments from Canadians. In fact, major or area of study was the most common factor mentioned by Canadians to enable or constrain their participation in class. This is remarkable given that the factor was not raised by myself or the research assistants but came from students unsolicited. It was mentioned 30 times by 10 participants in five groups over 11 conversations.

Canadian students explained that their participation in class varied greatly by major and other class types. Specifically, they divided classes into “sciences” and English/Arts. Examples of sciences included economics, physics, and chemistry. Sciences were those classes in which
there was little opportunity for participation because of large class sizes, high volume of material to be covered in a short amount of time, and the factual nature of the material, which made it less open to interpretation or comment. In general, Canadian participants saw science-related classes as settings where participation was not warranted.

Michelle: So let’s start with question 1A. So what’s it like for you to ask questions in class or contribute to class discussion?

Georgia-FSR: It’s really difficult in science classes, because they’re huge, the profs go really fast. There’s not really time for questions.

Sydney-FSC: I agree.

Georgia-FSR: It’s just, there’s not really any chance to ask questions even at all, it’s just bang bang bang, more info, more info.

Sydney-FSC: Even if you do ask, the prof is probably going to be like, “Oh, just talk to me after class.” Because you can’t waste time, there’s just so much material to cover.

Georgia-FSR: And there’s definitely no class discussions.

Sydney-FSC: Except for English.—Canada, year 1

Compared to science classes, English classes emerged as the ultimate setting for participation. One student said because English classes leave more room for interpretation, there is more room for participation. Numerous students said participation in English classes is expected and makes sense. In English classes, students ask questions, contribute to class discussions, receive feedback on their understanding and the assignments, and give feedback to the professor by the questions they ask. One student made a connection between participation and engagement by
saying that English professors want you to participate and “they expect you to be engaged”
(Samantha, Canada, year 1).

One student expanded the concept to encompass all of Arts:

Kaatje-FAC: It’s different in Arts because you’re less likely to have someone completely
confused about a topic. It’s not like, “That math problem just went right over my head.”
Gabriel-MSC: Yeah.
Kaatje-FAC: So I feel like people are less intimidated to ask questions. There’s less risk
of looking stupid. A lot of times people just want more info about something. If a topic
comes up, then they want the professor to expand a little about it. . . .—Canada, year 4
Samantha-FSR: I think it’s both content as well because there is more room for
interpretation in a lot of the English courses and a lot more discussion and you’re able to
do that, whereas a Physics concept or a Physics law, you’re learning what it is. You’re
not interpreting it, you’re not discussing whether you think it’s right because obviously
it’s right.—Canada, year 1

5.4.2 Class size. The second most robust factor to enable or constrain participation for
Canadian students was class size. This was a factor for 8 participants in four groups in 27
mentions over 7 conversations, which is slightly less than the results for major. Universal
wisdom among participants was that large classes make it harder to participate whereas small
classes facilitate the asking of questions and contributing to class discussions.
Canadian students said large classes were “huge” (Samantha, Rachel, Fagan, Georgia, Canada,
year 1; Hailey, Canada, year 4) and that participating in them was “really difficult” (Georgia,
Canada, year 1). Large classes were “harder, more intimidating to take part in (Fagan, Canada,
year 1). Samantha said, “I’m not comfortable with asking in front of a huge, 200-, 300-people lecture hall” and “You’re just receiving the information in large classes” (Canada, year 1), Rachel made it clear that large classes are “too big to ask questions” (Canada, year 1). Fagan took the matter of participation in large classes one step further by saying that “you could just sleep” (Canada, year 1). Sleeping in class suggests the student is not engaged or participating in any way, nor is there any expectation from the professor or classmates that the student would engage. This is the ultimate statement that participation does not and is not expected to happen in large classes.

Samantha-FSR: [I participate] Sometimes. I don’t want to say it’s not as often as smaller classes, but it’s pretty much you’re just receiving the information in large classes, whereas you can really put your own piece in it in small classes.—Canada, year 1

Canadian students were equally clear about the benefits of small classes: class size “actually makes a difference” (CD1-4M 481). Gabriel went so far as to say, “I think for me there’s a direct correlation between class size and my comfortability doing it” (Canada, year 4). Kaatje made a connection between research priorities and university funding of small classes, saying she understood that small classes are significantly more expensive to run. She lamented the lack of small classes: “But it’s such a different experience and you actually meet and make friends with people in your class. . . . Maybe that’s what you get when you go to a place like Harvard and you pay $40,000 and you get your 10-person classes or something” (year 4). The only positive comments made about large classes came from Canadians, who spoke positively about effective teaching techniques employed by certain professors, particularly in Science.
5.4.3 Social environment. Canadians did mention the emotional context of the classroom as affecting participation. However, this factor was less often mentioned by Canadians relative to other factors than it was by international participants. Seven participants raised this factor in 21 comments across both years. As well, Canadian participants as a whole were more positive than international participants in their assessment of their comfort level about participating in class. Canadian participants described the emotional context of the classroom in three dimensions: their own emotional comfort, the perceived comfort of classmates, and the connection to learning. Regarding their own emotional state, one Canadian said her participation rested on her being comfortable to say something and believing others would be able to discuss it. A second group of comments related to others’ perceived emotional comfort, such as not asking questions in class because it might distract others, not asking questions to avoid looking silly, and finding it scary to talk in front of a lot of people. Third, two students made the connection to learning when they said that it is “bad” not to ask your question in class because it will yield accurate information quickly, while Daisuke said that “you can learn way more if you’re into it and it’s fun” (Canada, year 1):

Samantha-FSR: I’d say it’s dependent on your class too because, more in smaller classes, if you have a silent classroom and no one ever asks any questions, [Daisuke laughs] . . . it’s horrible. Because even though you want to get a discussion going and I’m sure other people do too, you just feel like it’s not going to work. Maybe you’ll say something but no one else ever will. Whereas if you have a really engaged class and everyone says something you really feel like you can totally participate and no one is going to judge you because everybody’s doing it.
Michelle: So it’s not just which course you’re in, it’s kind of the makeup of the other students.

Samantha-FSR: Absolutely. Definitely.

Michelle: That’s funny. Because you can’t kind of predict that.

Samantha-FSR: No, you have no idea if you’ll get a bad class or a good class. And it really affects how you feel in the class, too. Because you’ll enjoy it more and take more material away from it if you’re engaged and you’re participating.

Daisuke-MSC: You can learn way more if you’re into it and if it’s fun.

Samantha-FSR: Yeah, exactly.

Daisuke-MSC: So the atmosphere is a contributor, I guess.—Canada, year 1

From this we can see that some Canadian students perceived the emotional context of the classroom to be a salient factor in enabling or constraining their participation in class, though with much less vehement and negative comments than international students made on the subject.

5.4.4 Role of the professor. Canadian students described the role of the professor as pivotal in enabling or constraining class participation. The role of the professor was the least-often mentioned factor but still had high consistency across Canadian students. Seven Canadians mentioned it 18 times. There were twice as many mentions by first-year students as by fourth-year students, so this topic was of greater interest to new students but also resonated with higher-level students.

Students described two distinct categories of professors. The first were those who expected students to engage, encouraged students, offered flexible office hours or appointment
times or email options, communicated indirectly that questions were welcome, came around to each small group during class time, actively helped students to open up and to enjoy the class more, and responded helpfully to students’ questions. The second category were those who “just stare[d],” gave the impression they were waiting to leave class quickly, did not expect students to engage, limited the discussion of controversial or sensitive topics, and responded harshly or inadequately to students’ questions.

Two Canadian students were eager to talk about the potential of good teaching to aid learning:

Daisuke-MSC: I think that teachers, in general, they have the power to enhance the class to participate and allow them to enjoy it more. Because I teach swimming as a lifeguard instructor back in Richmond and when I get first-day classes with my kids, because they are shy, so I play games with them first and I try to be funny. And you know how you play Simon Says and they start laughing and they eventually get used to it. And they’ll open themselves to you and that’s a great feeling. I think teachers have the power to do that. They just don’t know. Maybe they don’t know how or they don’t want to. They can.

... 

Samantha-FSR: It’s interesting you say that [to Daisuke] because I work at the UBC Pool doing the same thing so I absolutely know what he’s talking about. You can really make or break a class. And if you’re not into it as a teacher, not only will you not enjoy yourself, you can just tell that the kids are (a) not learning as much and not having as much fun, either. And that’s directly related to what your professor is doing in university. Totally.—Canada, year 1

Michelle: Is there anything that makes it easier to participate in class discussions?
Daisuke-MSC: That ultimately I think it’s about the professor. Because if you have a good professor, he or she will tell you indirectly that questions are okay. Because my Chem 121 first term, I had [a professor]. He was a really good professor in a sense that he basically told us not to be shy and told us to come to him whenever we wanted help, but most professors say that too but they don’t actually show it. But [the professor] did. And when he was teaching, the way he taught us was also a way of showing us that he cared because he showed us. Some professors, they just tell us the material and they don’t explain, but [the professor], he actually took the time to explain every single detail and everything made sense when he did it. I guess it depended on the prof and the method that he or she teaches.—Canada, year 1

Michelle: What makes it harder or easier to do? Are there things that make it easier to participate in class or that make it hard to do it?

Titus Nelson-MAC: I think generally how your prof has responded to other students in the past. If they’ve shut down another student in the past, you probably aren’t going to stick your own neck out there. If you find they generally respect students and give them a good answer, you’re probably more willing to do it.—Canada, year 1

5.4.5 Missing factors. The factors of culture, language, and first year were completely absent for Canadian participants.

5.5 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter presented the findings for international and Canadian students related to the NSSE behaviours asking a question in class or contributing to a class discussion in order of robustness as determined by frequency, distribution, and significance.
International and Canadian students perceived asking questions in class or contributing to class discussions as a social practice with an emotional connection. However, international students identified this as an emotionally risky activity and one that incited considerable anxiety. International students described themselves as outsiders to the unclear and confounding academic expectations of classroom participation. Their anxiety itself seemed to be a barrier to participation. Canadians, on the other hand, in some cases found participating in class to be enjoyable. This perspective was not found among international students.

International and Canadian students similarly described participating in class as a learning activity that could provide understanding of the material and exposure to new ideas. Both groups valued learning and recognized that learning is not automatic. Canadian students, however, had a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between participation, engagement, and learning. They pointed out that participating in class in a rote manner may be unproductive, whereas engaging with the material while participating could yield the desired learning outcomes.

Canadian and international participants said they responded to the challenges of participating in class by looking to other sources for class material. Canadian students emphasized that science and technical classes were the most likely sites for them to seek other sources. International students made no such distinction and emphasized friends and social networks as a key alternative source.

The factors that aid or constrain asking questions in class or contributing to class discussions were somewhat similar between Canadian and international participants. However, there were distinct shifts in emphasis, and some factors were missing entirely from Canadian students’ conversation. For international students, the social environment in the classroom was
often highly alienating and created a high degree of uncertainty, which spoke to their heightened sense of awareness to the social context in which they were studying. Canadian students referenced this awareness of social environment in the classroom but spoke far less negatively about it and were the only ones to indicate that this environment could at times be friendly. Large class size was highlighted by international and Canadian participants as a tremendous barrier to participating in class, and almost all of their comments were universally negative, with Canadians’ vehemence outstripping that of the international students. For Canadian students, the single greatest factor determining their participation in class was major or area of study of the course. Specifically, they spoke about the challenges of participating in science classes as these often featured a fast pace, a high volume of material, factual content, and large class size. International students saw this differently: there was no type of class in which it was easier to participate, but they were more likely to participate in classes in their major, required classes, classes in which they were likely to excel, or in classes in which participation was expected.

Professors appeared as significant players in aiding or constraining students’ participation. International students looked to professors to help them navigate the unsettling transition from professor- to student-centred classrooms, whereas Canadian students divided the professoriate into two categories: those who supported the engagement of students and those who were less welcoming.

Culture and language appeared as salient factors for international students as they contemplated participating in class. In particular, Chinese-heritage students found participating in class persistently difficult to understand and an activity for which their previous schooling had ill prepared them, even into fourth year. Lack of English-language confidence led to a decreased
likelihood to ask questions in class or participate in class discussions. Canadian students expressed no such cultural or linguistic barriers.

First-year international students described participating in class as alienating and unclear, whereas no such distinction between first- and fourth-year student participation was evidenced in the comments of Canadian students.

This chapter presented the findings related to the NSSE item *asking a question in class or contributing to a class discussion*. Subsequent chapters present findings pertaining to student-faculty interactions, relationships with staff, connections to people different than yourself, and demographic variables of the participants.
Chapter 6.

Findings on Additional NSSE Behaviours

This chapter presents findings related to additional NSSE behaviours that were addressed in the study but which were not presented in the previous chapter. This includes student behaviours and institutional practices. This chapter continues to address the second half of the first research question:

1. How do UBC international undergraduate students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan . . . perceive select NSSE behaviours? How do these interpretations and perceptions compare to those of Canadian undergraduate students?

This chapter also presents findings relevant to the second research question:

2. How do UBC international undergraduate students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan perceive their engagement with their host university? How do these interpretations and perceptions compare to those of Canadian undergraduate students?

The findings are organized according to NSSE benchmarks. The first benchmark to be discussed is student-faculty interaction, including focus group comments relating to the NSSE question about relationships with faculty members. The third benchmark addressed in this chapter is supportive campus environment and includes findings bearing on relationships with staff. Finally, the fourth benchmark that was considered in this study was enriching educational experiences with a specific focus on students’ serious conversations with people very different than themselves. The fifth benchmark, level of academic challenge, was not addressed in this study.
The findings in this chapter will follow the analytic structure of *framing* and *factors* for each behaviour, as was introduced in the previous chapter. In most cases, findings from international students will be addressed first, and the subsequent presentation of Canadian students’ comments will include comparisons to international student responses. Within those categories (e.g., framing by international students), findings will be presented in descending order of robustness as a combination of frequency, distribution and significance.

### 6.1 Student-Faculty Interaction

I chose to investigate the NSSE benchmark *student-faculty interaction* for two reasons. First, thinking of my role as an educational practitioner, students frequently come to the international student advisors in my office to share their concerns about interacting with faculty members. As well, other offices refer international students to us because of ongoing difficulties students have interacting with faculty members. On the other side, faculty members often approach us to share their concerns about students’ struggles to communicate with them. International students commonly confess they do not know how to approach a professor or have been too anxious to do so. Challenges vary from approaching professors outside of class to academic integrity to legitimacy of non-English sources for assignments. In my area of practice, in nearly every case the situation can be resolved by acknowledging the legitimacy of each party’s concerns and clarifying a misunderstanding between the student and the professor about what is expected and about the schema that underlie the expectation.

Second, analysis of the UBC 2008 NSSE scores showed that international respondents indicated a higher frequency of engagement with faculty members than did Canadians. If, as we might surmise from a Bourdieusian perspective, students lacked the cultural capital to engage with faculty members effectively, why would they indicate that they engage with them more
often? If international students misconstrued these NSSE items, as reported in Chapter 4, and responded in a way that did not reflect their actual experiences, this would explain the surprising results. I was interested to pursue this matter, and the institutional sponsor also requested that this topic be included in the study.

As I consider Bourdieu’s theories, I can imagine that students might find themselves disadvantaged if they have been habituated to interact with faculty members differently than faculty members at a Canadian university might expect, that is, if their accumulated cultural capital did not translate well to this new field. I was interested to know if this was the case through the eyes of students and if so, how they described it and what factors they felt could mitigate this effect.

The relationships students have with faculty members in university sit at the confluence of several of Hofstede’s (2001) cultural dimensions, including power distance index (PDI), individualism index (IDV), and uncertainty avoidance index (UA). Students from some cultural / country contexts that feature larger power distance might be accomplished in receiving the professor’s word as gospel but be ill equipped to critically engage with professors’ ideas or to make sense of Canadian university professors’ relative informality, such as casual attire or the use of first names. Students from some highly collectivist contexts might struggle to understand the self-determination required of them to pursue knowledge, clarify their own misunderstandings, and accomplish independent work without the support of instructors or peers. Students from some strong uncertainty avoidance contexts might struggle with the practice of some Canadian university professors to admit they do not have all the answers and whose structure for assignments and papers may leave room for interpretation. These are just some
examples of the challenges students might face in gauging how their accumulated cultural capital may or may not serve them well in their new context.

In addition, in Bourdieusian terms, faculty members could play a critical role in equipping newcomers for the field of Canadian undergraduate studies with needed capital. Faculty members produce and transfer academic knowledge to the students; faculty members employ a variety of tools, such as textbooks and online materials, to extend their capacity to transfer knowledge, but faculty members still by and large control the means of knowledge transfer. For example, most engineering students begin with relatively little knowledge of engineering content and over time gain content knowledge and a feel for the discipline; over time they acquire cultural and social capital, which in turn can be traded in for increased prestige and sway among their fellow students, mentors, and future employers. I was interested to see if students related to this idea of faculty members as a needed source of capital and what factors enabled or constrained their ability to access this needed resource.

The next task was to select the NSSE items related to student-faculty interaction to discuss in the focus groups. The NSSE benchmark student-faculty interaction includes a number of survey items, so to focus the conversation with students I selected the two that seemed to be the most broadly applicable:

- 1P: “During the current school year, about how often have . . . you discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class?” and
- 8B: “Select the circle that best represents the quality of your relationship with faculty members:
  
  Unavailable, Unhelpful, Unsympathetic (1)

  Available, Helpful, Sympathetic” (7) (NSSE, 2008).
In the interests of time, I chose not to include the questions on student-faculty interaction that would apply to a smaller subset of students, such as 7D: “Before you graduate from your institution, [do you plan to] work on a research project with a faculty member outside of course or program requirements?”

The focus group questions on this topic were designed to elicit students’ perspectives on the behaviour of talking to faculty members outside of class as well as their relationships with faculty members in general. As in other sections, the questions focused on whether students engage in the behaviour (HAPPENS), how they perceive the behaviour (FRAMING), and what enables or constrains their ability to engage in the behaviour (FACTORS). The questions asked in the focus groups were:

- Let’s look at question 1P. What is it like for you to (in English) “discuss ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class”? How important is this to you? What makes this harder or easier to do?
- Let’s look at question 8B. What are your relationships like with faculty members?

I expected international participants to express higher levels of negative emotions related to interactions with faculty members, including anxiety and frustration, than Canadian participants. It seemed reasonable that international participants would struggle to understand the cultural expectations faculty members have of them and that more of them would find interactions with faculty members awkward and incomprehensible than would Canadians. I expected to hear that international students lacked the cultural capital to negotiate a relatively informal, individualistic and uncertain environment in which faculty at a Canadian university might operate. I also anticipated that international students would say they actually have fewer interactions with faculty members than do Canadians and that their NSSE responses were
somehow due to a misunderstanding or desire to overstate their actual behaviour, perhaps due to social desirability bias. Finally, I thought international students would call for greater explication of student-faculty interaction norms in Canada, greater support from faculty members, and better equipping of faculty members to support international students effectively.

As discussed in the section on NSSE in chapter 4, the study showed that a large number of international—and some Canadian—students had a non-standard interpretation of faculty member, which seems to explain why the UBC 2008 NSSE scores showed more frequent interactions with faculty members for international students than for Canadian students. Common interpretations included “other students in my faculty” or “teaching assistants.” We would expect students to have much more contact with either fellow students in their faculty or with teaching assistants than with professors, so if students referenced these definitions, they would be expected to have higher scores on these NSSE items than those who applied the traditional definition. It seemed the mystery of the NSSE results was solved and the question of higher engagement expressed by international students might be answered already. That allows us to focus on students’ perceptions or “framing” of faculty member relations and the factors that enable or constrain them.

6.1.1 Framing of relationships with faculty members by international students. International students described their relationships with faculty members (when they were speaking about professors or teaching assistants) in several phases. For convenience I have arranged them in an order in which they might occur chronologically for a student, but this order does not come from the students themselves.
One student spoke evocatively about the role of the professor to pique her interest in a subject. Interest was important to capture the student’s attention and draw her into the topic of the class.

Several students described interactions with professors that opened their minds to new ideas, conflicting opinions, and ways of looking at the topic. They used words such as *opens* and *broadens*. They attributed these new ideas to the interactions with the professors, distinct from interactions with fellow students or other information sources, such as textbooks or the Internet.

Jacey-FSC: Even if it’s something I know, even if it’s something I actually did understand, just by talking to them [faculty members] my perception becomes broader. . . . As students, we probably don’t know as much as they do; but since they are already experts in their fields, they have a broader perspective and guide us on what to find more on, where I should be looking at, and what other resources are out there. It’s very beneficial that way.—Korea, year 4

Again, “FSC” behind Jacey’s name (a self-selected pseudonym) tells us she was a *female* student (F) in the Faculty of *Science* (S) who *commuted* to the university rather than residing in a university student residence (C).

The majority of comments about the role of the professor described ways professors clarify content for the students. The focus group questions focused on relationships with and interactions with faculty members outside of class, so the majority of comments related to one-on-one interactions in office hours, in the ten minutes after class, through email, or during a few extracurricular interactions such as class dinners organized by the professors. Students talked about the importance of clarifying lecture content, instructions for assignments, assigned essay
topics, and other course content. The comments did not mention the ability of professors to make the material clear but instead focused on the expert knowledge of the professors and therefore the efficiency of consulting with professors directly rather than seeking other sources.

R.-MAR: Professors don’t really word the question in a clear, precise way in terms of the topic or the process. I hate unclear or confusing things so I ask about them and ask for clarifications. Since it is directly related to my marks, and if I understand the question incorrectly, my marks won’t look so appealing later.—Korea, year 4

Several students described professors as experts. Such comments highlighted the wisdom of consulting with faculty members because they hold expert knowledge, but more often the comments pointed to the emotional and power distance between students and professors. In other words, the expertise of professors renders them unapproachable and intimidating.

A good number of international participants commented on professors’ helpfulness, kindness, and accommodation of needs of individual students. This was the human element of the student-professor relationship, when the interaction became more than transactional. One student described personal distress from a family crisis at mid-semester and the academic concessions the professor made possible. Another was grateful for a professor who invited students to his home, and another student was impressed that a professor attended a political event organized by a classmate. Several students commented on the importance of knowing professors for graduate school and job applications, while others remarked on faculty members who remembered students’ names and brought tea and cookies to exams. Students who commented on professors’ helpfulness, kindness, or willingness to accommodate seemed surprised but grateful.
6.1.2 Factors enabling or constraining relationships with faculty members as perceived by international students. Approachability emerged as a key theme within the faculty questions. A number of students from every year level and every country or region mentioned approachability, and there was a surprising consistency to their comments. Approachability refers to students’ perceptions that individual faculty members will welcome contact initiated by students. The atmosphere created by a professor signals to students that it is safe to approach him or her. Distinct from their teaching ability or students’ interest in them as a person or a scholar, approachability seems to be a measure of students’ level of comfort with initiating contact with the faculty member.

International participants said they found it much easier to talk with a professor who was approachable than one who was not. They said that the comparative lack of hierarchy in Canada made it less stressful to study in Canada. As well, they said that if they gauge a professor to be approachable in one interaction, they would be more likely to approach that faculty member again.

International students were very clear about what approachability looked like in faculty members. Professors were more approachable if they told students to approach them, indicated on the course syllabus that students could contact them, kept office hours, had an open-door policy, were friendly, encouraged students to ask questions, made time to talk to students after class rather than rushing off, scheduled meetings with students to review their progress, and responded to email.

Jason-MEC: Some professors explicitly tell the students to email the question first. Then the professor will pick the one that the whole class should probably know and if there are trivial questions, he or she will answer it rather in person.—Korea, year 4
Leveosa-FAC: Some faculty members are not available at all.

Jiefang: Could you give an example?

Leveosa-FAC: For example, I wanted to see a professor to talk about a presentation, she goes, “I can’t be here Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday . . . it’s in conflict with my schedule.” So I can’t actually go to see her except that I have to skip another class to see her. I don’t like that at all.

Jiefang: Do you think that they should have an alternative arrangement?

Leveosa-FAC: No, because they are busy themselves, with their research in addition to teaching. It is difficult to find a time we are all available. So it is not all their fault. It’s just hard to work out.—China, year 4

By contrast, students said approachability suffered when professors dismissed students, had long lineups of students after class, told students to find the answer themselves before asking a question (this discouraged even those questions that students had researched), said they were too busy to talk, or acted in ways that were “unsympathetic” and “merciless.”

Hannah-FAC: However, relationships with faculty members also depend on the characteristics of the instructors. Some instructors really don’t want to talk to students and others actually beg students to come visit them. A few of them even said there are cookies and candies in the office. There are unsympathetic instructors, though. Some will be merciless while others try to connect with students.—Korea, year 4

Even office hours could be “weird,” students said, unless the student brought a topic to discuss, such as the latest midterm.
Mabel-FCC: But I think if you suddenly go to see a professor during his office hours to just discuss [it seems strange]… Because normally when you go [see a professor] at office hours you have some questions to ask. If you suddenly go just to discuss readings or ideas with him it would be kind of weird (people laugh). —Taiwan, year 4

*Class size* emerged in reference to student-faculty interactions just as it did for nearly every topic in the study. In short, large class sizes made it difficult to interact with professors and small classes led to a natural connection with professors. In large classes students said there were too many people waiting to talk to the professor so only a lucky few had a chance to meet them. In small classes there was more opportunity for faculty to know students’ names, notice when they missed class, and attend to students as individuals, such as providing makeup exams. Class size was an unexpected finding and was raised by several students across the groups.

Rae-FAC: I think it’s still about academic, which is the class size. I really like small classes. I don’t like big classes. Right now, every class I have is big class. I find it really hard. Like my psychology class, which is in Woodward, there are so many people. And I really feel a lot of pressure. I just feel that I only listen to the lecture and there is no opportunity for me to interact with the professor. As a consequence, I personally think that I do not absorb a lot. If it is a small class, I can discuss and ask questions. If the class is big, I find it really difficult.—Hong Kong, year 1

Overall, regarding *major*, students noted in which academic areas professors were approachable, structured effective academic activities, inspired and clarified, responded to individual student circumstances, fostered peer learning across diversity, supported diverse languages and cultures, fostered social network development, and created an atmosphere
conducive to contributing in class and making presentations. International students referred to 
major when discussing faculty members’ approachability. Two students in two groups used 
major in this way. They said professors in certain majors were approachable and required them 
to check in after each midterm.

A few international students mentioned ways that professors in certain majors crafted 
more effective academic activities than others. One professor found ways to make a large class 
as effective as a small one. Another professor gave personal feedback on written work, including 
a grade and extensive comments on what students could improve. A third professor crafted 
discussions and presentations so students from different countries could hear one another’s 
perspectives. These examples stood out in that students offered them in response to questions 
about their interactions with faculty members. So in the students’ minds, professors’ choices of 
academic activities that helped students engage with their learning also improved their 
interactions with the professors.

Several international participants in both years and in several country or regional groups 
commented that faculty members were under great pressure and that busyness was a barrier to 
interacting with them. Research obligations were the most often-cited pressure that prevented 
faculty members from focusing on their teaching and being available to students. Students said 
professors had no time between classes to talk to students, had office hours at times students 
were not available, and were too busy to meet with students.

International participants’ stance toward professors’ busyness was surprisingly one of 
forgiveness. They said they understood the pressures under which professors worked and why 
those pressures were not likely to change. This was in sharp contrast to their perceptions of staff, 
whom they judged harshly for being similarly busy and unavailable, as discussed later in the
chapter. Pressure and busyness give us the first indications that international participants were aware of the university as a political entity where there are contested interests and power dynamics. But for international students, it is clear that at least part of the university structures and the demands on professors were evident to them and impacted students directly.

International students from 10 of the 12 groups, representing every year of every country, made over 30 comments about specific cultures when talking about faculty members. They explained a syllogism similar to that surrounding participating in class, but with additional impacts on their relationships with faculty members: professors at UBC do not act as merely a source “like a textbook” nor do they dictate when questions can be asked through the raising of hands. This leads to confusion on the part of students because they do not know how to interact appropriately with the professor in class. The tools they might use to overcome this confusion, namely English fluency and insider cultural knowledge, are also not at their disposal. They are unsure whether their questions are appropriate conceptually, then they doubt if their English is good enough to formulate the questions grammatically, then they recognize they are cultural outsiders, such as when the rest of the class understands a joke and they do not. All of these factors, they indicated, make it unlikely that they will interact with faculty in a meaningful way.

Ray Ray-FAC: Many professors tell jokes in class and then everyone is laughing except for us. We put up a smiling face because others are laughing. [Others laugh.]—China, year 4

6.1.3 Framing of relationships with faculty members by Canadian students. Canadian participants had similar stories to international students about the role of professors to clarify their understanding of course content and instructions for assignments. The interactions they
described were largely transactional. They would be interested to converse about the course content with a professor more broadly but had not done so and did not expect it. They did not talk about professors piquing their interest in the topic or opening their mind to new ideas. However, they did add the element of professors inspiring them to study more and harder, which international participants did not. In addition, international students’ unique imagined role for professors was more foundational (sparking interest, opening one’s mind to new ideas about the subject), whereas Canadian students’ unique imagined role was more additive (inspiring them to study more and harder). This is a pattern we will see repeated elsewhere: International students, as newcomers, are looking for support earlier in the process, whereas Canadian students are already habituated to the environment and so are seeking more advanced supports.

Kaatje-FAC: I think what’s more important with faculty members is that they inspire you to work hard. There are some professors . . . who are really good and understanding and you just really want to perform well in that class. That’s what I think is the best type of professor.—Canada, year 4

Michelle: In your opinion, what’s the most important thing that was said here tonight? . . .

Nadia-FAC: The profs should be more approachable. . . .—Canada, year 1

Mr. Volts-MEC: I gave it a 4 [of 7] because I’ve had some good profs who I’ve gone up to and they were always available. At the same time, there’s been some professors that are very unhelpful and they don’t show any care for students. They’re just doing their thing and leaving.—Canada, year 4

6.1.4 Factors enabling or constraining relationships with faculty members as perceived by Canadian students. Like international students, Canadian students said by far the greatest
influence on their interactions with faculty members was the faculty members’ approachability. They had very clear opinions about who was and was not approachable among their professors, and they said they did not approach professors who were not approachable. They said approachable professors told students to come talk to them, wrote in the class syllabus that students should come talk to them, had office hours at times students could attend, and answered other students’ questions with civility. These comments came from students in all years and from every citizenship, confirming that approachability is the key factor in international and Canadian students’ likelihood to interact with and have a positive relationship with faculty members.

Kaatje-FAC: It’s usually the professors the students like where they want to engage more and work harder. You get some of these really popular professors, like [a professor], who’s the head of [my department], and you can see that students really want to perform well in his class because he inspires them. They like him a lot.—Canada, year 4

Canadian students were concerned but less vehemently than international students that class size affected their interactions with faculty members. They said there was no interaction with faculty members in large classes.

Georgia-FSR: I just go to class and I go home. Do what I learn in class, do my homework, that’s it. And again, same thing, in science classes, they’re so huge, there’s not really a chance. There’s the ten minutes between when they teach and when they teach again. There’s a hundred students, and if you get to talk to them then you’re the lucky one of the hundred. And other than that you don’t see them.—Canada, year 1
Bubble-FAC: They’re busy. They usually have class right after, so it’s hard to approach them. [pause] I guess, say, if physics is a big class, I don’t really want to go to the prof. He doesn’t know you, I don’t know him.—Canada, year 1

By contrast, Canadian students said that small classes allowed them to interact with faculty members during and after class, made it possible for faculty members to know them by name, and allowed for a more positive relationship. This research suggests that, to the extent that student-faculty interactions positively impact student outcomes, large classes pose a substantive barrier to positive interactions and therefore to positive student outcomes.

Canadian students made no references to culture or language when answering questions about their relationships with faculty members or their experiences talking to faculty members outside of class. Since focus group questions did not mention culture or language, it is not surprising that Canadian participants did not bring them up, but it is all the more noteworthy that international participants did.

Faculty busyness was also mentioned by Canadian participants as a barrier to interacting with professors. Here again, the predominant tone was frustration with the external pressures but forgiveness of the faculty members. There was a sense that when the professor was not engaged with their teaching, the learning process was compromised for students.

Sabrina-FAC: The professor has taken on too much this year. We’ve had a lot of professors away in [my department] this year so she’s taken on a bunch of extra courses. She’s cross-listed in [another department] so she has a lot of other responsibilities as well. She’s just so overwhelmed that she just can’t facilitate the class. She doesn’t engage
the students at all, so the whole year [the class] has just been just zoned out for the whole year and resisting being part of the project. . . . —Canada, year 4

6.2 Relationships With Staff

This section presents the findings related to the supportive campus environment topic of relationships with staff.

6.2.1 Introduction to supportive campus environment. Student engagement theory suggests that students who perceive themselves to be well supported by students, staff, and faculty will experience a more supportive campus environment and be more likely to demonstrate desired outcomes such as student satisfaction, higher GPA, and persistence to graduation. NSSE question 8 is associated with the supportive campus environment benchmark and reads as follows:

8. Mark the box that best represents the quality of your relationships with people at your institution.

a. Relationships with other students.
   - Unfriendly, unsupportive, sense of alienation (1) –
   - Friendly, supportive, sense of belonging (7)

b. Relationships with faculty members.
   - Unavailable, unhelpful, unsympathetic (1) –
   - Available, helpful, sympathetic (7)

c. Relationships with administrative personnel and offices.
   - Unhelpful, inconsiderate, rigid (1) –
   - Helpful, considerate, flexible (7) (NSSE, 2008)
6.2.2 Introduction to relationships with staff. At North American post-secondary institutions, staff is a term often used to refer to employees of the institution whose roles do not involve formal teaching of academic subjects. In my experience, staff at university are distinct from faculty as follows: faculty hold academic knowledge and disciplinary professional capital; staff hold the key to unraveling the many complicated areas of logistical and developmental knowledge students need to thrive.

There being thousands of staff at an institution the size of UBC, one must make some assumptions about which staff students might reference if one wants to make sense of their responses. It seems reasonable to assume students will reference the narrow band of staff whom they see in their daily interactions, particularly those with direct student support and advising in their job descriptions. At UBC these include but are not limited to academic advisors, international student advisors, graduate staff in academic departments, licensed counsellors, enrolment services professionals (registrar’s office, including student financial assistance and awards), medical doctors and nurses, clerical staff, diversity and disability advisors, student involvement and leadership staff (including orientation and transition), career educators, librarians, wellness staff, learning specialists, technology staff, laboratory staff, residence and food services staff, and many more.

Staff members have a distinct role in interpreting and enacting student engagement theory at their institutions. Many of the behaviours or recommended experiences in student engagement theory are made possible by staff members. These include enriched educational experiences, student involvement opportunities, learning skills development, personal and career coaching, well-being and safety programming, and learning communities such as residence and first year

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4 In some European and Australian contexts, academic staff refers to faculty members.
experience programming. I was curious to see to what extent focus group participants would be aware of the role staff members play to facilitate their success at UBC.

Thinking with Bourdieu, I expected that Canadian students might have less need for interactions with staff and be better able to navigate the rules of the game and the field of Canadian education than international students. I expected that international students, as relative newcomers to the field of Canadian education, might have more need for relationships with staff who could pass along the cultural capital that comes from knowing the rules of the game. As a staff member myself, I hoped that international students would indicate higher levels of support from staff because of the dedicated supports the institution has put in place for them in integrated and distributed ways over the past decade.

Thinking with Hofstede, I wondered whether citizens of countries with strong uncertainty avoidance index (UA) scores would complain particularly about unclear information from staff. I wondered if those from lower individualism (IDV)-scoring countries would voice concerns about the institution’s lack of care for students. In my practice, we often hear from international students from certain regions that they are shocked the university does not automatically provide housing for every new international student or similar expressions of institutional provision, as one might experience in certain regions abroad.

6.2.3 Relationships with staff for international and Canadian students. This section will present findings related to students’ relationships with administrative personnel and offices. Framing will be the focus of this section, as students did not mention substantive factors that enabled or constrained relationships with staff. When analyzing the data related to relationships with administrative personnel and offices, as with other study data, I considered first the comments of international students and then turned to those of Canadian participants. I was
amazed when item after item, issue after issue was raised by Canadian students with nearly identical tone and frequency as by international students. Accordingly, this section presents the findings for this topic as a piece. At the end of this section, I identify the few distinctions between international and Canadian participants.

This section is divided into three broader themes:

- No more “campus marathon”
- Options, please
- International students’ experiences are distinct

Because there are so many nuanced ways students imagined their interactions with administrative staff, I have included minor headings to clarify the focus of each small section that follows.

6.2.3.1 No more “campus marathon.” Participants expected more from staff than they experienced in reality. Questions about relationships with staff elicited story after story of unsatisfactory interactions. Participants reported being sent back and forth between offices on a “campus marathon” (Rachel, Canada, year 1), setting aside a great deal of time and still not finding answers to their questions.

Rachel-FSC: Also for the administrative offices—I’m a first-year student, right? So I’m really not familiar with anything and I don’t know why... I’m trying to figure out how to get into a major and stuff so I had to go through each office and all the answer I got is like, “It’s not what we do. You have to go blah-blah-blah office.” So I go to that office and they say, “Go back to blah-blah-blah office.” Oh my God, I don’t know where to find a person. It’s just a simple question. But they just don’t answer me because it’s not their
business. . . It means I have to schedule all three hours of a campus marathon to ask a question. Last time I spent three hours going from here to there, back and forth. And I still don’t get an answer.—Canada, year 1

Waka-FAC: First, I try to figure it out by myself and if I can’t find the answer, I ask my friends. If my friends didn’t know, then I ask where I can get the help.

Ian-MAR: That’s true.

Yolanda-FAC: I don’t want to go because I don’t want the process of getting referred to different people [laughs].—Japan, year 4

Not great service. Encounters with staff were reported to be largely unproductive. Students’ general assessment of staff members was that they were mostly competent and would follow up when necessary but not go out of their way to help them. This related to staff’s attitude toward the work, which was often interpreted as impatience and a sense that they were too busy to deal with students. This perception also related to staff’s knowledge about their own office’s scope of practice. Students said staff in the same office would give inconsistent information. Additionally this related to staff’s knowledge of appropriate referral points. Several students described in vivid detail being shuttled back and forth between different offices, in some cases being referred back to the original office, as they tried to find the information or clarification they needed. This experience related, said participants, to staff’s inordinately heavy workload. Even well-intentioned staff were too busy and overworked to pay attention to individual students. Finally, the students said their experience related to the scale of the university; they talked about the university being too big to do anything but follow policy.
Amanda-FAC: They do not actively offer their help and [administrative staff] they just do what they are required to do. . . . They just want to reduce their workload.—China, year 1

Yvonne-FSC: Since the school is huge, UBC doesn’t care for every single student’s situations. It’s simply “follow the rules.”—Korea, year 4

Some positive stories. One student gushed about a relationship with a staff member who was available, encouraging, and offered personalized guidance beyond their specific topic area. There were a handful of other positive stories of staff, such as in Student Development (now part of the Centre for Student Involvement & Careers or CSI/C), making extra effort to help students. The Undergraduate Office (UGO) at the Sauder School of Business received nothing but praise for going above and beyond for its students. One particularly enthusiastic user was urged by her commerce advisor during orientation to come to the office because she had already paid for the service, and she attributed her highly supportive relationship with the advisor to that initial, compelling invitation. The Arts Academic Advising office was similarly lauded for its thorough and professional service. Students also praised “Brock Hall” (now replaced by Enrolment Services Professionals), “International House” (the popular nickname for International Student Development), the International Student Initiative, Career Services (now part of the CSI/C), and Integrated Sciences. Science Information Centre and UBC Student Housing assignment staff (now part of Student Housing and Hospitality Services) received a mix of very positive and very negative reviews.

Strongly negative impacts. Two students had strongly negative experiences of staff making mistakes that cost the students up to a semester of additional study before they could graduate, with no acknowledgement from the office that a mistake had been made and no effort to ameliorate the damages. Three students spoke in strongly negative terms about a particular
office: for one it was the library, for another Science advising, for another Arts advising, calling them “the weakest link” (Mr. Big, Sabrina, & Gabriel, Canada, year 4). Students emphasized that although anyone can make mistakes, the mistakes of staff advisors can have dire consequences for students and more care should be taken by staff to avoid mistakes.

Gabriel-MSC: I had a bad experience. They messed up my registration date for this year and as a result, they pushed my course registration date back, which meant that I couldn’t get into my fourth-year courses because they were full. They told me they couldn’t do anything, and that was that. And so I have to take another semester because of that.— Canada, year 4

*Instrumental need—to get things done or clarified.* Participants regardless of their faculty wanted the same things from their relationships with staff. There was an instrumentality about their relationships with staff: they go to them because they need something, they go because they have looked online and asked friends but cannot figure something out, and they go because they have questions. They said they wanted attention to their problem, follow-up, and exceptions when warranted. Registration, graduation requirements, and transfer credit seemed to be particularly sticky issues. Surprisingly, only one student spoke about proactively accessing administrative personnel before the help was needed. This student gave many examples of intentional planning of his university experience, including visiting the careers office in his first year so he could be familiar with their services as he believed he would need them in later years. Most other participants went to staff members when the need arose.

*It’s their job, unlike faculty.* Unlike faculty, staff did not garner sympathy from participants, as students seemed to expect that staff’s primary job was serving students. This distinction
surprised me. Students’ perceptions of the role of faculty interactions and the role of staff interactions seemed almost unrelated. Where faculty members inspired, opened minds, clarified ideas, and created approachable environments, staff interpreted guidelines and presented options for students to navigate necessary but complicated systems. When faculty were inaccessible, students were disappointed but understanding; when staff were inaccessible, students were simply disappointed.

Unlike with professors, participants were not looking for relationships with staff members. Only one student identified a staff member by name, and one other student described an ongoing, close relationship with a staff advisor. Most did not see a personal relationship with staff members as important. Kacey-FAC said, “I only go when it’s necessary. I talk, and then it’s over” (Japan, year 4).

Titus Nelson-MAC: I wrote not very [important], because generally speaking at the end of the day you’ll still get by. It’s not like, if someone came to me and asks, “What do I need for a good university experience?” I probably wouldn’t be like, “Make sure you get along with the administration people!”—Canada, year 4

6.2.3.2 Options, please. Students spoke at length about the importance of options. They seemed to be saying that as relative newcomers to the world of university bureaucracy, they could not see the breadth of options for themselves and needed the staff to point them out.

Options did not seem to refer to a catalogue of possibilities but rather pathways from their current situation to their desired state. They were not asking for variety but for practical guidance specific to their situation.
Amanda-FAC: At least what they offered provides an alternative, which is helpful to us. Because we are not “experts” in the field, we do not know what solutions are available. As an “expert helper” [professional staff], your job is to provide advice on how to solve the problem with possible solutions. It doesn’t matter whether they are useful or not, what I look for is just these solutions.—China, year 1

Georgia-FSR: It’s really handy because I have no idea how things work or what I want to do or what I need or credits or anything like that. So if you can go and talk to them and you can sit down and be like, “Okay, explain it all,” it’s really handy.—Canada, year 1

Websites useful but not clear enough; off-putting to be sent back there. Study participants made frequent references to administrative office websites. They said that most of the information they need is now online. They often consulted websites before consulting a staff member, taking up to two weeks to research the topic at hand. A number of students expressed frustration that the staff person simply directed them back to the website. Students said they were looking for clarification, personalized interpretation, or confirmation of material they had already accessed online. When this was not forthcoming, they were disappointed. No one said they were able to find what they needed from consulting the websites solely.

Vaguely aware of who you are and what you do—too many of you . . . Student awareness of staff offices was vague. Few students used the appropriate names for staff offices but most could identify the physical locations of the offices, such as “Uh, yeah, that one downstairs from here [in Buchanan Building]” (Titus Nelson, Canada, year 4). Two students had a confused conversation about where to take their questions, ranging from Brock Hall (registrarial functions) to various academic advising offices. Another student said he would go to Engineering Student Services only to be sent to Applied Science Student Services and finally to Brock Hall. Many
participants said they knew the offices were there and had a general impression that they would be helpful, though the students had never or rarely gone there.

Senhaneko-FAR: They are kind of out there, like even though they exist, you don’t feel the importance of going to them sometimes. Like, they become merely a resource. But I don’t think they advertise them enough so we don’t [think we] actually have them . . . we have them in the back of our mind, in other words. But then when we do need to talk to them, they are pretty helpful most of the time? Yeah.—Taiwan, year 1

Waka-FAC: There are too many resources so I don’t know where to go. [Everyone nods and agrees.]—Japan, year 4

**Graduate school information is missing.** Students listed several topics they were disappointed that staff could not address. Of these, all but one seemed to be within the mandate of the offices students were contacting. However, students expected to find graduate school options, particularly information about graduate programs outside of UBC. They expected to find this at their undergraduate advising offices but did not. They said they were sent back to their department heads but seemed mystified as to why that would be so. This was the only topic I heard that participants expected but which I understand from my practice is not within the mandate of academic advising offices at UBC.

**6.2.3.3 International students’ experiences are distinct.**

**Experts and elders.** International students did have a few perceptions that were different from those of Canadian participants. One Chinese student described staff members as “expert helper[s]” (Amanda, China, year 1) who were uniquely positioned to interpret and clarify administrative matters and present the options suitable to the student’s unique situation. One
student from Taiwan (but who identifies herself as coming from Thailand) memorably referred to staff as “elders” (Miu, year 4) from whom she could learn in ways she could not from her peers. These images of “expert helper” and “elder” take us away from a functional view of staff interactions toward a more complex set of role expectations. Expert helper suggests that staff provide more than a bank of knowledge but also a set of skills for interacting with students and applying the relevant knowledge to the students’ unique situations. On the one hand, elder can refer to one who is physically older. However, elder is also a role played by those older people who hold a place of honour in many societies as guardians of cultural values and are revered advisors to the community. In such depictions, we can see students expecting staff to provide guidance, knowledge, and expert care beyond the transactional view espoused by most Canadian participants.

Miu-FAC: I think actually these people can be helpful to me. I worked at a coffee shop next to UBC Bookstore before, and in the morning, people working in the offices nearby came in to buy coffee, and when they were waiting for their coffee, they were chatting with me, and giving me so much information, either about on campus or off-campus. . . . I learned a lot from them, because they are elders after all.—Taiwan, year 4

Access points do not feel right. International participants also focused on access, a topic that was not raised by Canadians. Some said that booking an appointment makes it “very serious and formal” (Amanda, China, year 1). Others commented that wait times for drop-in advising were too long. When asked how to improve services, one student suggested, “Have more counsellors?” (Rae, Hong Kong, year 1). This was a valuable reminder that students may have different expectations for access to services based on their cultural reference points. If they come
from a culture in which queuing is foreign and service staff serve multiple customers at once, waiting in line to be served singly may seem like a waste of time and create an unwelcoming environment. Similarly, if they are used to contexts in which bureaucrats sit at desks all day and can be accessed by dropping in, the culture of booking appointments and restricting oneself to a planned visit may seem overly cumbersome and unwelcoming.

**International students’ habitus is worth considering or shifting.** The distinctiveness of international students’ perceptions points to the importance of considering them when assessing and planning service structures. As well, their different expectations remind us that students’ perceptions may be influenced by their ideas of what is right and normal based on the contexts to which they have been habituated. These should be recognized as reasonable expectations that, if not met or reframed, will continue to be a source of frustration and communicate to international students that they are unwelcome.

### 6.3 Serious Conversations With People Very Different From Yourself

Student engagement theory suggests that students who engage more often in *serious conversations with people very different than themselves* will be more likely to achieve desired student outcomes such as satisfaction, higher GPA, and persistence to graduation. This is consistent with research into the cognitive and moral development gains associated with diversity experiences in undergraduate education. As Jeffrey Foot (2009) points out, “Gurin (1999) claims the amount of diversity is not important without meaningful conversations and interactions between students with different backgrounds” (p. 101).

In the UBC NSSE 2008 data, Canadian students reported a statistically significantly higher frequency than international students of having serious conversations with people different than themselves, as per the following NSSE questions:
In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following?

- IU: Had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own
- IV: Had serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values (NSSE, 2008)

This was puzzling for UBC researchers. At the time of the study there was a general expectation that Canadian students as a group were largely talking amongst themselves and would therefore have lower scores on these items, and that because international students were fewer in number, they were forced to have interactions with people from Canada or other countries and would therefore have higher scores on these items. In other words, the results were interpreted largely as a function of citizenship.

I was curious to know whether Canadian participants, as the group expected to possess the greater cultural capital, would see serious conversations with people very different than themselves as a non-issue because they would see themselves as easily crossing boundaries such as race, ethnicity, values, and so forth, even if in reality they might not be doing so. Conversely, I was curious to know whether international participants would conceptualize serious conversations with people very different than themselves from an outsider perspective as daunting and rare, fraught with cultural and linguistic barriers.

For this focus group question, the responses seemed at first to be quite random. There was a flurry of puzzled interpretations of “serious,” “very different,” “race,” with no seeming pattern. Students seemed to exhibit a genuine struggle to understand what these two NSSE items were trying to measure and why. If the participants’ unease was any indication, these had not
been easy NSSE items to answer, and there did not seem to be consensus on what they meant or what students’ experiences were in relation to the conversations in question. I finished the data collection phase no wiser than I began.

However, upon reviewing the data dozens of times, coding and recoding, a pattern has indeed emerged. The responses fall neatly into three categories: what is it like to have these conversations (FRAMING), what aids or constrains having these conversations (FACTORS), and what do we understand the NSSE items to be referring to, that is, what kind of conversation partners and conversation topics did we have in mind when we answered the survey (WHO/WHAT)?

Viewed in this three-part framework, the responses of Canadian and international participants appear to be almost completely unrelated to one another, as if they were describing completely disparate experiences, which I suspect might actually be the case. This finding shocked me as I had not expected such a dramatic divide between the lived reality of Canadian and international participants.

6.3.1 Framing of serious conversations by international students. In terms of framing, international participants said strongly that these conversations matter, they are important, and they are valuable.

Ray Ray-FAC: We should communicate more with foreigners [international students from other cultures] but we have different cultural background. Our cultural background is very different from that of Canadians. With Chinese friends we have the same experience and background and we can help each other. [With Canadians], it looks like
you are getting along well on the surface but it is difficult to have heart-to-heart talks.—

China, year 4

6.3.2 Factors affecting serious conversations for international students. In terms of factors, international students indicated that how and where they communicate has the strongest influence on whether or not these conversations happen. Language was the primary consideration. Serious conversations were far more likely within one’s language group and were awkward and difficult across language groups.

Serious conversations were more likely to happen for international students in classes, because classes bring together the combination of serious topics, people very different than each other, and an expectation that discussions will happen. Serious conversations were more likely for international students when they happened inside an existing community, such as among friends, in Jump Start, or with students from the same cultural background. Finally, having an open attitude and making an effort was important for international students to have these conversations. Here we have an example of the additional effort that international students might have to make to achieve the same level of engagement as others.

Surprisingly, residence did not receive even a nod from international students when talking about serious conversations. It seems the proximity residence provided to people different than themselves was not top-of-mind for them.

In terms of what NSSE items 1U and 1V mean, international students had myriad definitions and understandings. They engaged deeply with the topic in the focus groups and seemed to show keen interest in the discussion. In terms of what could be discussed in serious conversations, they said many students from other countries were interested to ask about East Asian geopolitical issues, such as Taiwan’s sovereignty. International students were impressed
when other students took an informed interest in their country and felt mild exasperation when students displayed ignorance, such as asking whether people from a certain province eat dog. Personal topics, “life,” and their imagined futures were next on their list in terms of what serious conversations did or might cover. Race was high on their list, as were other sensitive social issues. Other political issues were mentioned by a few as well. International students had rich and varied ideas about the content of serious conversations with people very different than themselves.

In terms of with whom these conversations happen or might happen, race was the overwhelming factor for international participants. They said it was rare for them to converse with people from a different race, and when it happened, the conversation was superficial. This means that they were tripped up by the double-barreled nature of the NSSE items, which asked how often they had serious conversations (the first criterion) with people very different than themselves (the second criterion). International students who did converse with people of a different race, thereby fulfilling the second criterion, might not report it in NSSE because it was not serious, thereby failing to meet the first criterion. This begins to explain the lower scores of international students on these items in the UBC NSSE 2008 results.

Some international students did mention conversations with people different than themselves in ways that did not relate to race. However, several of those comments pointed out that even people of the same race differ in terms of religion, political beliefs, and cultural values, implying that some of the serious conversations they were reporting on NSSE were still within their own racial group.

Koreans in particular indicated that they avoided other Koreans so they could expand their international networks. However, they said that university students in Korea focus on
developing long-term networks with professors. This includes joining special clubs through which senior students guide younger students. This mentoring club network was lacking at UBC. Some Korean participants spoke about how hard it was to meet “the right people” at UBC (Janet, Korea, year 1), suggesting that to them, some people were more suitable than others for advancing a student’s progress through university and into the world of work and that such a network was hard to cultivate at UBC.

6.3.3 Framing of serious conversations by Canadian students. In terms of framing, there was a stark contrast between the responses of Canadian and international participants. The predominant response from Canadian participants was that serious conversation with people very different than themselves was a non-issue.

Mr. Big-MAC: It’s like asking if we have serious conversations with people of another gender. It just kind of seems like it’s the 1950s we’re being asked this in.—Canada, year 4

Most Canadian participants did not see race as an issue, indicating these NSSE items seemed “weird” (Mr. Big, year 4). Most Canadian participants said they had serious conversations with people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds indiscriminately. A related comment by several Canadians was that such conversations were “not harsh,” which seemed to signify that they were no big deal, not a problem. Where international students seemed to be saying that this was an important topic to address, Canadian participants seemed to be asking, “Why are we talking about this?”
A few Canadians also said diverse conversations were important and one of the best parts of university life, but this was not the most common way Canadians had of thinking about serious conversations.

Titus Nelson-MAC: I think it’s [serious conversation with different people] very important. I think part of the reason or a great part of coming to university is you come to a place where you can share different ideas, and generally speaking if everyone is from the same background or ethnicity, generally you share a lot of ideas automatically. Then if you’re talking to someone from a different ethnicity, they come from a very different background, very different kind of social structure, they have very different ways of seeing things, and thinking what’s good, what’s bad. I think it’s important we learn there are different ways of doing things and different pros and cons, different systems. — Canada, year 4

6.3.4 Factors affecting serious conversations for Canadian students. In terms of factors that aid or constrain serious conversations, Canadian and international students again expressed mutually exclusive views. Canadians said that residence aids serious conversations and being a commuter constrains them. These perceptions of privileged spaces for diversity were consistent regardless of the residence status of the speaker.

Georgia-FSR: Just ’cause I live with them all, and we’re all put into a floor where everybody’s so different, yet, you live together and so you hang out together and you end up chatting and talking. It’s really good ’cause it opens your eyes to other things where you’re like, “No, this is what it is,” and they say something and you’re like, “Really? Maybe, that’s true.” — Canada, year 1
There was no evidence among Canadian participants of the language concerns or desirability of in-class structures for conversation.

In terms of what these particular NSSE items meant, Canadians had little to say. Four said the topic would be schoolwork and two said the topic would be race. This was nothing like the rich and varied responses international students named in their litany of discussion topics. Canadian participants had little more to say about with whom they would have these conversations, quite unlike the international students’ overwhelming observation that these were conversations across racial lines. There was mention of conversations across racial divides, but others made the point that serious conversations happen all the time and that they speak with people who are different than themselves indiscriminately. A few Canadian participants commented that they had serious conversations with people who were different than themselves across other types of difference, such as religion, but as one participant said, there might be an inherent homogeneity of societal views in such a privileged setting as UBC.

6.4 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter presented the findings for international and Canadian students related to NSSE items about student-faculty interaction, relationships with staff, and having serious conversations with people very different than yourself.

6.4.1 Student-faculty interaction. International students’ perceptions of student-faculty interactions differed from Canadian students’ perceptions in three key ways. First, they interpreted faculty member to mean other students in their faculty, so their NSSE responses to items mentioning faculty members did not reflect their interactions with professors but with fellow students. Second, they said they struggled to interact with professors because they were
used to a different cultural understanding of teachers’ and students’ roles in which the teacher conveyed knowledge and students accepted it. Third, they described professors as experts who meet foundational academic needs, whereas Canadian students described professors as providing motivation and inspiration.

In terms of similarities, international and Canadian students agreed that professors who were approachable and who were effective teachers significantly enabled their motivation and learning. Approachability, which the students described at length, was by far the most important factor identified by international and Canadian students in enabling their interactions with faculty members. International and Canadian students described faculty member as excessively busy and overworked but said they understood faculty members were under a great deal of pressure to conduct research and juggle many parts of their jobs. They wanted for less pressure on faculty members and better training for and recognition of effective teaching. International and Canadian students were clear that large classes constrained their interactions with faculty members and small classes enabled them.

6.4.2 Relationships with staff. International and Canadian students’ comments about staff were strikingly similar. Students said they were disappointed with staff, who were either inattentive and unhelpful or well-intentioned but overworked. Rachel (Canada, year 1) described a “campus marathon” in which she would spend three hours being referred from office to office and still not finding the answer. Students described a few positive stories but pointed out that negative experiences can have serious impacts on their life at university. They described interacting with staff to solve problems and get things done. After looking online for a solution, they would approach an office for attention to their problem, follow up if needed, and exceptions when warranted.
Students said they wanted options, which from their descriptions seemed to be an explanation of how they personally could proceed to solve the problem. There was confusion about which office did what but they knew they wanted help when they needed it. Existing websites were not clear and not sufficient for their needs.

International students had three unique ways of looking at relationships with staff. First, they described staff as expert helpers, equipped not only with valuable knowledge but with professional skills to help them. Second, they described staff as elders, proactively providing care for students. Third, they described frustration with access points to staff offices, such as appointments and other barriers that left them feeling unwelcome.

6.4.3 Having serious conversations with people very different from yourself. International and Canadian students had almost nothing in common in terms of perspectives on having serious conversations with people very different then themselves. International students framed such conversations as valuable and important. Canadian students largely saw such conversations as a non-issue and called the NSSE items “weird” and “like it’s the 1950s.” They said they had conversations with people of different backgrounds indiscriminately. International students named language as the most influential factor enabling or constraining such conversations, and they said they spend most of their time talking with students from their language and culture groups. The exception was classes, in which they expected serious conversations about academic topics to come up among an already diverse group of people. Canadian students, by contrast, said they had such conversations if they lived in residence and not if they were commuters. In terms of what to discuss, international students had rich and varied conversations in the focus groups about a broad range of possible topics. However, they said their discussion partner for serious conversations were usually within their own race, as it is difficult to have serious conversations
with people from different language and culture groups. The double-barreled nature of the question tripped them up, as they had serious conversations but within their own group. Canadians, by contrast, had little to say about the content of such conversations or with whom they occurred. International and Canadian students’ responses to these focus group questions were almost mutually exclusive.

6.4.4 Concluding comments. This chapter presented findings related to student-faculty interactions, relationships with staff, and serious conversations with people very different than yourself. Chapter 7 considers the demographic variables of the participants.
Chapter 7.

Comparison of Findings by Demographic Variables

This chapter presents and discusses the findings when considered according to students’ demographic variables. This chapter addresses the third research question:

3. Regarding UBC international and domestic undergraduate students’ perceptions of select NSSE questions, select NSSE behaviours, and their engagement with their university, how do first and fourth year students’ perceptions differ? How do students’ perceptions differ in light of residence status, faculty, and gender?

This study considered the perceptions of UBC international and Canadian undergraduates of select NSSE questions and behaviours, which includes student behaviours and institutional practices. Focus groups allowed for exploration of the perceptions of 77 participants who represented the following demographic subpopulations (see Table 7.1).

Table 7.1 Demographic variables of subjects: Possible values

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Residence Status</th>
<th>Citizenship</th>
<th>Year level</th>
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<td>Applied Science (Engineering)</td>
<td>Resident</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>First</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>Commuter</td>
<td>China</td>
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Each section of the chapter begins with an introduction to the demographic variable and its potential relevance, followed by the findings for each population within that variable. The chapter ends with a discussion of each variable and of the demographic variables as a whole.
Attention was paid to these demographic distributions for a number of compelling reasons. As a practitioner, I selected these variables because they mimicked a pattern of findings typical for the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). As a scholar, I considered demographic variables because they were indicated by the theoretical frameworks that acted as sensitizing influences in the study. As a researcher, I considered demographic variables to strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings. Findings based on the perceptions of one particular subpopulation but not held broadly across the participants might be valid for the subpopulation but not for the study as a whole. Similarly, findings based on the unique makeup of the sample but which would vary considerably with a different demographic mix are by definition less reliable. Allow me to elucidate for each variable.

First- and fourth-year standing (year level) was the most obvious variable to consider. The National Survey of Student Engagement is administered to first- and fourth-year students only. This limited sampling serves as a mechanism for considering difference between year levels. NSSE has utility to demonstrate how the experience of newcomers to the institution differs from the experience of expert students. For many items, an increase in frequency of behaviour over time will suggest a positive development, as frequency of NSSE behaviours is generally positively related to various measures of student success. It is common for NSSE results to be higher for fourth-year students than for first-year students. Thinking with Bourdieu, it is reasonable to assume that newcomers to a field might not know the rules of the game, might not be adept at applying the rules in an expert manner, and might lack certain desired forms of capital, the lack of which would disadvantage them in succeeding in the game. As such, it is important to consider the experiences of newcomers as contrasted to experts, as this helps us understand how newcomers can more effectively become full participants in the new field. It can
also help us gauge the successful acquisition of embodied understanding—habitus—and capital that is mutually desired. As a researcher, I needed to consider to what extent first-year students’ perceptions were distinct from those of fourth-year students so that those views could be attributed to the correct subpopulation by year rather than to the participant body as a whole.

*Gender* was a critical factor to consider in light of the potential variations in perspectives held by students across genders. Such variations could pose a threat to the validity of the findings if results were presented as occurring within the population under study when in fact they were gender-specific. The examination of potential gender-bias in qualitative research is new and critically important:

> The notion of automatically asking whether or not a piece of new knowledge (or old, for that matter) applies equally and equitably across the spectrum of sexes and genders, in a range of diversities of bodies, practices, identities, ages, locations, and geographies, is new. It is essential to support a burgeoning field, attempting to make this kind of question automatic, and, ultimately, answerable. (Greaves, 2011, p. 13)

Gender appears in NSSE meta-analytical reports with predictable regularity: women typically score higher on NSSE than men in frequency of engagement behaviours. NSSE captures only binary data on this variable, setting aside the spectrum of gender identities. Accordingly, for this study, I relied on institutional data that distinguished between men and women only, thereby missing potentially relevant data regarding perspectives of people along the gender spectrum but gaining consistency with NSSE analytical approaches.

*Residence status* is equally clear in the NSSE literature: residents of university-managed housing typically outperform commuters on every measure of engagement.
Faculty was introduced to the study at the behest of the sponsor institution. Faculties are critical sites of influence on student experiences because the majority of students’ contact with the institution is in the classroom, which is the purview of the faculties. Faculties are also key administrative divisions, and decision-making about student supports often rests in the faculties. Faculties at large research institutions exercise significant discretion in determining how their funding will or will not support student-focused initiatives. This is particularly relevant in times of economic crisis such as Canadian post-secondary institutions currently face.

From a research perspective, the sponsor institution’s NSSE results had been clear for several years: Students in smaller faculties scored higher on NSSE on a variety of measures, ostensibly because of the relative ease of interacting with faculty members and staff, the instant community formed from having smaller classes, and the more intimate community of a smaller population overall. Access to available resources and opportunities would also be facilitated by having closer contact with staff and more direct methods for communication than in a large faculty.

Within the larger faculties, the host institution was interested to understand how the experiences of international student differed between the often siloed entities that are faculties at large research institutions. Would there be evidence of distinct faculty cultures, varying levels of faculty intentionality in providing a supportive campus environment, and differing faculty-based approaches to teaching and learning in participants’ perceptions of their engagement? With NSSE, the key benefit of applying the findings is not in ascertaining which institution performs the best but what areas within one’s own institution demonstrate what the institution can be at its best. Similarly, this study has potential to show in what disciplinary areas students identify good practices that can be emulated by others within the institution. Accordingly, the data were
analyzed by faculty, and a new code was created to highlight good practices wherever they occurred.

Participants were selected through a stratified random sampling technique according to the proportion of each demographic variable in the undergraduate student population at the host campus. Despite recruitment challenges and the small sample size in certain subpopulations, every effort was made to ensure that the final demographic characteristics of participants reflected their proportion in the population.

7.1 Method and Considerations

A software developer assisted me to construct frequency tables to analyze the data by demographic variable. We devised a method to combine the coded transcripts into one spreadsheet, create pivot tables for all codes by demographic variable, develop a measure of significance to examine the difference between the number of utterances per code by members of one group (e.g., women) as compared to another group (e.g., men), show norms for the results by proportion of respondents in the demographic category, then summarize the results of the pivot tales, including raw figures and normed figures, into one spreadsheet for easy reference. I then used this summary to identify codes of interest for each variable in turn and across all variables, referring to the actual utterances to understand the nature of the differences and determine the relevance of the difference for the study. For example, according to the algorithm, significantly more commuters than residents commented on non-academic desirable traits for a Canadian student, including health, social life, and trying new things. However, upon examination of the transcripts, and with reference to the organizing frameworks for the study, this finding did not seem relevant to the study, so it was not included in the report of the findings.
Two interesting challenges arose in analysis of the data for this chapter. First, the research design intentionally focused on students’ perceptions, which is a deeply qualitative approach, yet the most suitable method to look for demographic distinctiveness in the data was by frequency count, which borders on the quantitative. As well, frequency counts are inherently inaccurate representations of focus group data, as participants may agree with a topic but not voice it or may disagree and not find a space in the conversation to voice that before the facilitator moves on to the next topic. Alternatively, a few people may speak briefly but passionately about a subject, lending it added significance that does not appear in the frequency counts, or a few people may have a mild opinion but spend a lot of time drawing out the conversation, thereby inflating the frequency count for that item. For example, according to the algorithm, significantly more residents than commuters talked about academic stress. This attracted my attention because it was opposite to my expectation. However, examination of the transcripts revealed that the majority of utterances were made by the same two students in an extended conversation on the topic in which many of the utterances were simple agreements (“Yeah”) that did not add new input.

Second, I was struck by the messiness of determining which of the demographic variables were relevant to the specific codes I was exploring. In the frequency counts, I could see the interplay between the variables, which made it easier to question their relationship. For example, for the 15 utterances coded as “competition,” 15 were made by females, 15 were made by first-year students, 9 were made by residents, 15 were made by Science students, and 15 were made by Canadians. This code is significant for year, gender, faculty, and citizenship. Which, if any, is relevant for this study? Upon examination, I saw that the comments were all expressions of concern about counterproductive competition between classmates.
Based on the comments, the only variables for which I could construct a reasonable narrative were gender, with females perhaps showing a preference for cooperation over competition, and faculty, as several of the comments named Science specifically. It is possible that these first-year students were not yet used to a competitive environment, whereas fourth-year participants were used to it and no longer commented on it, but it is also possible that a more competitive climate exists for first-year students than for fourth-year students, or that first-year students view the climate as more competitive because they are not yet included inside cooperative circles between which there is competition.

Could citizenship be relevant? Perhaps international participants had experience in competitive academic environments elsewhere and did not find UBC to be distinctive in that way, or perhaps the comparative search to decide which internationally ranked university to attend led them to expect competition.

At the same time, my task was not to describe the codes but to describe the populations of students and to form a profile of their preferences to see how they differed from one another and whether those differences might help to discern which findings were more broadly descriptive and which applied most closely to a particular population. For this reason, I describe findings for each of the populations by variable and then discuss broader perspectives on the codes across the populations.

7.2 Findings by Year Level

This section presents findings related to students’ year in their program (first year or fourth year standing).
7.2.1 What I expected to find. Bourdieu’s writing about fields and rules of the game (1990a, 1990b, 1998, Bourdieu & Lacquant, 1992) provides an organizing framework for anticipating how responses of first-year students might differ from those of fourth-year students. Bourdieu described a social system in which the goal is individual advancement through the accumulation and exchange of the particular forms of capital that are favoured in the field in which one is situated. It follows that a person who is new to a particular field is disadvantaged to the extent that the forms of capital valued in the new field may not have been valued in the newcomer’s previous field(s). For this reason, they might not enter the field with an accumulation of the desired capital and might require time to acquire it. In addition, they might not be aware of the rules of the game specific to the new field and so might be disadvantaged in playing the game effectively. Even if they were aware of the rules, they might not be skilled in the playing of the game and so might require additional time before they could participate on par with those who were fully habituated. In certain cases, the desired capital may be something they cannot acquire, if it relates to a feature they cannot change, such as gender, race, and so forth.

I expected to find a few important differences between the responses of first- and fourth-year students. Thinking with Bourdieu, I conceived of first-year students as newcomers to the field that is university life. First, I expected to find more confusion, non-clinical anxiety, and disorientation among first-year students. I expected them to express more constraints to engaging in the NSSE behaviours. I expected them to emphasize things they did not know and voice frustration in their interactions with faculty members and staff. Second, I expected first-year students to express more busyness and stress, academic or otherwise, because they were facing the purportedly increased workload of university in addition to a new set of rules within which to accomplish the academic, social, and personal tasks set before them. This requires a good deal of
time and energy. Third, I expected first-year students to express greater social isolation, difficulties making social connections, and fears about how to meet new people. Just as there are academic rules of the game, there are social rules of the game for undergraduates at a Canadian university. As newcomers, they could be expected to be less skilled and therefore less accomplished at and more fearful about making social connections. Fourth, I expected first-year students to have less interest in career preparation and associated activities. Fifth, taking first-year standing as a proxy for “new to Canada,” I expected that first-year international students would display even more of the above traits than first-year Canadian students. In that sense, first-year international students would be new to the overlapping fields of university life and life in Canada, which could compound their sense of confusion, stress, and social isolation.

7.2.2 First-year students. Taken together and compared to fourth-year students, first-year students presented as a more hopeful group. They had more positive things to say about the university and its reputation:

Bubble-FAC: I would say UBC is pretty supportive, when I’m comparing to different schools.

MS: And are you comparing to different schools?

Bubble-FAC: Yeah, my friend goes to SFU or UVIC, like that. They’ll be like, “Oh my God, UBC does that!” I’m like, “Yah”. [implying: of course] [Laughter] “Does your school not do that? Oh, really?”—Canada, year 1

Georgia-FSR: I’m actually pretty happy with the whole outside-of-classes aspect. There’s events, there’s things going on, there’s definitely UBC spirit and stuff, it’s kind of fun,
you get to go hang out. I’m pretty satisfied. Seems like UBC does a good job at getting
the student body involved, or trying to. It depends on how many of us come out.
—Canada, year 1

Fagan-MAC: They [UBC] have a lot…there’s a lot of things out there right now to
integrate you. I guess it’s your own…
Alixe-FSC: …choice. —Canada, year 1

In other words, the university provided everything they needed to succeed, and those who
could not succeed due to lack of resources had no right to complain. This finding was surprising,
because I expected the disorientation and confusion that many newcomers experience but had
discounted the initial excitement and enthusiasm that is also common with newcomers, who
perceive their entry into a new field to be a positive change. One might also expect recent school
leavers to have a rosier outlook on their adult life than those with a few more years’ experience,
for whom the novelty of independent living might have worn off and the realities of creating
one’s future beyond the confines of the now-familiar university setting might seem daunting.

On the whole, first-year students made more references than did fourth year students to
academic stress, grades, and what they did not know about university life. They made references
to academic stress from pressures such as exams and midterms; the bell curve; feeling
incompetent; trying to “achieve and maintain a balanced life” (Daisuke, Canada, year 1); poor
marks due to volunteering, recreation and clubs, “the atmosphere and high expectation. . . a
sudden drop in expectation [grades]. . . parental pressure” (Rachel, Canada, year 1); “the switch
from high school level” (Georgia, Canada, year 1); and large prerequisite courses “you have to
get through” (Georgia, Canada, year 1). Fagan observed that when you move out “you don’t
have the same support system as you did back home” (Canada, year 1).
Julia-FAR: Exam results.
Lucia: Is that a disappointment about yourself?
Julia-FAR: Yes, and it was traumatizing for me. I did study hard but I don’t think I knew how to study for my exams. I simply felt despair…—Korea, year 1
Juliana-FCR: I think it’s the ratio that exams are worth. Oftentimes the final is about 50% or 60%, and midterms are 20% or 30%. Adding those together equals your overall. I feel like one test just…
Alice: Determines everything?
Juliana-FCR: Yeah, life or death is decided in that moment. —Taiwan, year 1

First-year students made comments that suggested they were more sensitive to the classroom environment, spoke only when others spoke, and so on. They also made more references to being busy and to how busyness (their own and others’) proved a barrier to finishing group assignments and talking with professors outside of class. This finding was consistent with my expectations that first-year students in the aggregate may see themselves under a great deal of pressure.

Although cultural references were common among students of all years, first-year students had much more to say on the topic. Like fourth-year students, they referred to challenges faced by international students in general, such as not understanding academic cultural expectations and the difficulty of expired health insurance. Like fourth-year students, they commented on their own national or ethnic backgrounds and how they move within those identities. Like fourth-year students, they spoke at length about the way they have been accustomed to interacting with faculty members and fellow students and how awkward and tiring it was to spend time with English speakers, regardless of cultural background.
Their experiences and suggestions for the university related to culture were quite similar to those of fourth-year students, but they introduced the topic more often. This is notable because only two of the 15 focus group questions made any reference to nationality and none to cultural ways of knowing, so these responses were largely unsolicited. The heightened salience of cultural references to first-year students is consistent with Bourdieu’s notion of rules of the game. To the extent that first-year students are newcomers to the field that is university life in Canada, their relative lack of desired capital and low level of awareness of and fluency with the rules of the game would logically be more salient for them than for more experienced students.

A number of key factors aided or constrained first-year students’ engagement with their university. First, they looked more to professors to set the tone for the classroom environment and to set academic activities that would foster social connections. Although both first- and fourth-year students said they learn more effectively from professors who are approachable, first-year students were particularly vocal on this point. This is consistent with the view of first-year students as newcomers for whom professors would fill the role of experienced players, sharing expertise and expending their own capital to create opportunity for the students to gain capital of their own. Second, first-year students described large class size as a substantive barrier to learning and satisfaction with their UBC experience. In terms of rules of the game, large classes might be seen as requiring distinct expertise that the newcomer lacks. Third, they saw a culture of competition, where it existed, as a barrier to working with other students. Here their disadvantage in terms of capital might be exacerbated by them being pitted against others who have more of the desired forms of capital. Fourth, for first-year students, residence emerged as a positive, generative environment for serious conversations with people very different than themselves, a place to make meaningful social connections, and a source of peer and mentor
support. Residence may level the playing field for newcomers by facilitating the acquisition of desirable cultural and social capital. Cultural capital may be acquired in residence, a place where the rules of the game are made explicit through residence staff supports and active and passive programming. Social capital may be advanced in residence through the structured living environment, which is designed to foster meaningful peer relationships.

Grades played an additional function as described by students. They depicted marks as an unavoidable practicality in their career preparations. People know they need good marks to achieve a particular career goal, they said, so if they experience a sudden drop in grades in first year, “That’s hard to adjust to” (Rachel, Canada, year 1). Georgia noted, “I thought I might do a little bit better than I am doing at the moment. It's not like I'm doing terrible, but just the switch from high school level, where it was really easy and I did fine, to this is just eye-opening. The fact that it's not going to be just as easy as it was” (Canada, year 1). Samantha said, you “can’t afford to go here to just learn about stuff” (Canada, year 1).

Rachel-FSC: I do like to volunteer – and I play on the Rec centre intramural team, and I also work with clubs... so that’s why I got bad marks. [laughs]

Samantha-FSR: Yeah, inversely proportional!—Canada, year 1

This comment is ironic given the depth of student engagement research suggesting quite the opposite.

7.2.3 Fourth-year students. Fourth-year students were more likely to express disappointment with the university and their experience of it. They were more vocal about policies, such as housing, financial aid, and tuition, which they saw as evidence of the university’s lack of sympathy for students. This finding was a surprise to me, as I expected fourth-year students to be
well supplied with the forms of capital that are valued in their field. I expected that students with more capital would be more satisfied. Instead, it seems that more experience has given them a keener awareness of what they perceive to be failings of their institution, leading to greater dissatisfaction.

As expected, fourth-year students spoke more often about career preparation in and out of the classroom. As people who are preparing to exit the field of undergraduate life and move on to the next, where they will again be newcomers, it is understandable that they would be preoccupied with the transition and want to be well prepared for it.

Fourth-year students commented more often on distinctions between the cultures of faculties and disciplines, such as the emphasis on critical thinking in certain Arts majors or the high levels of collaboration among Engineering students at their university. This is consistent with Bourdieu’s theory that fields exist throughout society and operate under distinct rules of play. Newcomers to Canadian universities may not be able to distinguish between the fields represented by the disciplines, but experienced players are aware of and have learned to succeed in them.

7.3 Findings by Gender

This section presents findings related to students’ gender as they identified themselves to the university upon admission or in subsequent communication. The university’s central student information system treats gender data as binary (male/female).

7.3.1 What I expected to find. Gender was not addressed explicitly in the organizing frameworks that guided the study. However, few would argue that gender is a significant factor
in understanding students’ engagement in post-secondary education (Harris & Lester, 2010).

Based on stereotypical feminine traits, I wondered:

- Would female participants be more collaborative?
- Would female participants value interactions with professors more?
- Would female participants be more concerned with social networks?
- Would female participants be less interested in university policies?

Notions of gender and gender roles intersect with ethnocultural differences in ways that may be relevant to this study. For example, Hofstede (2001) identified a dimension of culture he calls the Masculinity Index (MAS), which measures the relative emphasis in a society on distinct masculine and feminine traits. Cultures placing higher value on militarism, patriarchal family structures, and more polarized male and female roles would score higher on the MAS; cultures placing higher value on collaboration, social services, and more overlap between male and female roles would score lower on the MAS. Given the breadth of MAS scores for the countries represented in the study (from 39 to 95 out of a possible 110), it seems likely that distinct patterns of gendered differences in the findings may be obscured by variation between MAS scores of the participants’ countries.

7.3.2 Women. Female student responses mirrored first-year student responses in surprising ways. In many cases the topics mentioned frequently by first-year students were also mentioned frequently by female students. Upon closer examination, I discovered that 74% of first-year students in the study were female. This may explain some of the alignment between the two variables, but not all.

Many of the first-year student comments about academic stress, grades, and not knowing what was expected of them were made by female students. These comments point to a level of
stress and vulnerability among female first-year students that was surprising. Similarly, concerns from first-year students about unproductive competition in certain disciplines were made by women, and concerns about class size among first-year students also came largely from female students. For female students, their strongly worded complaints about class size included a particular focus on the constraint that large classes place on forming relationships with other students. Taken as a whole, these comments paint a picture of female first-year students as a population that experiences a great deal of pressure academically and socially.

A small number of differences may also suggest a gender gap in participants’ perceptions of their engagement. Of special interest to female students were their relationships with faculty members. They had more to say about the critical importance of faculty members being approachable, such as encouraging students to ask them questions and holding accessible office hours. Most of the comments describing good practices in teaching were made by female students, who clearly paid attention to and valued the examples of good teaching they witnessed. Female students were more likely to say the key factor that helped them contribute to a class discussion or ask questions in class was the role of the professor in creating a welcoming classroom environment. Faculty members factored substantively in female students’ perceptions of what they need to engage successfully with their university.

Female students placed a similar though less fervent emphasis on relationships with their peers. As mentioned above, the part of large class size they found particularly frustrating was the barrier it presented to developing relationships with other students. Females commented strongly that developing relationships with other students was hard. By contrast, men were more likely to comment that the student community was “friendly.” Women were more likely to say that academic activities, living in residence, attending Jump Start orientation, and meeting people of
the same culture were important factors to enable relationships with other students. Here we see an indication that female participants might be more concerned with social networks than male participants. However, in other areas of social network development, female responses were not substantially different from those of males.

Similar to first-year students, female participants made more cultural references, which were significant for being largely unsolicited. These included comments about their international student identity, their decisions about whom to seek out for social interaction, the academic cultural practices in their home country and at UBC, and many other topics related to culture. Although female participants commented more (even after correcting for gender balance in the sample), there is no discernible difference between male and female utterances related to culture in the topics discussed or in the perceptions expressed.

7.3.3 Men. Few topics were mentioned by male participants more often than by females. The supposition that males would have greater interest in university policies such as tuition was not borne out. One surprising distinction was that males mentioned language difficulties more often than females. This may be significant as these were all unsolicited comments. However, there is nothing in the organizing frameworks for this study that would shed light on this finding.

7.4 Findings by Residence Status

This section presents findings related to students’ residence status at the time of the study (living in a university residence or living elsewhere).

7.4.1 What I expected to find. Two of the organizing frameworks—Bourdieu and student engagement theory—helped me develop expectations about how the responses of students living in university-operated residences (“residents”) might differ from those living elsewhere
Following Bourdieu, I expected that international students might not have accumulated the desired forms of capital to participate successfully in the new arena. I expected that residence at its best would function as a kind of training ground for certain fields and provide opportunities to accumulate certain forms of desired capital more quickly. So the interesting populations to compare are perhaps first-year students, who might be considered newcomers to the field(s) of Canadian university life, who do and do not live in residence.

George Kuh (2009b), the lead author of NSSE, summarizes student engagement thus: “Student engagement represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities (Kuh, 2001, 2003, 2009)”. Living in residence creates myriad opportunities for students to be engaged in the life of their campus in formal and informal ways. For example, we might reasonably assume that residents would have more opportunity to form positive social connections with fellow students; be more aware of and participate more often in opportunities for leadership and involvement, including within residence programming structures; be better informed about on-campus resources to support their success; and spend less time commuting and therefore have more time for leadership and involvement activities.

This was the rationale for the request by this study’s sponsoring institution that participants be selected and their comments identified with consideration given to their residence status. With respect to residence status, I wondered:

- Would residents speak more or speak more positively about their social networks?
- Would residents be more involved on campus?
- Would residents be more aware of resources?
- Would residents report more positive experiences with staff?
• Would residents have an easier time working with other students in and out of class?

7.4.2 Residents. Here I present findings related to students’ perceptions of their university as well as specific comments students made about residence status. After considerable examination of the data, I found only a few substantive differences in perceptions that related to residence status, apart from comments students made about the status itself.

Language, by which I mean references to the use of a specific language, such as English, was raised more often by commuters (40% more likely after correcting for proportion). Commuters said language constrained their ability to get along with others socially, have serious conversations with people different than themselves, work with other students, contribute in class, and make class presentations. One commuter student identified language as a difficult thing about life at UBC, and another said it was the most important thing discussed in the focus group. Every type of language issue mentioned by a participant in the study was mentioned by at least one commuter.

I then looked more deeply at the data and saw that students from China were more likely to make language comments than were commuters. Many of the comments referred specifically to Chinese language and culture. Granted, many Chinese students were commuters, but the incidence of Chinese participants in residence was actually higher than most other citizenships in the study. Therefore it is reasonable to wonder how residence status and Chinese citizenship may have overlapping relationships with language. This section considers residence status.

Language was not one of the topics I anticipated would differ based on residence status. However, if we look again at the questions in the section above and consider language as a mechanism to facilitate or hinder interpersonal relationships, we see from the language comments that commuters did speak less positively about their social networks and they did have
a harder time working with other students where language was concerned, as predicted. How can we understand this? Participants in residence may have more opportunities to interact with others in English every day, as the likelihood of being housed near speakers of their home language only is unlikely. Presumably one is more likely to encounter a linguistically isolated social milieu in an apartment or house than in a residence hall with dozens of other students who have many different home languages and therefore will rely on the lingua franca, in this case English.

Aside from language, a cluster of classroom factors were raised by commuters more than by other students. Taken alone these factors are not significant, but taken together they suggest a pattern of mild disconnection from the classroom experience. Commuter students said they were constrained in contributing to class discussions or asking questions by the fear of making a fool of themselves (coded in this study as GRPTHNK). Large class size as a constraint on making presentations in class was raised solely by commuters. They singled out the way professors assign groups for group assignments as an important factor in working effectively with others. One could say that commuter students experienced a heightened sense of intimidation in the classroom, in particular in large classes, and looked to professors to create environments, such as certain kinds of working groups, that would ease their sense of disconnection from the classroom experience.

This sense of disconnection among commuter students, if that is what it is, supports the argument that living in residence can serve an enculturation function that commuter students lack. Commuter students may not have the social connections, the ties to campus, or the informal mechanisms for learning the ins and outs of academic and everyday life at their institution. This may lead to a greater sense of hesitance in and out of the classroom and a lack of the specific knowledge and skills that would help them access successful classroom experiences.
A number of topics showed non-significant levels of difference between residents and commuters when considered in proportion to the population. There was a cluster of comments touting the importance of having a positive attitude about (making the most of) university life, made by a few more residents than commuters proportionally. A few more commuters than residents expressed frustration that NSSE forced them into one response per item, whereas they felt their university life was more complex than that; their responses depended on the circumstance. If the effect were stronger, this could suggest a model of commuter life as more fragmented compared to residence life, which creates perhaps a more coherent story of university life based on one’s own experience aggregated with those of fellow residents and stories told by residence advisors. Residents were mildly more cognizant of student involvement and leadership opportunities than commuters, which was one of my original suppositions before reviewing the demographically divided data. A few more commuters proportionally mentioned that faculty member did or might refer to fellow students in their faculty, which might be interpreted as mild support for the notion of residence as a normative environment in which students are inculcated into the terminology and “rules of the game” of the university.

Residence was not introduced by the focus group questions or by the NSSE items students completed, but residence was mentioned by students from across the demographic groupings. Residents and commuters alike sang the praises of living in residence. They extolled the inevitability of makings friends when living in residence. They described the mechanisms by which they made friends in residence: meeting in the first few weeks, eating in the dining hall together, going to events together, hanging out, going to parties together, sitting together in class, being “study buddies” (Sydney, Canada, year 1), keeping their doors open whereby people could drop by and start conversations, and meeting friends of friends. They had “amazing” floors and
“really good” brother floors (Georgia, Canada, year 1), residence friends as close as their high school friends of 10 years (Sabina, Japan, year 1), residence friends from first year who were still their closest friends in fourth year, and residence experiences that led them to rate their relationships with other students on NSSE as 7 out of 7. Gabriel transferred from another institution and observed that because he was not living in residence it was harder to meet people. “In terms of meeting new friends, that was little bit harder because I wasn’t in res but I knew if I just got involved I’d meet people” (Canada, year 4). Another student said because she is quieter she probably would have stuck with her high school friends if she had not lived in residence. One student who had not lived in residence said it would be easier to make friends if one lived in residence, with which much of her group agreed.

Residence was not without criticism. The first cluster of concerns related to the “not nice” appearance and party reputation of Totem Park residence (in 2009) and the prevalence of fire alarms in Totem, Vanier, and Gage residences. One vegan student said she learned even the vegetables for the vegetarian dishes were steamed in milk so she ate French fries for every meal. A St. Andrew’s resident complained (again, in 2009) about the large increases in rent. Two students mentioned that some floors were too large to get to know people.

Perhaps more concerning is the vehemence with which two students, in the middle of an otherwise positive conversation about residence, shared their very negative experiences. One student said he had no friends in residence and that there were not many opportunities to make friends, which was met with surprise in his group. A second student then commented bitterly about her floor, on which “everyone hates each other!” (Stella, Korea, year 1). She described an environment in which people who attended floor events were jeered and belittled so people stopped coming to the events. Not everyone’s experience in residence was positive.
7.4.3 **Commuters.** Respondents painted a vivid picture of life as a commuter. Commute times could be up to three hours each way, leaving little or no time for joining clubs, getting involved on campus, socializing, or networking with other students. One student said he had not been integrated into campus life because he commutes. Another said you see people in class and then go home. One student said that if you commute you feel distant even from your close friends. Referring to NSSE items 1U and 1V related to serious conversations with people different from you, one first-year student said she had never had a serious conversation with another student on any topic because she commutes. One first-year student apparently felt commuters’ difficulty making social connections was common knowledge. When asked about his relationship with other students, he simply said, “I live in Richmond [a nearby suburb], so . . .” (Daisuke, Canada, year 1).

In addition to barricading social networking and involvement, commuting created added stress for students. In terms of transit, this included wait times, the business of making connections, and unpredictable travel times of up to one additional hour each way. For one student, even academic group work was complicated by the distances people had to travel and the difficulty finding times that group members were on campus, so most work was done “on the Internet” (Wade, Hong Kong, year 4).

Commuter students had specific recommendations to make their lives as commuters easier. They lamented the 7 or 8 p.m. scheduling of club and involvement activities as being too late for them to attend. They complained that there was no place to rest in the four- to five-hour gap between classes. They asked for a 24-hour library and a place to stay overnight if needed. (Once the focus group was over, I made sure to tell that group about the university’s new commuter hostel.)
7.5 Findings by Faculty, Major, or Discipline

This section presents findings related to students’ faculty, major, or discipline.

7.5.1 What I expected to find. Distinctive perspectives of students based on their academic discipline or faculty is an area of particular interest to me as a practitioner. Over the years I have heard time and again from colleagues who are embedded in specific faculties that their students are distinct. Furthermore they tell me that only they truly understand their students, that only they can select the student leaders who will shape their new students’ formative experiences in orientation and first year, and that any centrally facilitated onboarding program for new students must include an enculturation into the distinctive faculty that will be their home. Each year at our opening pep rally for the 7,000 new undergraduate students (Canadian and international), student leaders from the faculties lead new student in chants designed to mark the distinctiveness (and in some cases, superiority) of their discipline. Each year at UBC student leaders from the disciplines lead their own first-year student orientation that is distinct from the university-run events, again, clearly declaring that their faculty culture is unique and that newcomers are expected to join in.

My experience as an international education practitioner aligns well with Bourdieu’s notions of fields (1990a, 1990b, 1998; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), in which distinct forms of capital are valued and the rules of the game may be unique to that field. When faculties run networking events for new international students, Arts in my experience has chosen a lecture or panel discussion, whereas Commerce has created a networking event where students practise North American–style handshakes and mingling with student leaders in the faculty. When faculties highlight student involvement opportunities, Arts focuses on interest-based clubs, whereas Engineering showcases its award-winning design / build teams for things like solar-
powered cars. Technical skills versus interpersonal skills, theoretical soundness versus real-life application, and creative interpretation versus adherence to disciplinary principles are just some of the types of embodied cultural capital I have seen valued differently by different faculties.

As a practitioner, I understand that there are forces beyond the purely academic content of the disciplines that may affect student perceptions within faculties. Looking at the broader socio-political climate, there are clearly professions that are more highly regarded and compensated. It follows in many cases that funding from alumni is more free-flowing. In other cases, research funding from federal and private sources ensures healthy growth and sustainability of the faculty. Funding in many cases allows a level of autonomy, which can leak into other areas of interaction, such as approaches to selecting, teaching, and advising students. This creates certain tensions when trying to advance common and cumulative outcomes for students based on scholarly expertise about how students can be successful. If this expertise is located outside the faculties, it may be seen as foreign and inappropriate for the needs of “our” students. Yet co-locating expertise within the faculties can lead to divided loyalties and philosophical tension between the prevailing thought in the faculty with established best practices in the student affairs field.

Regarding faculty, I wondered:

- Would perceptions of participants by faculty about NSSE behaviours and their university differ noticeably or would the fundamental distinctiveness rather come out in their comments about their faculties?
- Would participants in some faculties be more competitive?
- Would participants in some faculties express fewer difficulties contributing or presenting in class?
- Would participants in some faculties speak more positively about interactions with faculty members?
- Would participants in some faculties perceive the campus environment to be more supportive?
- Would participants in some faculties be more aware of resources available to them?
- Would participants in some faculties indicate a distinct experience having serious conversations with people very different than themselves?
- Would participants in some faculties have more positive attitudes toward their university life?

A note on process is necessary here. Although these are reasonable questions to ask, they were not used to inform the coding process, so in some cases it is difficult to find the answer in the data. For instance, I am asking here whether students expressed fewer difficulties contributing or presenting in class. However, the coding was designed to draw together the responses related to contributing and presenting into types of responses that are neither positive nor negative. For example, one code pulled together all comments related to English-language ability and making presentations. Some of these comments related to the difficulty of making presentations as an English as an Additional Language speaker, while others pointed out the value of making presentations for improving one’s English speaking skills. So the codes themselves do little to assist in responding to these questions.

A further process issue arose at this point in the analysis. When reading over the frequency counts by faculty, it became apparent that most of the substantive numeric faculty-based differences favoured Science. Accordingly I checked and Science participants made 13% more comments than their proportion in the study. This is understandable given the
conversational patterns in one focus group involving Science students. As recruitment was a challenge, a handful of groups had only one or two participants. Where only one person attended, he spoke in long monologues such that the number of comments he initiated was small. In a group of two, the participants struck up a light banter, interrupting each other and finishing each other’s sentences. As a result, this last group had an unusually high number of comments, and both participants were Science students. This group alone accounts for much of the skewing of frequency counts toward Science. This skewing in turn created a challenge in narrowing down the themes by which to compare faculties.

And of course, human subjects are multi-faceted creatures, so for example it was difficult to distinguish whether the comments that were made frequently by male commuter students from Taiwan were attributable to the students’ maleness, their commuter status, their affiliation with Taiwan, or none of the above.

In sum, surprisingly few meaningful differences arose between perceptions of students from different faculties or disciplines. That is to say, there were differences, but in most cases they appeared to be artifacts of other, more relevant differences. For example, the relationship with faculty members is spoken about with differing frequency by people in different faculties, but upon careful examination, I could find no discernible pattern to the comments by discipline. Instead the differing frequency emerges as an artifact of the more salient difference, which is between international and Canadian students. A few unique perspectives of Science students will be presented, followed by the few meaningful distinctions across the faculties and disciplines.

7.5.2 **Grades and competition in Science.** One of my first surprises when reviewing the focus group transcripts by faculty was that, at this top-tier research institution, competition did not arise as a topic among students—in all faculties except Science. In Science, “It’s either eat or
be eaten” (Georgia, Canada, year 1). I even asked about competition when talking to a student in Engineering, a discipline notorious for weeding out students by heavy competition. He observed that the importance of relationships with classmates was ”huge,” so competition was not an option (Mr. Volts, Canada, year 4).

Mr. Volts-MEC: . . . In terms of relationships with other students, the ones you see on a daily basis, I think that's huge. Especially in my faculty, I like to know everybody because they become helpful, you know? . . . You kind of have to support – everyone supports everybody. . .

Michelle: Where’s the competition I always hear about?

Mr. Volts-MEC: Competition between students?

Michelle: Yeah.

Mr. Volts-MEC: Uhh…. It's there to some extent, I think.—Canada, year 4

Several Science students, mostly female Canadians in first year, spoke at length about the “ridiculous” (Daisuke, Canada, year 1) competition among students in their faculty. Stories included top students pretending to be weak in the subject to avoid helping anyone study and classmates asking to borrow notes multiple times without reciprocating. By way of explanation, students said that many people are trying to get into medical school, so they know if they help someone it may give that person an advantage when competing for the same medical school placement.

Grades factored into the conversation about competition. Students said that the pressure from family and one’s own high expectations for high grades drives competition, creates frustration, undermines students’ self-confidence, and sparks friction between students. They
reflected that this was worse when grades are scaled or on a curve, as competition is then not between oneself and one’s expectations but with other students who desire the same grade. I noted that, according to the students, scaling or grading on a curve functions as a scarcity mechanism, creating or amplifying competition. The Department of Psychology was singled out as notorious for employing a grading curve policy, to which participants objected.

Grades were also contrasted to learning. Several students conversed about the irony of getting a good mark when they only grasped the material long after the test and conversely of knowing the material thoroughly yet getting a bad mark. They pointed out that marks may not reflect learning and that learning is more satisfying than grades. However, no one indicated whether this lure of learning changes their behaviour toward the achievement of grades. Participants seemed to accept the primacy of grades as measures of their achievement in university and portals to future opportunities, but not without significant lament.

7.5.3 Good practices in Science. A bright note from Science students was their praise for the good practices of several key faculty members. Students said the approaches of these faculty members to teaching large classes made the otherwise unbearably long classes in large lecture halls engaging and productive. Students commented on the approachability of the professors, “smart neighbour time” (Sydney & Georgia, Canada, year 1), personal response system (“clickers”), and email triage systems whereby every email gets a response either in class (for commonly held questions) or by email. For small classes, students cited professors’ use of peer feedback on essay drafts, professors’ availability to clarify assignments with groups in class, verbal and written comments beyond just a grade, and professors initiating class dinners. In short, they said, ”the professors makes an environment” (Kacey, Japan, year 4). Although
students from other faculties pointed out faculty members’ use of good practices, the greatest number of comments and the greatest enthusiasm came from Science students.

7.5.4 Perspectives about each faculty. There was striking consistency in perceptions of specific faculties from students in and out of each faculty. It seems that faculties and programs had distinct cultures and student outcomes, which I describe in the sections below.

Students said they found it hard to meet people outside of their faculty. This was a common lament from students across the faculties, and several students said the university should do more to facilitate networking across faculties. They said the faculty another student was in would affect their relationship with them (Rae, Hong Kong, year 1). The notable exception was in learning communities such as residence, Jump Start orientation, peer programs, and the Greek system, in which students did meet others from outside their faculty.

I was surprised to note how often students spoke about taking classes outside their faculty or major. This was evident when they commented on their frustration that NSSE allowed them only one answer to each item, whereas their responses would vary depending on which of their faculty or class experiences they chose to reference. Students commented frequently on classes they had taken in a faculty or major other than their own. It is important to note that students have learning experiences that cross faculty boundaries, particularly in English, Math, and first-year courses. This reality strengthens the argument that students will benefit when faculties pursue common and cumulative learning outcomes, particularly for first-year classes.

7.5.4.1 Applied Science (Engineering). The common perception of Engineering was of collaboration and teamwork. Engineering students said they were “all very close” (Barnaby, Canada, year 4) and that they depended on forming a network (Mr. Volts, Canada, year 4) to
complete the high volume of work and the high-stakes assignments. They said that “in Engineering many projects require teamwork” (Lewes, China, year 4) and that students get to know each other well within their major.

7.5.4.2 Arts. Participants perceived that the learning goal in Arts is primarily interpretation rather than the acquisition of facts. Nearly all references to class discussions were in Arts classes (including English). Students said that in Arts classes they could bring their lived experiences, so had more to contribute to class discussions than just their reading of the text.

Daisuke-MSC: Because if you’re in Economics versus if you’re in English, it’s completely different.

Michelle: And that’s class size or the content as well?

Samantha-FSR: I think it’s both content as well because there is more room for interpretation in a lot of the English courses and a lot more discussion and you’re able to do that, whereas a Physics concept or a Physics law, you’re learning what it is. You’re not interpreting it, you’re not discussing whether you think it’s right because obviously it’s right.—Canada, year 1

This focus on interpretation was echoed in the approach to plagiarism. One Science participant described the practice of copying homework from others (Janet, Korea, year 1), whereas an Arts student said that would be plagiarism in Arts (Elis, Korea, year 1).

Arts was also distinguished by its emphasis on plurality of perspectives. One Geography student said, “I have to get a different idea of different groups in order not to be biased” (J. J., Hong Kong, year 4). One student lamented that students in Science and Engineering should be
“forced to critically think about social issues” (Stella, Korea, year 1) as they are in Arts so they do not graduate with closed-minded stereotypes about others.

Participants in Arts and Science described feeling pressure to choose the right faculty or major. Some fourth-year students wondered wistfully if they had made the right choice (Kaatje and Gabriel, Canada, year 4). They commented on the link between major and career and the lack of clarity in their own career goals even at graduation. These sentiments were not echoed by students in Commerce or Engineering.

7.5.4.3 Commerce. Commerce emerged as the home to confident, career-minded students with solid group presentation skills and a focus on networking for the future. Yet one student said he transferred out of Commerce because “it was too, like, make money” (Jenny Jones, Canada, year 4). A few students said it was hard to get to know Commerce students because their culture was so different.

Geoff-MAC: For Commerce students, they are [...] less friendly. For example they have more “ego”. It happens, I heard, and it will affect our relationship.

Rae-FAC: In Jump Start, [the students] were divided into Arts, Science, and Commerce. And there was a huge contrast when they presented. Arts students presented in a very boring way, but Commerce students were more aggressive and they really knew how to sell something. It was very different. (Hong Kong, year 1)

A number of students commented that they had hoped to join Commerce but did not have the marks to get in.
7.5.4.4 Science. Common perceptions about Science included unproductive competition, large classes, no discussion, ineffective use of class presentations, memorization of fine-grained detail that requires dedicated attention, classes packed with content, and multiple sources for content learning. Participants said Science students did not contribute in class because it was a distraction from the core content (Daisuke and Samantha, Canada, year 1).

Science faculty members and Chemistry professors in particular were lauded for teaching techniques that made large classes “as good as a small class” (Rachel, Canada, year 1). Science was further distinguished as the only faculty in which students mentioned undergraduate research. Science students listed doing “crazy research” (Sydney, Canada, year 1) as an outstanding achievement for a UBC student, and Bubble insisted there should be more opportunities to assist in laboratory settings as a way to become better acquainted with faculty members (Canada, year 1).

7.5.5 Learning as viewed in each faculty. In previous chapters I introduced the idea of learning and the surprising awareness some students showed of the potential for learning—realized or not—from the NSSE behaviours. Upon close examination of the data, I found no discernible difference in the way students from different faculties talked about learning in general. They highlighted the often missed potential to learn when giving class presentations. They pointed out the relationship between class participating in class and learning, motivation, memory enhancement, and social network development, and they lamented when class participation was absent. They referred to multiple sources of learning, including classmates, friends, study buddies, textbooks, the Internet, faculty members’ notes online, individual interaction with faculty members, and class attendance. In general their comments were quite similar.
There was, however, one unique slant to participants’ comments when they named a faculty or discipline when speaking about their learning.

Arts. When speaking about Arts, they said learning requires interpretation rather than memorization. They pointed to the high number of papers they must write and the importance of faculty members being accessible so that prescribed paper topics, which are easily misunderstood, can be clarified. Interaction with a faculty member is about clarification, which is necessary, or about discussing new ideas, which is optional and can wait if the professor is not available. They emphasized the importance of group study outside of class so they could learn from one another’s perspectives. They said that students bring unique perspectives when contributing in class or making presentations. They said there is scope for discussion of lived experiences, which means there is more opportunity to contribute in class beyond discussing material from the textbook.

English. International and Canadian students could not say enough good things about their English classes. As no participant identified as an English major, we can assume they were referring to first-year English or English courses they took as electives. They said English classes require interpretation and feedback from the professor so the student can improve, as well as feedback from the student so the professor knows students understand. Peer feedback is valuable and discussion is the norm. Students described English as the ideal engaged classroom, with some participants saying it was their only small class, their only class presentation, and the only class where they could contribute. Examples of approachable professors were largely from
English classes. The go-to contrast to large classes, unapproachable professors, lecture format, and boring classes was English.

*Applied Science (Engineering).* Students said their Engineering coursework requires a high degree of collaboration to deal with the enormous volume of content, the time pressure from taking up to eight courses a term, and the high-stakes assignments that may be worth half of their term mark.

*Science.* According to the participants, Science requires precise attention to detail. This means the students’ task is to grasp and memorize the material. Interacting with a faculty member is primarily about clarifying a specific point, but since this is in the context of highly complex content, it cannot be done quickly but requires dedicated time. However, since the information is factual, it can be learned from a variety of sources, so there is a way around unapproachable or inaccessible teachers. Participants told us that learning in Science requires collaboration to master the high volume of content, but unfortunately students in Science are unproductively competitive. Assignments in Science can be worth a lot of marks, so it is critical to build your network of effective study partners. Most Science classes are lecture format, with no discussion. Those presentations that are assigned add no value for the hearers and do little to benefit the presenter, as there is no coaching on how to present.

*Commerce.* Participants said confidence is highly valued in Commerce, so presentations are essential. They build one’s ability to be confident and to project confidence. Presentation skills are taught in a specific course, and students are expected to present effectively in every class.
Students commented that peer learning is valuable because the workplace requires working effectively in teams. They said workplace teams may include friends but they may include enemies, so it is beneficial to hone group skills now, at university.

*Language.* The second most cited type of ideal class was language class. Students said language classes were intimate, reduced anxiety (a barrier to learning), built social networks, and made access to faculty easy. Every language teacher mentioned was lauded for their approachability and care for students.

### 7.6 Why Comparison by Nationality Faltered

I have made some mention in preceding chapters to nationality where relevant, but the individual participants’ hybrid experiences of living in a number of countries and settings did not allow for extensive analysis on national lines. In this section I will outline why comparison by citizenship had limited utility in this study.

Two research questions point to a comparison of student perceptions by nationality:

1. **How do UBC international undergraduate students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan interpret select NSSE questions and perceive select NSSE behaviours?** How do these interpretations and perceptions compare to those of Canadian undergraduate students?

2. **How do UBC international undergraduate students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan perceive their engagement with their host university?** How do these interpretations and perceptions compare to those of Canadian undergraduate students?
As recommended by Zhao, Kuh and Carini (2005), this study considered perspectives of Asian international students with attention to national groupings. The assumption was that students who share common cultural influences and have shared experiences of educational enculturation in their home context might have similar perspectives on their engagement with their university that outsiders to their culture do not.

In some cases, this assumption seemed to be relevant. For instance, the fourth-year Japanese group showed a fascinating homogenization of responses. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, the result was so surprising that I sent the research assistant back to the audio and video tapes to verify that they had “all nodded” and shown other signs of agreement. She did verify that, indeed, in every case the group had acted in concert. This is reminiscent of Hofstede’s collectivism, on which Japan as a nation scores very high.

However, I expected the assumption of national similarities would be sorely tested and might not hold up for a number of reasons. First, Hofstede (2001) emphasizes that his cultural dimensions address national or regional aggregations and that variation of individuals within a cultural group will be substantial. Second, the study purposefully excluded controls on acculturation to the Canadian context, as that would have added a layer of complexity beyond the scope of the study. For instance, in one case, the entire population for one focus group was 12 students, making it unrealistic to exclude certain students based on time spent in Canada, given that the ideal number of participants in a focus group was 6 to 12 and likelihood of recruiting even 50% of the population was slim. Third, the cultural complexity of the Canadian student population, mirroring in part Vancouver’s cultural diversity, reduced the likelihood that Canadian students would demonstrate a cohesive set of perceptions. Fourth, the cultural complexity of UBC’s international students, who are drawn substantially from international
secondary schools (International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, British or American curriculum), means that international students may have lived in and been schooled in a third country or been used to a curricular structure Canadians would find familiar.

During the focus groups, students disclosed demographic details that suggested they would not fit neatly in the expected national or regional cultural clusters. One student left her country of citizenship at age three. She identified herself as Thai, which was not one of the culture groups intended for study. Another student had lived and studied in Canada since Grade Five. One student had lived in several countries before coming to Canada. Ken said he had “been living abroad most of the time” (Japan, year 1). A cluster of students from Taiwan discovered their strongest connection was not that they were from Taiwan but that all but one of them – including, amazingly, the research assistant – had studied at the same high school abroad, in Shanghai. Many students were not “from” the places the study intended them to be “from.”

In addition to objective characteristics, participants expressed a number of perspectives that demonstrated their hybrid identities. First-year student Geoff from Hong Kong preferred to speak in English, although the rest of the participants and the research assistant were speaking Cantonese. Even the research assistant found this confusing:

Geoff-MAC: In UBC, I think Asians, especially Hong Kong people, like to hang out with Hong Kong people or Taiwanese. So it turns out that I talk to people with a different ethnic background once a week. Well, in class I have to, like in group [discussion]. But outside of class, like in normal social life, I barely have any. [I] like hanging out with people who speak my native language.

Kerry: But you speak English better.

Geoff-MAC: Yes, so I have both.
First-year student Ken distanced himself from his national heritage when he said, “Well I don’t like the Japanese culture in general – like I see positive aspects of it but I feel like the negative aspects kind of overwhelm things.” Yasmine, another first year student from Japan, refused to comment on the NSSE item related to race or ethnicity:

Yasmine-FAR: For me, as for number 1 I thought that 1U asked whether I had serious conversations with students of different race or ethnicity and I thought that ethnicity doesn’t matter. So I thought that that question was irrelevant. Well, I guess the question can exist but I just didn’t think race was important.

When asked what was the most important thing said in the focus group, Yasmine’s response was telling: “I felt that, just because someone is Japanese they would think this way, or to think that because a person is from this country they think a certain way, is wrong. I think that was important.”

As Douglas Bourn (2011) pointed out, “With the increased globalisation (sic) of societies and communities, the role and identity of the individual becomes complex, fluid and often of a hybrid nature” (p. 563). The hybridity of participant demographics, including exposure to diverse cultural influences and school curricula, and of their self-perceptions made it quite challenging to tease out national or regional cultural patterns among the findings. Those that were strongly evident have been shared, but clearly this line of thought was insufficient to capture the complexity of identities among the students in the study.

7.7 What We Learned About the Population Under Study Aside From Their Comments

The distributions within the citizenship subpopulations merit future study. For instance, the proportion of Japanese enrolled as BAs shoots from 50% in first year to 93% in fourth year. One
hundred percent of Japanese first-year students live in residence, compared to 33 to 60% for other international populations in the study. There were also differences in residence status by gender within certain country groups; men or women from certain countries may have stronger expectations of institutional care in the form of the residence system. China, Hong Kong, and Japan have significantly more fourth-year than first-year students, and so their transfer student experiences may merit particular attention. South Korea and Taiwan see attrition from first to fourth year, which raises questions about academic performance, military service, and status changers (those 50 or so students each year who “leave” the international student population by becoming permanent residents).

7.8 Making Sense of Student Populations

See Table 7.2 for a profile of participants by gender, faculty, and residence status.

Table 7.2 Participants by gender, faculty, and residence status

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See Table 7.2 for a profile of participants by gender, faculty, and residence status.
## Country/Region

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<td>Subpopulation</td>
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</table>

*Subpopulation refers to percentage within the total of registered UBCV international students for the noted year and citizenship.*

### 7.8.1 Findings by year level.

As expected, first-year students made more comments about busyness, grades, and academic stress. This is consistent with the theory of them as newcomers in the field that is university life. But it also begs the question of the role of stress in aiding or constraining first-year students’ movement toward desired outcomes such as personal
development, the development of social networks, meaningful learning about their chosen subject(s), and graduation. Where is the balance between challenge and support?

Interestingly, first-year students were not only more stressed, they were also more hopeful and believed it was up to them to make the most of university life. These two perceptions may work against each other to create added pressure on first-year students, who might be expected to experience difficulty and failure when engaging in a new activity such as university life presents. If students expect positive outcomes and believe success rests on their own efforts, yet the environment presents many challenges, it is possible that objective failure could be seen as a failure to achieve one’s own potential. This could be problematic for first-year students if they are unable to deal effectively with the challenges and failures that arise, because they may miss the opportunity to learn from them and adjust their behaviour and expectations and instead become stuck in an unproductive pattern of self-criticism and ineffective behaviours.

The critical roles of faculty members and of residence life in aiding first-year students’ perceived engagement should not be overlooked. First-year students singled out faculty members as a powerful factor in creating a classroom environment conducive to engagement and in crafting academic activities that promote social connections. Similarly, residence life was mentioned repeatedly as a factor aiding first-year students’ social network development, reducing stress, and providing passive and personalized support from residence advisors.

Both faculty members and residence life programming serve to build newcomers’ capacity to acquire the desired capital to succeed in the new field. Residence life has long been recognized as a key factor in promoting student success, and one could argue that student success has been a desired outcome of post-secondary residence life programming since its inception. The role of faculty members in promoting holistic student success is perhaps less apparent when
one considers the systems of selection, preparation, reward and recognition of faculty members commonly followed in post-secondary institutions. Certainly these findings suggest that the role of faculty members in promoting desired student outcomes is critical in the eyes of first-year students.

It is ironic that large class size, which emerges in the study as one of the greatest perceived constraints to student engagement, satisfaction, and learning, is localized with first-year students, whom we have already identified as one of the most stressed and least equipped populations. This finding bears consideration given the prevalence of large classes at many Canadian universities, due in part to rapid growth in post-secondary education in Canada since the 1980s] and dramatic decreases in provincial funding in the same time period (Fisher et al., 2006). Some first-year participants called for the reduction of class sizes, which is a reasonable conclusion from a student’s point of view. Other students, however, cited positive examples of large class teaching and learning, echoing Bourdieu’s notions that individuals within fields may be more successful when they know and can effectively employ the rules of the game. There is tremendous potential to transform first-year education at Canadian universities when we reconsider not only the number of students in first-year classes but also the kind of teaching and learning environments in which newcomers lacking capital can be successful despite the size of their classes.

7.8.2 Findings by gender. There were small but notable differences between responses of male and female participants, none of which were anticipated based on the organizing frameworks in the study. Certainly women emerged as a particularly stressed and vulnerable population, and the overlap of first-year and female respondents suggests that the subpopulation of first-year females is one meriting particular attention. Academic stress, grades, not knowing
what is expected of them, competition, and large class sizes seemed to place particular strain on members of this group.

As expected, there was a greater emphasis from female students on relationships with faculty and to some extent with other students. They paid keen attention to the actions of faculty members who signaled approachability, demonstrated good teaching practices, and created a classroom environment conducive to students contributing in class. They commented more often on the difficulty of developing social networks, particularly in large classes, although overall men had as much to say about social networks as women. There is a clear argument to be made that relationships with faculty are a key motivator for female participants, and that institutional commitments to improve teaching and learning would have a positive impact on female participants’ perceptions of their engagement with the university.

7.8.3 Findings by residence status. Residence status was not a central variable to the study but was worth considering to be sure the findings were not skewed toward one population or the other. Language comments do seem to come disproportionately from commuter students, but no other effect is substantiated by the frequency counts and there is no other discernible distinction in tone or topic between residents and commuters. Segregating participant comments by their residence status shed little light on their perceptions of NSSE, NSSE behaviours, or their engagement with the university. This strengthens the findings of the study overall.

On the topic of language, it would be interesting to know whether speakers of English as an Additional Language living in an English-speaking residence, particularly traditional residence halls such as those UBC first-year students inhabit, tend to develop greater facility in English than those who do not. It would also be interesting to understand to what extent the necessity and opportunity to speak predominantly English in the residences influences choices of
speakers of English as an Additional Language to apply for or eschew university residence. I suspect post-secondary education as a field has not begun to tap into the potential of residence halls as productive sites of additional language learning.

I was not surprised to hear negative comments about commuting, but I was surprised to hear only negative comments. Commuting has advantages: financial savings for those living at home for no or reduced rent; and flexibility to choose the neighbourhood, size, price point, commute time, type of housing, style of decor, roommates, and proximity to services and, in the case of Vancouver, beach, national border, forest, or mountains. However, perhaps these choices are less choice than consequence of resources. There is a dynamic interrelationship between commute distance and size of housing when the price is held constant; neighbourhood and proximity to key attractions will dictate price in many cases, or if price is set, then size or style of decor is impacted. In one of the most expensive cities in the world, housing is clearly a stressor for students, international and domestic alike.

Considering Bourdieu’s notion of fields, it does seem that residents and commuters alike see residence as a schooling ground for learning and practising the rules of the game and for accumulating the desired forms of capital, at least as far as social capital is concerned. As well, though the effects were small, there were hints that residence might be a place where students learn to embrace a positive attitude, grasp a broader picture of university than just their own experience, become aware of leadership and involvement opportunities, and learn the terminology of the university, which are all arguably part of the rules of the game. Residence is a locus of powerful learning for students and has potential for even more intentional interventions.

7.8.4 Findings by faculty, major, or discipline. Several lessons emerge from the data when parsed by participants’ faculty, major, or discipline. First, this study substantiates the
distinctiveness of cultures within faculties as perceived by the students. MAJOR, the code I used to note a reference to a faculty or discipline, was one of the most frequently used codes. The most telling comment came when the facilitator asked a question and the first student to respond asked, “Any faculty, right?” (Sydney, Canada, year 1). To the participants, the response would differ by faculty. Students made that point again when many of them commented that their answers to NSSE items would vary depending on the faculty or discipline students were referencing. Student descriptions of the faculties were consistent regardless of whether the student was from that faculty. This aligns with the insistence I often hear from staff and administrators that faculty cultures are distinct and new students must be introduced to them if students are to be successful.

However, although students describe the faculty and disciplinary cultures as distinct, there is very little evidence that students themselves differ by faculty. This study was not focused on faculty distinctions, but considering the way students spoke about their perceptions of their university experiences, although they described their faculties as distinct, they did not otherwise display significant differences in their overall perceptions of university life. There is an argument to be made that undergraduate students in different faculties are more alike than dissimilar, all things being equal, and that it is in their induction to their faculties that disciplinary distinctiveness is acquired.

Second, although students in different faculties did not display noticeable differences in their perspectives on their engagement overall, they described quite distinct cultures when they talked about specific faculties and about learning in specific faculties. Students said they would respond differently to NSSE questions based on the faculty of the courses or even the faculty of the fellow students they referenced when answering the questions. Students also longed for more
opportunities to meet students from other faculties, which struck me as odd given the many ways students from different faculties meet in residence, clubs and organizations, and in campus activities.

In brief, Arts was known for its interpretive stance and plurality of perspectives in which students’ own experiences were brought into the class discussions. First-year English was lauded by students in every faculty because of its small, discussion-based format and approachable professors. Engineering (within Applied Science) was known for the collaboration and teamwork students employed to deal with the otherwise unmanageable workload. Commerce students were depicted as confident, career-minded students who prepare for their career through networking and class presentation skills. Science stood out as a site of “ridiculous” competition, large classes, memorization of detailed content, and notable innovative teaching practices.

Third, students pointed out that they take classes outside their own faculty, which is a reminder of the value and importance of common and cumulative outcomes for students beyond the curriculum. When students hear in all their classes about the benefits of enriched educational experiences and an inclusive and respectful environment, for example, they are much more likely to move towards those valued perspectives and experiences.

7.9 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter presents the findings related to demographic variables in students’ perceptions of select NSSE items and associated behaviours. This chapter addresses the following research question:

Regarding UBC international and domestic undergraduate students’ perceptions of select NSSE questions, select NSSE behaviours, and their engagement with their university,
how do first and fourth year students’ perceptions differ? How do students’ perceptions differ in light of residence status, faculty, and gender?

As expected, first-year students were more likely to comment about busyness, grades, and academic stress. This supports the theory of them as newcomers to the field of university academic practices. In counterpoint, they were also more hopeful and believed it was up to them to make the most of their university life. High challenge combined with high and perhaps unrealistic expectations of themselves may make it hard for first-year students to deal effectively with and learn from failure. Faculty play a critical role in supporting first-year students’ engagement, particularly in creating classroom environments conducive to engagement. This is particularly true in large classes, which participants said was one of the greatest constraints they perceived to their engagement but which ironically were quite common in first year. Residence life was cited as a key factor aiding first-year students’ social network development, reducing stress, and providing valued support from residence advisors. In short, first-year students emerged as one of the most vulnerable populations in the study and therefore a population with whom institutions will do well to intervene.

Regarding gender, there were small but notable differences between responses of students who self-identified in the university database as men and women. Women emerged as the most stressed population, suggesting that first-year women may merit particular attention. Women placed greater emphasis on relationships with faculty members and to a certain extent with other students. The limited number and extent of the differences by gender strengthens the validity of the study overall.

Regarding residence status, participants living in university-operated residences showed no substantive differences from commuters. The minor exception was that commuters were more
likely to mention language as a barrier to engagement. The virtual lack of differences between these populations’ utterances again strengthens the validity of the study.

At the same time as there were virtually no differences between perceptions of engagement by residents and commuters, both groups clearly identified residence as a cite of social connections, stress reduction, and personalized support in the form of residence advisors. There were no positive comments about commuting. Residence life represented the ideal for participants and greatly enabled engagement opportunities.

Regarding faculty, major, or discipline, an unexpected paradox arose in the findings. The perceptions from students in different faculties did not differ appreciably, which strengthens the validity of the study. However, as with residence, the perceptions about each faculty differed greatly and were consistent whether students were in the faculty or outside of it. Students were keenly aware of the different responses they would give in NSSE, or the different way they would relate to fellow students, depending on which faculty the course or student was in. Students said they wanted more contact with students from other faculties, yet they also pointed out that they take courses in other faculties (particularly in first year), so while they lament a sense of isolation within faculties, their university experience is in fact distributed across faculties. In brief, Science appeared as a space of “ridiculous” competition but notably of innovative teaching practices that neutralized the barrier to engagement presented by large classes. Arts, and particularly first-year English, was the ideal for small class discussions, philosophical plurality, inclusion in the classroom of students’ own experiences, and approachable professors. Commerce engaged confident students in class presentations and networking as career preparation, and Engineering defied all stereotypes by emerging as the most
collaborative and team-based culture of all – of necessity, the students said, to manage the otherwise unbearable workload.

After comparing the findings by demographic variables, it is reasonable to conclude that year level was the only variable across which students’ perceptions of their engagement differed substantively across a variety of topics. Women’s responses showed some differentiation but with lesser strength and scope. The limited differentiation by demographic variables strengthens the validity of the study overall.
Chapter 8.
Discussion: Making Sense of NSSE and NSSE Behaviours

8.1 NSSE as a Survey: Statistics Do Not Tell the Whole Story

Of the statistically significant differences between UBC Canadian and international students’ NSSE 2008 results, several were surprising: international students said they had more interactions with faculty members, particularly outside of class, and Canadian students said they had more serious conversations with people very different than themselves. These results were surprising because, based on my practical experience and based on the theoretical frameworks grounding this study, international students would be expected to have less contact with faculty members and of necessity to engage more often with people very different than themselves.

8.1.1 Student-faculty interaction and out-of-class interaction with faculty. In unpacking these issues with international participants, it became clear that they interpreted the wording of the NSSE items differently than Canadians. Further, their responses demonstrate that the statistics do not tell the whole story of their interactions with faculty members. The most prominent example here is international students who took faculty member to mean “students in my faculty,” whereas most Canadians interpret faculty member as “professors and teaching assistants.” Certainly students interact more often with other students in their faculties than they do with professors, so the NSSE results around student-faculty interaction are understandable. This explains the gap in responses and simultaneously calls for a reconsideration of NSSE items that use the term faculty member in a Canadian context, in which faculty means both discipline (e.g., Engineering) and professors.
This provides a plausible theory as to why international student responses to NSSE were higher for student-faculty interaction, and why this was not the case for the sample in Zhao, Kuh and Carini (2005) or in Irungu (2010): in the U.S., where the majority of NSSE participants reside, the disciplinary entity is typically called a college and the only faculty are professors (used here in the generic sense). However, in Canada, the disciplinary entity is called a faculty and faculty members may well be mistaken by speakers of English as an Additional Language to mean other students in one’s faculty.

UBC international student responses to NSSE 2008 indicated higher numbers of out-of-class interactions with faculty members. This is understandable when one combines the above misunderstanding of faculty member with the second misunderstanding: outside-of-class as meaning a person not related to my class. In this way, interactions with faculty members outside of class, rather than referring to conversations between or after a class with the professor who teaches me that class, was understood by some international students to mean any interactions with other students in my faculty who were not taking my class.

8.1.2 Diversity / serious conversations. Similarly, with the NSSE items about diversity, international students tended to see these items as referring to intimate conversations with close friends, whereas Canadians tended to see race as a non-issue and judged many conversations as serious, so they reported having many serious conversations with people different than themselves all the time. Again, the statistical variance does not point to the kind of difference in engagement that the NSSE results would suggest. It is not that Canadians are having more serious conversations with people different than themselves, but that they have a lower threshold for seriousness and dismiss the idea of difference relatively easily, so in essence they reduce the items to have conversations.
The NSSE items related to serious conversations were nearly unintelligible for the participants in this study. The double-barreled nature of the items made it very hard for participants to tease out whether to answer the items based on the seriousness of the conversations or on the nature of difference between themselves and their conversation partners. The definition of *serious* engendered lengthy, inconclusive debate among international participants from nearly every country or regional group. From Taiwanese politics to personal stories and dreams for the future, serious conversation topics were not only broad but also hotly debated by participants. They seemed unable to determine how to interpret the questions.

For international participants, these two NSSE items sparked a great deal of anxiety. In fact, it is not clear to me that the international participants’ written responses on the draft survey they completed during the focus group reflected the comments they later made during the focus groups. When respondents are unable to understand what the questions mean or how to answer them, this suggests that the NSSE items about serious conversations have questionable validity for international students and should be reconsidered.

For Canadian participants, clearly, the word *serious* did not have the same meaning as it had for international participants. For Canadians, the threshold for a serious conversation seemed to be quite low, and they indicated that they had such serious conversations on a daily basis with whomever was at hand. The dramatic gap in experiences between Canadian and international participants around *serious conversations with people very different than themselves* is generally consistent with the UBC NSSE 2008 responses. However, it belies the interpretation that institutional analysts applied to it, which is that Canadian students were reporting high levels of interactions with international students but that international students were reporting low levels
of interactions with Canadian students. This also suggests that the NSSE items in question require serious reconsideration before their results at this university can be given much credence.

8.1.3 **Impressions of NSSE as a survey.** That students found the survey unremarkable may be good news. It suggests that there were no significant barriers presented by the impression of the survey to answering the survey authentically. Later we will see response barriers that arose from the structure of the items and the response options, but the overall impression did not seem to be a barrier to authentic responses for most international participants.

8.1.4 **Meanings misconstrued.** Lack of clarity produced less than reliable results for certain NSSE items. One Canadian participant confessed she had not read the diversity items in full because the items were double-barreled and longer than the other questions, and as a result she had answered incorrectly. Two Canadians had diametrically opposed interpretations of the *relationship with faculty members* item in terms of whether it was based on experience or on reputation of the professoriate. These two students had similar experiences and perceptions of faculty members but gave completely opposite responses to NSSE because of how they interpreted the question. It is concerning that NSSE has been adopted so readily in Canada when it seems even Canadian students struggle to answer items reliably.

8.1.5 **Response options.** Regarding response options, several international and Canadian students objected to the lack of more specific response options. Interestingly, international participants saw only one option as missing: *rarely*, between *never* and *sometimes*. This suggests they were looking for a way to show they are not inexperienced or unwilling but also not full participants in the activity. We may see here a desire for precision but also hesitancy to be over-associated with the engagement behaviour. This is consistent with a strong-uncertainty avoidance
(Hofstede, 2001) emphasis on getting the right answer. The lack of a response option that precisely fit the students’ experiences could be expected to cause distress and frustration from a strong uncertainty-avoidance perspective.

8.1.6 Statistics do not tell the whole story. International and Canadian students said that their answers were an amalgam of their realities and that they would answer differently based on the type of course, type of staff member, grouping of students, and size of class they referenced when answering the question. Because the survey did not provide a way to qualify their answer, they were frustrated and felt that the university did not really care about their experiences. This was an early clue that participants saw their university life as contextual and consisting of various subcultures created by class size, category of staff, and category of students with whom they interact.

Interestingly, fourth-year Canadian students did not mention the context-dependency of their responses to NSSE. The most likely explanation is that they have far fewer large lecture classes, as small seminars are more common in upper years. However, this would be the same for fourth-year Korean students, yet they had quite a few concerns about how to answer the survey accurately given the varied reality between large and small classes. Again, this suggests that there might be a cultural component to their responses that differentiates their experiences from those of Canadian participants.

This insistence by the participants that their responses “depend” raised a further concern about NSSE as a survey, and also about surveys that require students to generalize broadly across a variety of situations. The concern is that students’ responses will vary depending on which memories they are accessing, because they are either most representative, most salient, or simply most recent. This possible variance is disconcerting because institutions tend to analyze the
results as if the responses were representative of the students’ experiences, when in fact they may be products of a recency effect.

This leads to a final observation, which is that a number of students were swayed during the focus groups to change their answers to the NSSE items or discussed multiple interpretations from which they had simply picked one. This suggests that students answered NSSE (during this study) based on whichever of several possible interpretations or stories they were accessing at the time, which may come from their own experiences or from hearsay.

8.2 Asking Questions or Contributing to Class Discussions

8.2.1 Framing of class participation by international students. A broad spectrum of international students said they do not ask questions in class or contribute to class discussion. This is striking given that these behaviours are among those purported in the engagement literature to predict success. If international participants say they are not engaging in these behaviours, why did these items not appear on the UBC NSSE results as significantly different from Canadian responses?

8.2.1.1 Emotions. As expected, international students were less likely to say that they ask questions in class or contribute to class discussions. Also as expected, international students focused heavily on anxiety-based emotions when they spoke about contributing in class. These references to the emotion of participation confirmed my observation as a practitioner that many students experience strong constraining emotions related to these behaviours. Participants described more than an intellectual exercise when trying to puzzle out what was expected. Fear of ridicule from peers and professors seemed to be the most salient concern for the international participants when asked about participating in class. The behaviours may have been anxiety-
inducing because they called on unfamiliar social practices and assumptions about students’ roles. International students’ expectations seemed to imply an unwritten and perhaps unclear set of rules for classroom participation. There was talk of stupid questions, saying the wrong thing, and asking a question that others do not have. For the students there appeared to be right questions and wrong questions and right and wrong ways to act in the classroom. The rules did not seem to be explicit but instead were set by some kind of crowdsourcing.

One way to explain this finding is to consider the habitus these international students might be bringing to this new field. The target countries or regions score lower on Hofstede’s individualism index and higher on the uncertainty avoidance index than does Canada. This means that in the aggregate they might tend to prefer more prescribed situations with people whose social behaviours follow predictable rules that favour the good of the group. Here are some thoughts from Hofstede and Hofstede’s work on uncertainty avoidance that may illuminate the findings:

_Uncertainty avoidance_ can therefore be defined as the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations. This feeling is, among other things, expressed through nervous stress and in a need for predictability: a need for written and unwritten rules. (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p. 167, italics in original)

The strong uncertainty avoidance sentiment can be summarized by the credo of xenophobia: “What is different is dangerous.” The weak uncertainty avoidance sentiment, on the contrary, is: what is different is curious. (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p. 175)

Students may have experienced a sense of being outsiders to the expected social practices of the classroom. Seeing the other students as cultural insiders, they feared being targeted or
pointed out as not fitting in. This outsider role is commonly a challenge for cultural newcomers but especially so for ones from countries with high collectivist orientation. The uncertainty over expected behaviour may be particularly distressing for students from contexts of strong uncertainty avoidance. This may be compounded by cognitive-linguistic factors, such as the need to quickly formulate a response in an additional language so as to insert it appropriately into the conversation.

Students may preferentially engage in behaviours that are consistent with their cultural frames of reference and shy away from behaviours that are not. It seems that for many first-year international students, participating in class was not within their cultural frame of reference.

This hesitancy became a recurring tone through many of the international focus group responses. As a researcher I became curious to understand how students understood themselves as agents in their own involvement, if hesitancy was such a defining approach. As a practitioner I was determined not to jump to the common but erroneous conclusion that people who are hesitant in a given situation must therefore be shy. Student services professionals who are less familiar with international students commonly label them as “shy” and even declare “no shy zones” on their campuses as a way to encourage international students to be more engaged. This over-application of shyness by professionals strikes me as a misattribution that displays egregious ethnocentrism. It assumes that the context itself is harmless and those who do not venture into it comfortably must be shy individuals, rather than recognizing that unfamiliar settings are inherently risky and that hesitancy in such situations may be a reasonable caution. These perceptions on the part of respondents, who were mostly fourth-year students, tells us something about the students’ meta-awareness of the learning process and themselves as learners.
8.2.1.2 Learning. A surprising number of international students talked about learning from, wishing they could learn from, or regretting that they were unable to learn from participating in class. Some fourth-year participants indicated that participating in class can lead to learning and has a purpose beyond fulfilling a professor’s expectation or course requirement. This awareness on the part of students may reflect the increasing emphasis at UBC on learner reflexivity (Dyke, 2009). Some students may also have come from schools that expected participation and talked about its value. However, the awareness does not appear to be widespread.

8.2.1.3 Other sources. First-year international students saw participating in class as just one of several sources for academic information-gathering. Participating in class was anxiety-producing for many, and other sources provided a more palatable way to obtain the same information than asking a question in class.

The absence of fourth-year voices on this point is surprising. I would have expected that fourth-year students would be even more adept at finding alternative sources of information than first-year students. Fourth-year students may be more comfortable than first-year students in asking questions in class or contributing to class discussions so may have less impetus to rely on other sources. Alternatively, they may be so used to using a variety of sources that they no longer think to comment on it. This suggests that class participation relies on skills that can develop over time.

In students’ mentioning of other sources, I saw the first evidence of agency and strategy among participants. I observed that students were employing strategies and using multiple sources, such as their social networks and other academic resources, to accomplish their academic goals. One strategy is to leverage emotionally safe activities, such as talking to friends,
to replace ones they perceive to be unsafe, such as asking questions in class. In this way they turn to something in their frame of reference to deal with unfamiliar or uncomfortable elements in their new environment. Using social connections may be emotionally validating, as they can see that others have questions, too. Dependency on friends in class may strengthen social networks, which can contribute to overall well-being. Lisa Moores and Natalee Popadiuk (2011) commented on the primacy of social supports in the positive experiences of international students:

In a variety of incidents spanning several categories, the participants of this study emphasized the magnitude of “knowing I’m not alone.” Across the international student adjustment literature, social support has been one of the only factors that have consistently predicted a successful transition (Poyrazli et al., 2004), a finding supported here. (p. 296)

Another strategy is to turn to passive sources like textbooks that are emotionally non-threatening and factually reliable or to the Internet, which is readily at hand. International participants displayed flexibility and artistry in a way that sparked my curiosity and led me to look for other examples of agency and strategy development among the participants. As Walter Heinz concluded, “Transition uncertainty requires that young adults develop agency (planful and adaptive competence) in order to manage meaningful decisions between alternative pathways...” (2009, p. 341). If students can access multiple sources of information in strategic ways and can see themselves as agents of their own learning, they may be more successful in their studies. They may be less stuck and have more options to access needed information. They may also feel more confident and less anxious about the learning modalities with which they are
unfamiliar. In this way, international participants’ awareness of multiple sources for learning may point to an emergent opportunity to equip students with a sense of their own agency and self-awareness.

The focus by international students on learning through social networks may be evidence of Hofstede’s low individualism index (IDV), in which the good of the individual may be subsumed by the good of the collective. The majority of international participants have a connection to countries or regions that score quite low on individualism, suggesting that they may have higher expectations than Canadian students that their help will come not only from their own inner resources but from a group of mutually supporting people.

8.2.2 Factors affecting class participation for international students. Factors are important because they tell us how the university can help students, or how they can help themselves, engage in these behaviours. Factors highlight barriers we can remove and actions we can take so students are more likely to ask questions in class or contribute to class discussions.

8.2.2.1 Social environment. International students’ comments about the social environment in the classroom suggested that they were highly attuned to the environment and social expectations in the classroom. From their descriptions, an open social environment enables participation. I had not expected students to be so attuned to the social milieu of the classroom, especially in large classes. I called this code GRPTHNK because it seemed participants were tuned in to a group mentality about speaking up in class. It was as if there were invisible mood markers about who would speak up when and the participants somehow could sense these moods.
The unexpected dimension of social environment developed into a broad theme that recurred in numerous parts of the focus group scripts. To clarify this point, we also considered the comments of Canadian participants relative to their own participation in class. Since international students fear the responses of Canadian students in the classroom, and Canadian students share similar fears though to a lesser extent, perhaps the fears are unfounded, which knowledge could be liberating for students were they aware of it.

This reference to environment makes a logical connection to one of the NSSE benchmarks, supportive campus environment. NSSE measures this benchmark mainly as a factor of relationships with students, faculty and staff. However, participants were talking here about a different kind of attentiveness to social environment—not primarily about supportiveness but about *social norming* around engagement behaviours.

According to Blanton, Köblitz and McCaul (2008),

. . . *Social norms*. . . traditionally are defined as ‘customs, traditions, standards, rules, values, fashions, and all other criteria of conduct which are standardized as a consequence of the contact of individuals’ (Sherif, 1936, p. 3). . . . Like many social psychologists, however, we construe social norms broadly to include also the informal and momentary ‘codes of conduct’ that can emerge in a single interaction or social context (p. 1380).

This suggests that engagement theory may benefit from an expanded definition of supportive campus environment that includes contextual rather than only relational elements of the campus environment.
8.2.2.2 Class size. I was surprised by the extent and the force of international students’ certainty that class size was a deciding factor in their ability to contribute in class. It seems that the “rules of the game” in large classes are stricter and carry greater penalties. I had expected participants to describe a comfort in the anonymity of large classes and the familiarity of the sage-on-the-stage approach I understood some of them had been used to in previous schooling. However, there was not a hint of this. Instead, large classes were sites of intimidation and inhibition. For a population already leaning toward a sense of exclusion and feeling silenced, the reality of large classes, as they are experiencing them, is not likely to bring them closer to the desired outcomes of satisfaction, progress, and academic success.

Previous findings revealed that international participants perceived contributing in class as a primarily anxiety-inspiring activity and that they had many experiences of discouraging social environments in the classroom. Large classes only amplify the dampening effect of these perceptions, making it very difficult for international students to participate successfully in class.

8.2.2.3 Role of the professor. International students from every year and nearly every country indicated that professors were instrumental in enabling or constraining their class participation.

Chinese students were used to seeing teachers as sources of content information and as moderators of classroom participation. We can imagine that in the students’ experiences in China, the professor controlled the timing and pace of the class, and students were freer to ask questions because their role was clear: if you have a question, raise your hand and the professor will decide when it is appropriate to interrupt the lecture to answer the question. The ambiguity of whether one can ask a question or when to ask is taken away in such an arrangement. Based on the students’ comments, we can infer that the system of asking questions in China leaves less
room for getting it wrong, because they describe this system in contrast to a Canadian approach, which for them inspires anxiety and uncertainty.

The system they describe imbues the professor with significant power over the instructional content and format and removes that power from the learner. Accordingly, the skills to judge what is knowable and how the classroom experience should flow also lie with the teacher and not the student. International participants from this system looked for ways to reduce the uncertainty of knowing when to interrupt a lecture.

The Chinese participants’ descriptions of the teachers’ role in China is important. It helps explain some of the mystification they experienced at a Canadian university. They were not only navigating new social practices, they were doing it without the guide they had come to trust over many years: the teacher. Suddenly their own role shifted substantially, perhaps without warning and without clear instructions. Suddenly class participation was governed not by one individual but by some kind of mysterious crowd sourcing. No wonder their attention was drawn to the social environment for clues.

8.2.2.4 Culture. Culture and language are manifestations of rules of the game: those hidden patterns of behaviour that are as familiar to insiders as the air they breathe but which they would often be hard-pressed to articulate or explain to outsiders.

The comments from Chinese-heritage international students about “we Chinese” and references to not knowing the culture give the first clue that participants were aware of cultural differences between their home countries and Canada. This is consistent with the intercultural communication literature, which indicates that myriad foundational cultural differences exist between people from different countries and regions and that newcomers can expect to encounter these differences as confusing and confounding. Milton Bennett’s definition of culture is
applicable: "the learned and shared patterns of beliefs, behaviors, and values of groups of 
interacting people" (Bennett, 1998, p. 3). So is this a matter of simply learning the new cultural 
practices, much like one learns the academic terminology of one’s field in first-year classes? 
Apparently not, as indicated by the number of fourth-year students who chose to raise the issue 
in the focus groups.

The problem does not appear to be limited to first-year students but was a salient issue for 
some participants throughout their time at UBC. This speaks to the profound impacts cultural 
differences can have on international students’ ability to participate in class and perhaps also to 
engage in other ways.

In the students’ comments, we see evidence of key approaches to the differences between 
national cultures according to traditional cultural anthropology. Students comment that they do 
not understand and they “aren’t sure about everything.” They indicate that although they do not 
understand, they also do not know how to ask questions to get the answers they need. These are 
classic examples of high-context logic and communication (Hall, 1989, 1994). In high-contexts 
communication styles, the meaning is embedded in the situation, rather than primarily in the 
verbal exchange. This is in contrast to low-context communication styles, in which the verbal 
exchange contains the majority of the information and the context simply provides background. 
An example of low-context communication would be the posting of rules at a public swimming 
pool in North America. In a high-context communication setting, one would be expected to know 
how to behave without having to be told. It is reasonable in a high-context communication 
setting for the environment itself to be confusing, as students raised in a high-context tradition 
would be used to scanning the environment for clues about expected behaviour. In addition, 
North American styles of questioning, which are informed by low-context approaches, would
likely be unrecognizable and impenetrable for students used to a more roundabout manner of asking questions.

Similarly, Hofstede’s Individualism Index (2001) as a dimension of difference is clearly visible in the use of friends as content sources and the insistence that it is the university’s role to provide clarity around academic expectations for the students. Collectivism involves a commitment to the good of the group over the good of the individual. An example of collectivist social structures is the prevalence in the previous century of Chinese companies providing housing, schooling, and a whole range of social services for their employees and their families. Turning to friends as sources of academic help is consistent with the collectivist ideal, in which the students, despite the intense culture of academic competition, rely on one another for clarification and academic support.

Hofstede’s power distance (2001) may be seen in the expectation of students from China that the teacher or professor is in charge. This lack of role clarity on the part of students, who are unsure how to participate or how to formulate a question, may relate to the more deeply held value that it is not their role to formulate or direct the question-asking and give-and-take of the lecture setting. In this way, we see students’ comments about their social environment, the role of the professor, and their high level of anxiety at engaging in classroom participation as evidence of underlying cultural patterns that may inform their thinking, even without their knowledge.

8.2.2.5 Year level. International participants consistently asserted that contributing in class is more challenging in first year and gradually becomes easier. The cultural knowledge gaps cited in the previous section seemed to be more extreme at first and diminish over time. This factor does not exist in isolation. Participants made the link between first year and class
size, saying that it is harder to participate in first year, it is harder to participate in large classes, and most first-year classes are large.

8.2.2.6 Major. International students indicated they are more likely to participate in classes in their major, that are required, that interest them, or in which they expect to succeed. Although this result was not expected, it is understandable within a framework of limited resources. If students perceive themselves to have limited time and energy to focus on coursework, it is reasonable that they would invest heavily in areas that will yield the most academic benefit and which (one would hope) represent their strongest affinity and natural talent. In Bourdieusian terms, they are striving to advance themselves on the field in such a way to acquire the optimal embodied cultural capital.

This finding presents an opportunity to leverage major (area of study) and required courses to strengthen international students’ capacity to participate in class. It also lets us know that elective classes and those in which in-class contribution is not expected may pose particular challenges for international students’ in-class contribution, given other factors that may stand in their way.

Here again we see evidence of agency and strategy as students look to obtain maximum benefit from their finite resources. This presents an opportunity to leverage major (area of study) and required courses to strengthen international students’ capacity to participate in class. It also lets us know that elective classes and those in which in-class contribution is not expected may pose particular challenges for international students’ in-class contribution, given other factors that may stand in their way.
8.2.2.7 Language. I anticipated that international students would say that speaking English as an Additional Language (EAL) was a disadvantage for them and affected their ability to participate in class.

I wondered whether students would demonstrate more extreme responses, either negative or positive. For instance, I could imagine students complaining that the English-language admission standard at the institution was woefully inadequate such that they were struggling significantly more than they expected to be. On the opposite end of the spectrum, I could imagine that students might indicate they find the university a very easy place to be an EAL speaker, that they are afforded ample opportunity to make their opinions known, that they are proud of the English-language learning they have accomplished previously and are eager to improve it and demonstrate it in an academic setting.

That said, I did not expect the former response, as the university has worked carefully to pitch its English-language admission standard to align with international comparators and relevant institutional data points, such as achievement rates in first-year English. I also did not expect the latter, as such a welcoming environment for EAL speakers would require significantly more intentionality than I had seen exhibited at UBC. In addition, I regularly observe instances of faculty members and staff responding to EAL speakers as people who are somehow deficient, rather than as respected, accomplished people who happen to be functioning in an additional language. I rarely hear recognition that mastering an additional language for academic purposes is in itself a laudable feat. A significant culture shift would need to occur at a place like my institution before students could perceive the language environment as welcoming and their reduced facility in English as irrelevant.
International students said that language held them back from participating in class. They were unsure what to express, when to express it, and how to phrase it. Students’ uncertainty about what to ask and how to formulate a specific question may point to a language difference or another kind of cognitive disconnect, such as not understanding the underlying cultural schema related to protocols for asking questions. This could also relate to logic patterns and cultural assumptions around what is stated and what is implied in acceptable academic discourse.

8.2.3 Framing of class participation by Canadian students This section addresses ways Canadian students framed or perceived asking questions in class or contributing to a class discussion.

8.2.3.1 Learning. As stated earlier, participants’ awareness of the potential learning benefits of academic behaviour was an unexpected finding in this study. Canadian and international students alike saw the benefits of participating in class to aid student understanding of the material, provide students with immediate feedback or clarification about their understanding, and provide professors with feedback about their teaching and students’ learning. In addition, Canadian students saw added value to participation in class: It helped them personalize the content and provided a way to pursue their interest in the subject matter.

Canadian students saw the connection between participation, engagement, and learning far more clearly and with more nuance, although some international participants also made this connection. One explanation for the difference is that Canadian students may be more used to certain academic behaviours such as contributing to a class discussion and so have more capacity to reflect on its use and see its added value, being less overwhelmed by the prospect of engaging. In this way Canadian students could be seen to have greater cultural capital regarding Canadian
academic behaviours. However, it does not necessarily follow that Canadian students would have a greater understanding of how and why one engages in these behaviours.

**8.2.3.2 Sources.** Similar to international students, Canadians spoke about class participation as only one source of information about class content. Canadian students seemed to understand the context of participating in class and used other sources judiciously, whereas international students mainly used other sources and avoided participating in class.

Both groups referenced the Internet and the textbook. However, international participants were much quicker than Canadians to reference classmates and friends as key alternative sources of information. These students described more often and in more detail the importance of peers as information sources and made the link to a broader social network as an information source. Behaviours they described included the practice of intentionally taking classes with friends and joining “the mentor program” as alternative sources of academic information. In this way international students placed a heavier emphasis on social networks as keys to learning.

This focus by international students on learning through social networks may be evidence of a low score on Hofstede’s Individual Index (IDV), in which the good of the individual may be subsumed by the good of the collective. The majority of international participants have a connection to countries that score quite low on individualism, suggesting that they may have higher expectations than Canadian students that their help will come not only from their own inner resources but from a group of mutually supporting people. For international students, this finding suggests that the development of social networks may do more than contribute to their overall sense of well-being but may actually be a critical strategy for learning and academic progress.
8.2.3.3 Emotions. The emotional context associated with participating in class apparently matters to Canadian students differently than to international students. It was mentioned less often and with less vehemence, and only Canadian students said the classroom was an emotionally safe space for participating. Contributing in class was not nearly the anxiety-producing experience for Canadian participants that it was for international students. This distinction between international and Canadian participants emphasizes the earlier point that international students are trying to make sense of a set of academic social practices that are new to them—and not explained—whereas Canadian students in some cases will be more at home with the expectations because they have been brought up with them in the classroom and because they mirror social practices outside the classroom.

The constraints experienced by international students in the classroom as compared to Canadian students strengthens the theory that international students may exist as cultural outsiders and may find the rules of the game in Canadian post-secondary education to be confusing and difficult to put into practice whereas Canadian students may be more familiar with and adept at employing the rules and therefore better able to enjoy the process. This finding is consistent with Bourdieu’s theory of fields, whereby newcomers to a field can be expected to struggle to understand and then apply the “rules of the game,” whereas those who have developed the embodied habits of that field are able to play adeptly.

8.2.4 Factors affecting class participation for Canadian students This section presents a discussion of factors Canadian students said enabled or constrained their participation in class.

8.2.4.1 Major. Comments on the topic of major from Canadian and international participants showed both similarities and dissimilarities. Both groups mentioned the lack of
opportunity, or need, to contribute to class discussions in more technical classes. But the issue
was raised much more frequently by Canadian than by international participants, and the kind of
classes in which students did contribute more differed, with Canadians highlighting English,
whereas international students pointed to major and other required classes as their most likely
site of participation.

One possible explanation, given international participants’ comments about language
struggles, is that Canadian students, who are more likely to have English as their first language,
may feel more comfortable participating when it is expected than do international students. As
Daisuke commented, “. . . during English discussions, I tend to just talk a lot. . .” (Canada, year
1). It may be that international students’ struggles to participate effectively are distributed evenly
across topics, including English; there is no comfortable position from which to participate.
Classes in their major may trigger an instrumental need to be successful, hence effort is exerted
there. In fact, common wisdom at UBC would suggest that first-year English is a set of classes in
which international undergraduates struggle particularly. So the comfort Canadian participants
describe with participating in English classes is clearly not the same for international students,
recognizing that speakers of English as a first language will have a different experience. Hence
the differential opportunity to contribute to discussions in classes in their area of study that the
international students describe may be tied more to motivation than to ease. In short,
international students may be exerting more effort to achieve the same level of participation as
their Canadian peers.

8.2.4.2 Class size. Compared to international students, Canadians were far more vocal
about the constraints on participation imposed by large classes, which they characterized as huge
and daunting when it came to participating. They sang the praises of small classes and said there was a clear link between small classes and their comfort with participation.

The research university appeared as a theme in the Canadian participants’ comments. Kaatje lamented that the research mandate of the university and the associated funding model led to an understandable but unfortunate reliance on large classes and lack of intimate class settings. This attention to the university’s research priorities and the political and fiscal environment within which the university operates was unique to Canadian students and persisted throughout the focus groups. This was an unexpected sensitivity among Canadian students to the political environment of the campus that did not appear in the comments of international students. As we will see, Canadian and international students each had their own unique perspective on supportive campus environment that differed from the definition used in student engagement theory.

8.2.4.3 Social environment. Some Canadian students said their in-class contributions were negatively affected by the emotional context of the classroom. However, there were also a few positive remarks about their comfort in the classroom. This is distinct from the comments of international students, which were far more widespread across the groups and included no positive comments. International students’ comments were more extreme than those of Canadians and included repeated references to fear of being laughed at, feeling targeted, and being afraid of attracting attention. These challenges were compounded by concerns about their English-language ability. Some Canadians expressed a similar sensitivity to the emotional context of the classroom as did the international participants, but it was milder and less prevalent, with no mention of the compounding factors of language and culture.
8.2.4.4 Role of the professor. Canadian and international respondents likewise said professors have a pivotal role to encourage participation. Both groups were expressing a sincere desire for greater involvement of professors in this arena. Canadian students described in great detail what good and poor practice looked like, lest there be any doubt what they were asking for. But for students from China, there was an element of bewilderment at what participation should look like, as they had different cultural reference points from their past experiences. For students from China, professors were central to their concept of how participation should be managed in the classroom, and their absence left a gap that students themselves could not fill. Canadian students seemed to be looking for value-added; Chinese students seemed to be describing a basic need that was not being met.

8.2.4.5 Missing factors. The factors of culture, language, and first year were completely absent for Canadian participants. This may or may not be important for two reasons. First, the UBC student population is widely diverse, as has been discussed previously. Also as mentioned before, the study did not control for ethnocultural self-identification, language ability, or time in Canada. Therefore there may be Canadian students for whom differences in culture and language from mainstream expectations would emerge as relevant factors affecting participation in class. This was not the case, so either the Canadian participant population did not think of their cultural or linguistic backgrounds as relevant or for whatever reasons chose not to talk about them. We cannot assume the former, as we know from the focus group literature on response bias that participants might tend to report what they think the researcher wants to hear. If they were invited to a focus group for Canadians, they might tend to respond based on what they think Canadian students are expected to say, which may not include comments about cultural or linguistic barriers to in-class contribution. The lack of Canadian voices on culture and language
reinforces the uniqueness of the international participants’ experiences; while it does not conclusively show that these issues do not count for Canadians, barriers of culture and language are clearly top-of-mind for international participants.

Second, the lack of comments from Canadian students on the factor of first year does suggest that international students may have a more dramatic experience of transition into university life than the Canadian students. The challenges of first year and of adapting / adjusting to university life were clearly more salient for international students than for Canadians in terms of contributing in class. Again this may point to a greater facility among Canadian students for entering into the academic social practices of a Canadian university and the comparatively greater challenges faced by first-year international students.

8.2.5 Summary of the discussion of class participation. Thinking with Bourdieu, we see that Canadian students exhibit a measure of familiarity with the social practices of asking questions in class and contributing to class discussions. They exhibit some anxiety but there are also those who enjoy participation. They have an insider’s nuanced view of how to unlock the learning potential of participation and see the research politics behind the prevalence of large classes. They see the added learning potential of participation and of engaged professors. They are held back somewhat by the perhaps unfounded fear of ridicule in the classroom, but they know the rules of the game and can play it comparatively well from the first year.

International students fit the profile of Bourdieu’s newcomers to the field of Canadian academic life. They do not know what is expected from the professor, who is no longer the trusted guide in the classroom. They rely on their cultural conditioning to look for cues in the social environment of the classroom, which they find chilly. They do not know what to ask or how to frame their questions. They do not know what is expected in class discussion, and their
lack of confidence in their English skills leaches their confidence about their academic abilities, which further silences them. They are paralyzed by fear of ridicule. Large classes leave them speechless and compound their cultural confusion and language self-consciousness. First-year students are especially hard-hit, yet the struggles they describe persist in some form into fourth year.

International participants show their flair for strategy and agency, their desire to learn, and their existing capital, mismatched as it may be on this new field.

Professors emerge as the hero for international students. As trusted sages, they have the power to break the gridlock of anxiety that presides over the classroom, lay clear the expectations, and create ways for international students to bridge to the Canadian classroom.

8.3 Student-Faculty Interaction

The NSSE benchmark student-faculty interaction was selected for this study because of (a) my experience as an international student advisor witnessing decades of international students expressing their struggles to relate effectively to their faculty members; and (b) the surprisingly high incidence of international students whose NSSE 2008 institutional scores indicated they had statistically significantly higher numbers of interactions with faculty members than did Canadian students. This topic was also chosen because student-faculty interaction is widely documented in the U.S.-based student affairs research to be associated with a host of desired student outcomes. As Kuh and Hu point out, “educators at all levels believe that frequent, meaningful interactions between students and their teachers are important to learning and personal development. The higher education literature almost unequivocally extols the virtues of student-faculty contact” (2001, p. 309). Thus it is critical to develop a clear understanding of international students’ perceptions of this interaction and the factors that make it more or less likely to be effective.
Applying the theoretical lenses of Bourdieu and Hofstede, I expected international participants to present as newcomers to the field of Canadian academic life and as such to express a level of negative emotion and a perception that they lacked valued forms of capital to interact effectively with professors in this new field. I expected that, as people who were likely habituated to relatively collectivist, large power-distance, and strong uncertainty-avoidance world views, the international students might find professors in a Canadian setting to be too hands-off, too informal, and too fallible for comfort.

The unexpectedly high student-faculty interaction level indicated by international respondents’ institutional scores on NSSE 2008 was readily understood when we asked students to define their terms. For many international participants, faculty member turned out to mean “other students in my faculty” or “teaching assistants.” This interpretation is understandable given the double meaning in Canada of faculty. This double meaning would not be an issue in the United States, where the survey was developed, but unfortunately this particular turn of phrase did not translate well for the international participants in this Canadian study. This is unfortunate because it suggests Canadian institutional NSSE results might not provide accurate data about international respondents’ frequency of interaction with faculty members and calls into question the validity of related results.

The negative emotions I expected from international participants regarding their interactions with faculty members did not materialize, or at least they were not directed as expected. Rather than anxiety about faculty members directly, participants expressed a sensitivity to approachability of faculty members.

Approachability is not a construct I had encountered in the literature or in my previous work with international students, so it was all the more surprising when it emerged in vivo as the
most salient factor aiding or constraining student-faculty interaction. Respondents were very clear: faculty members who are approachable will be approached by students and those who are not will not be.

This desire for contact may be explained in part by the role of professors in many countries with large power distance (PDI), where respect for teachers extends to the person and not just the position. Faculty members are important in a number of the target countries not only as educators but as key players in a students’ professional network. In many strong uncertainty avoidance (UA) countries such as Korea, faculty may be seen as the source of content expertise, which the students are meant to absorb rather than contribute to or challenge. Students’ desire that faculty signal their approachability may be rooted in a collectivist cultural practice of observing and adapting to others’ moods for the sake of harmony, whereby the onus is on professors to signal their openness rather than on students to assume they are welcome to approach professors.

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) indicate that in weak uncertainty avoidance countries, “students are comfortable with open-ended learning situations and concerned with good discussions” and “teachers may say, ‘I don’t know’ ” (p. 181). In strong uncertainty avoidance countries, by contrast, “students are comfortable in structured learning situations and concerned with the right answers,” while “teachers are supposed to have all the answers” (p. 181).

Although it was not mentioned in this study, student evaluation of teaching may be impacted when students from strong uncertainty avoidance countries find their professors do not provide the structured environments to which they may have been accustomed.

Canadian and international participants spoke at length about what professors could do but were not doing. Further, they were able to articulate the specific behaviours expected. They
sympathized with faculty, whom they perceived as overburdened and therefore unavailable to students. They identified numerous pressures under which professors operate, including overcommitted schedules, dual department–dual institution reporting, no time between classes, funding limitations, and research obligations and interests.

However, they indicated that contact with professors who were approachable and were effective teachers was a significant motivator for learning. International participants commented on the role of faculty to create the classroom environment, which was a key factor in their ability to participate and learn. To that end, participants wanted more training for faculty and more recognition for exemplary teachers.

Culture and language revealed a lack of valued forms of capital among these newcomers to the field. International students said their uncertainties about interacting with faculty members also stemmed from their lack of cultural context and linguistic confidence in English. As we have seen before, cultural mismatch and language challenges were not additive but compounded the effects of other mismatched forms of capital. These mismatches compounded to yield a lack of interaction with faculty.

As newcomers to the field of Canadian academic culture, international students looked to faculty members for more elemental supports: sparking their interest, opening their minds to new ideas, and so forth. Canadian students, in comparison, made no mention of uncertainty or discomfort and looked to professors for loftier goals, such as inspiring them to study more and better than before. In this way we see international and Canadian playing out the expected outsider / insider roles respectively in their perceptions of student-faculty interactions.

Did students see professors as the sought-after purveyors of academic capital we might expect in Bourdieusian terms? Apparently they did. International students saw them as
consummate drivers of the academic experience, from sparking interest in the topic through to sharing their expert knowledge, in addition to connecting with them on a personal level. International and Canadian students earnestly desired that faculty members be approachable and lamented when faculty members were unapproachable or were constrained due to pressures of the academic system.

8.4 Relationships with Staff

With regard to perceptions of relationships with staff, I was surprised to see how similar such perceptions were for international and Canadian participants. I expected that, as newcomers to Canadian university life, international students might describe a stronger reliance on staff. I also wondered whether, as cultural outsiders, international students would report less welcoming or more confounding interactions with staff, given variations of cultural practices related to client services, logic patterns, and orientations to rules. I expected international students would want staff to provide information about the rules of the game and options about how the game is played. In contrast, I expected Canadian students to indicate greater self-sufficiency as insiders who bring greater cultural capital to this field, and therefore have comparatively less need for staff interactions.

Information, please

Information was high on participants’ list of desired goods from staff. They wanted accurate, timely, personalized information. They did not want to be referred to a website (which they said they likely had checked in advance of the staff encounter), but wanted to hear from a person confirmation or clarification of what the website or other source seemed to be saying. They did not want to hear inconsistent or inaccurate information, and they did not want to be referred to
another office, especially if that referral sent them on a “campus marathon.” Participants from Japan, Korea, and Taiwan were especially frustrated when they could not find the right answer to their questions. These countries score high on uncertainty avoidance (UA), so it is not surprising that these students desired clearer direction and expressed greater frustration than others.

We can think of information from staff as “rules of the game” for the field of Canadian university life. Since information unlocks the doors to academic opportunity, we could say that accurate information about university life is a form of capital, or a precursor to the acquisition of capital. This information can be traded for desired goods in the form of course registrations, program progress and completion, and so forth.

Options equals playbook

Beyond information, students wanted options. Options provide a new way of looking at students’ roles on the field of Canadian university life. If information represents rules of the game, options represent the playbook, or instructions on how to play a strategic game within the rules. The rules themselves do not teach a newcomer how to execute the game, only what behaviours are allowable. The playbook provides options for winning the game and shares effective strategies to play to one’s advantage.

What students say they need

Students described a veiled and uneven landscape of service in which it was unclear which unit provided which service and in which the level of service was inconsistent. However, they were not saying they want to understand the mysteries of university administrative structures. Instead, they were asking for fewer places to go, and that in those places they wanted to
accomplish what they needed to accomplish, without being sent on a “campus marathon.” This suggests a need to streamline services, network them to one another in a highly collaborative way, and present them to students based on student need rather than organizational structure.

Further, students say that busyness, overwork, and insufficient resources are reducing staff’s ability to do their jobs, which should be to support students to be successful. They say that staff are too busy to help them, that staff seem harried with too much to do, and that this is tied to too few staff resources. They say this results in students receiving inconsistent, incomplete, and inaccurate information. Hence they do not get what they really need, which is options: explanations of how the information relates to their situation, and pathways they can pursue to achieve their desired result. Staff busyness, they say, is preventing students from getting the support they need, which in turn causes unnecessary frustration, loss of academic opportunity, and a poorer university experience.

Clearer websites, a staff orientation toward options, and more personalized service from staff would help students feel more supported by the university toward their academic success. Students said the websites they used to prepare for interactions with staff were not providing what they needed. They wanted clearer websites and then for their interactions with staff to provide more than the websites by laying out options suited to their particular situation. Moreover, they wanted personal attention to be paid to their situation and exceptions made when warranted. They perceived that staff were just “follow[ing] the rules” and not considering exceptions, and this strengthened their sense that the university was big and unwelcoming. They were particularly disappointed with the university when mistakes were made by staff, without redress, that cost them a summer or semester of studies.
These findings are not unusual in the student engagement literature. Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2013) found in their qualitative research synthesis of the international research on student engagement: “Across the studies was a sense of alienation that students experienced in relation to staff responses towards then [sic] along with a sense of injustice, about being an inconvenience” (p. 323).

The findings indicated small but important differences in ways international participants engaged with staff compared to Canadian participants. The transactional view described by Canadian students was not sufficient for international students, whose imagined reality of staff was of “experts,” or those who hold knowledge and can advise on personal application of it, and “elders,” or those who hold wisdom and are guardians of the community. International students were tripped up more than Canadian students by access points to staff services, particularly practices that might be culturally jarring to them.

8.5 Serious Conversations With People Very Different From Yourself

International participants said clearly that serious conversations with people very different than themselves matter and are valuable. Despite a stated desire to “open ourselves up and discuss things with others” (Geoff, Hong Kong, year 1) most international participants were keenly aware of race and ethnicity as barriers to doing so. Many said they hung out primarily with other Asian students; others developed friendships among non-Asian international students. Some international participants described interactions with members of different language and culture groups as tiring and awkward.

The target countries or regions score lower on Hofstede’s individualism index and higher on the uncertainty avoidance index than does Canada. Students from these countries or regions may struggle to navigate a diverse social system that is not tightly bounded by clear cultural
expectations. International participants were keenly aware of in-group / out-group distinctions (low individualism), found conversations with the culturally different daunting and exhausting (strong uncertainty avoidance), preferred making friends within their perceived in-group (low individualism), and singled out Jump Start and other comfort zones as an opportunity to create a new, culturally diverse in-group and create new behavioural norms.

The learned appreciation for written and unwritten rules combined with a strong sense of who is and is not a known quantity make for a powerful predilection for students from strong uncertainty avoidance and strong collectivism contexts to perceive culturally heterogeneous settings without carefully bounded societal expectations as anxiety-producing and unimaginably complex.

This effect may be dampened by express willingness of international students to place themselves in foreign settings, which suggests international students from such contexts are likely to be outliers on some of the cultural dimensions in question. However, the comments of the international students in this study strongly mirror the description of strong uncertainty avoidance and strong collectivism. It is worth considering how such culturally conditioned perceptions, to the extent that they reflect Hofstede’s dimensions, might help us validate and support the experiences of such international students as they navigate the cultural complexities of this new field.

Students from Korea signaled particularly high distress over the lack of mentoring and network-building pathways through university. This may reflect Korea’s strong uncertainty avoidance score, which typically indicates a greater comfort with structured relationships than randomly occurring contacts. This may also reflect a low individualism score, suggesting a high value for interdependent networks of affiliation for collective benefit.
This study explored the puzzling NSSE UBC 2008 findings that Canadians reported having more conversations with people very different than themselves than did international students. The closest explanation for this is my comment which summarizes responses of Canadian students in first and fourth years: “serious conversations are happening more with people from different races because race doesn’t matter.”

Canadian participants perceived serious conversations with people very different than themselves to be a non-issue. They said they had serious conversations with all manner of people regardless of race or ethnicity. Bourdieu provides a lens on this perception. As those imbued with relatively greater culture capital and the embodied habitus of this field, Canadian students would have an advantage and could be magnanimous with those who lack such advantages. Hofstede and Hofstede’s assessment of high individualism and weak uncertainty avoidance cultures such as Canada suggests a relative comfort with difference, or at least curiosity rather than reflexive avoidance in the aggregate.

Further insight can come from social stratification theory, which suggests that those with greater privilege in a society will be unfamiliar with the constraints experienced by those with less privilege (Lenski, 1966). In this case, we might argue that Canadian students would have the greater privilege in a Bourdieusian sense and might be unfamiliar with the constraints experienced by international students. If some Canadian students have never felt constrained by their race, ethnicity, or country of origin, they might be less attuned to these issues.

Canadians did identify a primary site for diverse conversations; they said that living in residence promotes conversations across difference and being a commuter student proscribes it. This binary view, that residence status defines the singular opportunity for serious conversations across difference, is concerning to the extent that it disavows the role of agency in constructing
diverse conversations. Students’ varied capacities, acquired skills, and predilections are nowhere to be found in such an environment-based view. It is as if Canadian participants were saying, “If you create the environment for us, we will fall into diverse conversations. If not, we are without interest or skill to do so ourselves.” Even if they valued diverse conversations, most Canadian participants seemed to be saying they either happen naturally or not at all.

However, as we saw in the chapter on demographic variables, the only Canadians who remarked on factors aiding or constraining diverse conversations were first-year students. So this binary view of whether conversations happen based on residence status may have been different for fourth-year Canadian students, who were the strongest proponents of the perception that these conversations were a non-issue.

8.6 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter presented a discussion of the findings, which were addressed in Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7.

International and Canadian students shared several perspectives. They agreed that faculty approachability was paramount and that staff should offer clearer information and tailored options. In students’ complaint that NSSE was frustrating for them, we see that their answers “depend” because of particular subpopulations within which they experience university life, including their faculties or majors.

The surprising UBC NSSE 2008 results are explained largely by international students’ misinterpretations of key wording: faculty members, outside of class, and serious conversations. The misinterpretations of faculty can be attributed to the double meaning of faculty in Canada (a professor or a disciplinary entity, e.g., faculty of forestry).
Bourdieu’s theory of fields is consistent with many of the results. International students present as outsiders, bringing capital from their previous fields that may or may not be valued in the field of Canadian post-secondary education. In many cases they are missing both the rules of the game and the feel for the game, or habitus, which would enable them to understand intuitively what is expected of them. International students found contributing in class to be mysterious and confounding. In several cases, international and Canadian students had overlapping perspectives, but the outliers showed the direction in which the students as a group were leaning.

The expected cultural influences often but not always explained students’ perceptions of their engagement. International participants’ collectivist backgrounds could be seen in their reliance on social supports as a key source of learning and their difficulties making sense of the social expectations when meeting people outside of their cultural group. Hofstede’s (2001) uncertainty avoidance was evident in the desire for more precise response options in NSSE and the high level of anxiety related to unclear academic practices. Hall’s (1989, 1994) high-context communication helps make sense of the international students’ scanning of the social context for clues, such as when asking questions in class or contributing to a class discussion. Language and culture differences compounded the constraints on international students’ engagement. They saw these language and cultural differences, sometimes summarized under the term race, as central to their navigation of social spaces, including serious conversations. Specific populations demonstrated specific needs: more guidance from faculty members for students from China, more guidance from senior peers for Korean students, more guidance about group work interactions for students from Japan, and so forth. Clearly culture matters. Based on the findings
from this study it can be argued that international students were exerting greater effort than Canadian students when pursuing similar outcomes.

Chapter 9 presents implications and conclusions of the study.
9.1 Summary of the Study

This section presents a summary of the study, including statement of the problem, research questions, conceptual frameworks, study participants and data collection, data analysis, and limitations.

9.1.1 Statement of the problem. This study was born out of my concern as a student services practitioner about the potentially unexamined drift of student engagement theory into Canadian higher-education settings and its potential misapplication in that context to international students. It was also born out of a deep conviction that the presence of international students, in the right conditions, could and should invigorate Canadian higher education for the better. I undertook this study in hopes of setting out some of the unique ways international students perceive their engagement with their institution. This information, I hoped, would lay the foundation for the kinds of institutional approaches that would materially enhance the ability of international students in Canadian higher-education institutions to be fully engaged members of their university or college communities.

9.1.2 Research questions. The purpose of the study was to provide recommendations for policy and practice for administrators and practitioners in higher education regarding ways international students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan interpret select NSSE questions, perceive NSSE behaviours, including student behaviours and institutional practices,
and perceive their engagement with their host university. The study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do UBC international undergraduate students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan interpret select NSSE questions and perceive select NSSE behaviours? How do these interpretations and perceptions compare to those of Canadian undergraduate students?

2. How do UBC international undergraduate students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan perceive their engagement with their host university? How do these interpretations and perceptions compare to those of Canadian undergraduate students?

3. Regarding UBC international and domestic undergraduate students’ perceptions of select NSSE questions, select NSSE behaviours, and their engagement with their university, how do first and fourth year students’ perceptions differ? How do students’ perceptions differ in light of residence status, faculty, and gender?

9.1.3 Conceptual frameworks. I worked from a number of theoretical frameworks to design the study and analyze the results.

Student engagement theory was the foundational theory under investigation in the study and can be summarized as the theory that “what students do during college matters more in terms of desired outcomes than who they are or even where they go to college” (Kuh, 2001, p.1), where college is understood to mean post-secondary education generally. Student engagement as a construct grew out of extensive U.S-based research which indicates that engaging in certain behaviours on the part of undergraduates and their institutions can positively impact academic achievement, personal development, and persistence to graduation. Further, institutions can
claim to be of higher quality when their students score higher on measures of student engagement as embodied in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

I heeded Edward Said’s caution that theories “traveling” from one context to another, whether through time or space, merit closer examination. Student engagement was born out of research into U.S. students, yet it has drifted into Canada and is being applied to international students from many contexts. To conceptualize this drift, I tempered student engagement theory with the sensitizing framework of Geert Hofstede’s (2001) dimensions of culture, including power distance, individualism, and uncertainty avoidance. Thinking with Hofstede, I wondered whether a behaviour in one cultural context will naturally have the same meaning and produce the same outcomes in a different cultural context, and with what ease people schooled in one context will be able to reproduce the expected behaviour in the new context.

Finally, Pierre Bourdieu’s work on fields, habitus, and the varied kinds of capital that are valued differently between fields (Bourdieu, 1990a, 1990b, 1998; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) provides a concrete model for the kind of cultural navigations students in the study were describing. Bourdieu’s theory of fields suggests that newcomers to a field may lack the desired forms of social and cultural capital and may not know the “rules of the game” or how to play them expertly. We can imagine students as struggling on the field of Canadian post-secondary education, using their embodied ways of thinking, or habitus, and applying the capital they accumulated in their previous fields, such as academic and social skills, recognizing that the habitus of this new field and the capital valued here may not put them at an advantage. Further, those who do know the rules of the game may expect them to play expertly, too. I wondered to what extent international students would emerge from this study as ill-equipped newcomers to
the field with Canadian students showing more familiarity and expertise in navigating the expectations of Canadian university life.

9.1.4 **Study participants and data collection.** How could I, as a representative of the host institution and member of the host culture, elicit authentic utterances from students about their potentially culturally contextual perceptions of life at my institution? The solution seemed simple: Invite a random representative sample of international students from a select country to speak to one another in their home language under the guidance of a home-language facilitator who was also a student with similar cultural reference points, then repeat for a variety of countries or regions. Further segregate participants by year to minimize the likelihood of senior students dampening the responses of junior students. Select countries or regions with similar scores on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions and which were of interest to the host institution due to the large numbers of students from those countries or regions. Within each country or region and year group, target a representative sample based on factors known by the host institution to demonstrate statistically significant differences in student experience measures; these variables were residence status, gender, and faculty (area of study or discipline). This was my approach to identify and recruit study participants and collect data for the study.

9.1.5 **Data analysis.** Focus group transcripts were transcribed and translated by the student facilitators, who were encouraged to err on the side of explication when culturally contextual nuance or slang arose in the utterances and interactions. In this way I and the readers of the study could have the best information possible to access participants’ perceptions, despite being cultural outsiders. Data were coded into broad themes that emerged from the data, including several in vivo codes.
9.1.6 Limitations. The study had several limitations. First, participants came from a single institution and campus. Institutional culture, location, and provincial and institutional policies may have influenced what was meaningful for participants. It is possible that students’ responses would be quite different in another institutional context, which might be revealed in a multi-site comparative study. Second, the host institution was a particular kind of institution, namely a research-intensive university. Perceptions of faculty busyness and concerns about large classes, for example, might look quite different at a teaching-intensive university or college. Third, the citizenships included in the study represented a particular set of source countries or regions. By considering students from East Asian countries or regions only, the study did not capture the breadth of nationalities that make up international student populations at institutions in Canada. Findings may have limited application for students from other countries.

Fourth, I deliberately excluded notions of acculturation, or the changing level of influence a new culture has over time on the perceptions and behaviours of newcomers, because of the complexity this would have introduced to the sampling and the collection and analysis of data. Instead, first-year standing was used as a proxy for being new to Canada, and citizenship was used as a proxy for cultural identification. The inclusion of year 4 students was not intended to address the cultural changes that may have come through the process of socialization across four years. Attention to the complex influences of time-in-country and cultural identity development might have revealed further nuances between perceptions of international students with varied levels of acculturation in their host culture and identity. Fifth, the use of focus groups may have diluted the message some students wanted to share and privileged others disproportionately. More exhaustive methods such as in-depth interviews or single-person case studies may yield more precise knowledge claims about student perceptions.
Sixth, I invited students to complete parts of NSSE as a sensitizing exercise but did not compare their written responses to their verbal comments. Such a comparison might reveal gaps between intention and reality, which could shed light on student motivation, self-perception, and the role of self-reflection to stimulate desired behaviours. Although I asked students about the relative importance of the selected NSSE behaviours, we did not focus on this question sufficiently to construct a comprehensive model of student success factors in the eyes of the students, which a different design might have accomplished.

9.2 Key Findings
This study points to limitations of the National Survey of Student Engagement for international and Canadian students and reveals the complexities of applying a behaviour-based theory when there is no common understanding of what the behaviour is or what it represents. The findings suggest that students’ perceptions of engagement behaviours may be informed by their home cultures and that students may require additional intercultural effort if they are to reap the expected benefits of engaging in the behaviours. The study calls into question the validity of student engagement theory for Canadian and international students at a large, research-intensive Canadian university. It proposes a greater emphasis on student perception and the clear explication and accessibility of academic and social cultural practices within higher-education institutions.

9.2.1 NSSE as a survey. According to NSSE 2008 results, UBC international undergraduate students reported higher incidence of interaction with faculty members, higher incidence of interacting with faculty members outside of class, lower use of technology and lower incidence of contacts with students different than themselves, as compared to UBC Canadian
undergraduate students. These results surprised institutional researchers. They had expected that international students would report lower incidence of interaction with faculty members and greater incidence of contacts with students different than themselves. This study asked students to complete selected NSSE items and comment on these items and on their experience of engaging in the behaviours these items described.

This study found that international students misinterpreted the wording of several NSSE items. Greatest concern related to faculty member and outside of class, with some confusion as well regarding serious conversations, other students, administrative personnel and relationships with faculty members. Students said they would change their responses to these NSSE items if they interpreted the wording differently. From this it is reasonable to conclude that their responses to NSSE, were the survey administered to them, would not reflect their actual experiences related to these NSSE items. Further, it is reasonable to conclude that, if other international students at Canadian universities that administer the English-language version of NSSE have similar misinterpretations, their responses to NSSE might not reflect their actual experiences related to these NSSE items. These findings raise the question of whether the English-language NSSE results for international students at Canadian institutions are a valid measure of students’ experiences where these items are concerned.

This study discovered that international students claimed higher rates of contact with faculty members because they interpreted the term faculty members to refer to “fellow students in their faculty.” (Canadian participants, in contrast, mainly interpreted faculty members to mean “professors.”) Of course one would have more contact with fellow students than one would have with professors. This ambiguity of terminology explained the statistically significantly higher scores of international students on student-faculty interaction. Likewise, to the students in this
study, *out of class* referred not to activities taking place in situations not involving the classroom, such as professors’ office hours, but to people who were not connected to the class, such as fellow students taking other courses. Again, it is obvious that one would interact far more frequently with fellow students not taking one’s class, such as residence hall connections, than with professors during their office hours. Hence the gap between international and Canadian participants’ incidence of interacting with faculty members is exposed to bear little or no resemblance to that suggested by the NSSE results alone.

In addition, international participants’ confusion about administrative personnel and offices poses a challenge to the reliability of the related NSSE item. Students complained that the phrase was unclear and not specific enough. From this we further learn that both international and Canadian students were aware that multiple administrative offices exist, but as we saw in Chapter 6, they were not clear which office to seek out for what kind of assistance. They also described widely varied quality of interactions with different offices, praising some while calling others “the weakest link” (Mr. Big, Sabrina, & Gabriel, Canada, year 4). This is concerning in light of the campus marathon they said they have to run in order to accomplish an administrative task with the university. More focused assessment could uncover the ways students interact with specific staff and offices and could point to recommendations to transform these relationships to meet a consistently high standard of excellence. Such an assessment was recently conducted at UBC V among central student services, including enrolment services, and led to a comprehensive rethinking of ways the institution curates information for students. Further assessment of student experiences with staff in the faculties could provide the opportunity for specific feedback which students said NSSE did not provide.
Serious conversations with people very different than themselves posed a more challenging puzzle. Given the cultural diversity within and between international and Canadian student populations, it was challenging to guess how international students could be having far fewer serious conversations with people different than themselves than Canadians were. Here again, perception held the key. International students defined the questions largely by race, ethnicity, and language, noting that they often kept to people similar to themselves, whereas Canadian participants saw race as a non-issue and reduced the NSSE items to have conversations. It was as if Canadians saw that the questions were about diversity and automatically knew the “right” answers without actually thinking about their own personal experiences.

The items containing the misinterpreted wording are critical because they constitute most of the items that roll up to the benchmark student-faculty interaction and the scales diversity and out-of-class interaction with faculty: Tables 4.1 and 4.2 list the items that roll up to each of those benchmarks or scales, with the misinterpreted wording noted in bold. NSSE in its current form might not provide a valid measure of Canadian institutions’ international students’ interactions with faculty members or their contacts with students from different backgrounds.

This finding is important because student-faculty interaction and contact with students from different backgrounds have been linked through decades of US-based research to desired outcomes such as academic achievement, retention to graduation, and satisfaction. If the measures of factors understood to impact these outcomes are not valid, this poses significant challenges to institutions to assess and improve such factors. If NSSE does not currently measure certain types of international student engagement in Canada due to wording, it would serve
Canadian institutions and the expanding NSSE undertaking to change the wording for surveys administered on behalf of English-speaking Canadian universities.

Based on the students’ comments, faculty member and outside of class would be the most straightforward wording to substitute with more universally understood phrases. Students easily understood alternate phrasing, such as professor, when discussing possible interpretations of faculty member.

The NSSE website indicates that “each consortium may add up to 20 consortium-specific questions to the core survey” (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2015). There is precedent for a change to a core question. For example, the NSSE US English version’s indicators of race and ethnicity were deemed by the Canadian institutions in 2007 to be insufficient, inappropriate, and inconsistent with existing student data (personal correspondence). The Canadian institutions successfully lobbied NSSE to substitute the Statistics Canada race and ethnicity indicators in their version of the survey rather than those used in the NSSE US English version.

Students struggled to agree on interpretations of faculty members, outside of class, serious conversations, relationships with faculty members, administrative personnel and students. The lack of clarity around these items and the participants’ frustration with missing response options underscores my original contention: that international students’ responses to NSSE may suffer from selectively poor validity and reliability. Rewording the NSSE items that include these phrases would allow for more robust comparisons of international and domestic responses and greater validity of institutional NSSE results.

I have several recommendations that arise from this finding. First, UBC, working with the consortium of institutions that use the Canadian English version of NSSE, could assess the
applicability of the instrument to international students, identify appropriate substitutions for commonly misunderstood phrases where warranted, and submit a request to the NSSE team for amendments to the relevant items. Second, UBC and other Canadian institutions would do well to reconsider the use of faculty member and other problematic phrases in the surveys it administers and validate any new wording with its international students. Finally, UBC and other Canadian institutions should reconsider past institutional research findings related to items where these phrases were used.

9.2.2 The power of the professor. International participants placed tremendous value on relationships with their faculty members. This study found that faculty members are key drivers for international students’ academic behaviours, motivation, and learning and even facilitate the development of coveted social networks. Faculty members provide clarity and open international students’ eyes to new ideas. This suggests that faculty members are a critical element in any institutional efforts to reach out to and create a more supportive campus environment for international students.

According to international students, as trusted sages, professors had the power to break the gridlock of fear that presides over the classroom, lay clear the expectations, and create ways for international students to bridge to the Canadian classroom. International students also wanted professors to be more adept at supporting their needs, and Chinese students wanted more guidance from professors in class discussion and question-asking.

Student engagement theory identifies student-faculty interaction as critical to the success of students. If interaction with faculty members is critical for student success, then factors that facilitate this interaction become important. International and Canadian students wanted
professors to be more approachable, to be more effective teachers, and to be less burdened by multiple responsibilities and therefore more available to them.

International and Canadian participants told us approachability was the most important factor to aid or constrain their interaction with faculty. Approachability seems deceptively innocuous. It is neither a matter of policy nor the subject of professional training, and it is not a traditional measure of success among faculty members, yet students tell us they will not approach professors who are not approachable. Faculty members may be unaware of how students perceive their approachability. They may not realize the various barriers to communication that students perceive, and as a result, faculty may be unwittingly warding off student interactions with international students. An awareness of faculty approachability and how it can be increased provides faculty members and departments with an important new way to transform student engagement and student success.

This finding is echoed in Wimpenny and Savin-Baden’s (2013) qualitative synthesis of the student engagement literature. They found that the approachability of faculty members shone through the literature they reviewed.

The studies also exposed that engagement with learning is a subjective experience, yet consistently, the importance of tutors adequately conveying genuineness and empathic understanding to student learning, acknowledging students’ struggles, and insecurities, pleasures and pains was expressed (p. 324)

International and Canadian students also wanted professors to be more effective teachers, and to be less burdened by multiple responsibilities and therefore more available to them. They wanted faculty members to show an interest in their subject, to teach and provide corrective
feedback on how to do the academic activities well (e.g., how to present in class, how to write a policy paper), and to assign and use effectively academic activities that students associate with learning (e.g., group work, class presentations, and class discussion).

In 2001, Kuh and Hu conducted a pivotal study documenting that student-faculty interaction in general yields minor net gains but does act positively on students’ efforts to engage in other behaviours that have been linked to myriad positive outcomes.

The most important finding from this study is that student-faculty interaction encourages students to devote greater effort to other educationally purposeful activities during college. This finding clarifies and reinforces previous research. However, the dynamics of how student contact with faculty contribute to this heightened and balanced engagement are not clear. Perhaps meeting and talking with faculty members empower students to do more than they think they can and help validate them as full members of the campus community. Such contact may, in turn, legitimate their presence and makes them feel more comfortable about extending themselves and becoming engaged in a variety of activities. (Kuh & Hu, 2001, pp. 329–330)

Note that Kuh and Hu conclude that the mechanisms of this effect are unclear. Even NSSE framers were unable to understand the nature of the interaction and what leads to the reported gains for students. This gap in understanding leaves ample room to question whether the cultural understanding students have of their interactions with faculty members might lead them towards or away from the expected benefits, depending on the meaning they attribute to the interactions.

Faculty members emerge as the single most powerful asset the institution has to minimize the negative impacts of large class size, cultural and linguistic isolation, and lack of expertise
among first-year students. Roby Marlina (2009) calls faculty members “the most important and powerful member in the ‘context’” (p. 235). The role of the professor is one of the few factors affecting class participation in which change can be effected relatively quickly. Class size, students’ home culture, students’ year level, major, and language ability are much harder to shift from an institutional perspective. If we imagine a classroom full of students daunted by the prospect of participating, the person in the room most likely to change that environment is the person with the greatest capital, which is above all the professor.

Professors have a significant role to play in creating opportunities for students to participate in NSSE behaviours and fully reap the learning benefits from them. For instance, some students complained there had been no in-class discussions or presentations in their first year at all. Others bemoaned discussions that gravitated to the mundane, being in essence a restatement of the course content rather than an analysis of it. Presentations for which there was no instruction on how to present, during which neither students nor professors paid attention, and for which there was no constructive feedback from which to learn were other sources of dismay for students in the study. Students can accomplish a great deal by deliberately engaging fully in the academic activities presented to them, but activities that are well structured and deliver on their instructive potential are the purview of professors.

According to the students, professors have a role in supporting students from teacher-centred backgrounds. As they suggested, teachers can ease their transition in subtle ways by asking questions of the class, fielding questions by email, and taking advantage of small classes to entertain and welcome questions and discussion. One can imagine many other ways that, without surrendering the centrality of students in the learning enterprise, professors could support students transitioning from more teacher-centred systems.
At the same time, this study focused on the perceptions of international students. Neither they nor I are experts in the scholarship of teaching and learning. As such the findings will not prescribe actions professors or administrators could take regarding effective instruction of international students. Such discussions are beyond the scope of this study. Others may take these findings and assign them practical application.

The perceptions of the students are invaluable in helping us understand how they make meaning of their interactions with faculty members and thereby provide clues as to the “user experience” of any interventions the institution may design. If an institution desires more interaction between students and faculty as a way to enhance desired student outcomes, it would be important to pay attention to approachability and effective teaching as understood by the students.

Some students reported actual experiences approaching professors, but most seemed to be speaking about an imagined reality where they were reading cues from the professor but had not yet attempted an approach. In this way there is vast potential for shaping students’ perceptions that faculty members are approachable, since the perceptions rely in part on imagination, which can be influenced.

There were small but important distinctions in the perceptions of international students versus Canadian students regarding student-faculty interaction. Here we begin to see distinctions in the realms of culture and language. Unclear cultural expectations and lack of English-language confidence were important lenses through which international students saw their interaction with faculty members and which compounded the negative effects of other constraining factors. However, the common message about approachability from participants regardless of citizenship and the consistency of their definitions of approachability tell us that approachability may be one
of the most critical factors in student-faculty interaction. The opportunity is to learn more about the phenomenon of approachability and understand the related systemic tensions in the professoriate. Then we would see how this potentially powerful tool can increase student-faculty interaction and minimize the compounded negative impacts of cultural mismatch and language self-consciousness to achieve the successes we desire for all students and which they desire for themselves.

International students will be more likely to remain at UBC and to learn effectively if faculty members are well equipped to communicate interculturally, engage with international students, and use NSSE learning behaviours effectively. Retention and learning should be impacted positively when faculty are seen as approachable, when exemplary teachers are recognized, and when faculty are freed up to be available to students.

Several recommendations arise from these findings. First, institutions could consider how approachability and effective teaching as perceived by students may enable student learning and motivation to learn. Second, institutions could consider how student learning and motivation to learn may be enabled when faculty members are under less time pressure and are more available to the students they teach. Third, institutions could consider how to increase the likelihood that students will have positive interactions with faculty. This could include early facilitated interaction with approachable faculty members and providing students with strategies to interact effectively with faculty members regardless of their approachability. Students who have positive early experiences interacting with faculty members, understand the value of interaction with faculty, and identify strategies to approach faculty members may be more likely to have positive student-faculty interactions. (For an example of this type of intervention, see Implications for Policy and Practice at UBC later in this chapter.) Finally, institutions could consider the role of
faculty members to use NSSE behaviours effectively, reduce international student anxiety in the classroom, demystifying academic practices, facilitate transitions of international students into Canadian classrooms, and mitigate negative effects of large classes.

9.2.3 **The tyranny of the large class.** This study found that large classes were one of the most impactful and universal constraints on student engagement. In this study, students of every year and citizenship complained vehemently about large classes, their negative impact on student engagement, and their amplifying effect on other constraining factors.

Large classes present an interesting conundrum in the context of student engagement theory. On one hand, the evidence is clear from decades of research that asking questions in class and contributing to class discussions are positively associated with desired student outcomes such as higher grades, persistence to graduation, and student satisfaction. It is easy to see that large classes are not the ideal venue for free-flowing class discussion or the asking of questions by individual students. Yet at institutions like mine, large classes are a common format for the delivery of first-year content. Judging by the prevalence of comments by both Canadian and international fourth-year participants in this study, large classes continued to be a common format for instruction throughout their program of studies. Given the overwhelmingly negative comments of participants in this study on class size, I suggest the university has a tremendous opportunity and challenge to achieve the desired student outcomes knowing that one of its primary tools (i.e., large classes) is ill-suited for this purpose.

I was curious to see that class size as a factor pertained primarily to contributing in class but also affected other elements of students’ experiences. As we saw, class size was one of the most commonly mentioned factors in the entire study. As a driver constraining other elements of students’ experiences, class size is one of the strongest.
The impacts of large classes on international students had more complex negative effects, compounding issues of language, confidence, social networks, and learning. Large classes may require additional effort from international students and may exacerbate the challenges these students already face in Canadian post-secondary study.

This raises several interesting and important questions. If there is a gap between students’ expectations of positive classroom experiences and the experiences they currently have in large classes, what is the precise nature of the gap? To what extent does it reflect learning as well as satisfaction? Three possible approaches present themselves:

- Equip students with skills to be successful in large classrooms
- Shift the large-classroom experience so that it more closely matches students’ positive expectations
- Shift students’ expectations so they are less disappointed and disempowered by the same classroom setting they experience now

What is the right mix of these three approaches to impact learning?

This study joins the ranks of research suggesting that a small class experience can be differentially beneficial for students, particularly first-year students who are trying to establish a sense of academic community and learn academic practices such as contributing to a class discussion. At the same time, this study also found that some students perceive that the negative effects of large classes can be significantly mitigated by effective teaching techniques.

Thinking with Bourdieu, people who are new to a field can acquire the forms of capital that are valued in that field. In the same way, students who are new to university life have potential to acquire expertise in the form of strategies to render large classes a more effective learning environment for themselves.
Creating engaging classrooms could be a high priority for post-secondary institutions, as emphasized by Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie and Gonyea (2008):

The classroom is the only regular venue that most commuting and part-time students have for interacting with other students and with faculty. Thus, using the classroom to create communities of learning must be a high priority in terms of creating a success-oriented campus culture. (p. 556-557)

Based on the findings from this study, I assert that the institutional environment be changed in several ways. First, institutions should consider the positive impacts on student engagement of providing small-class experiences for new students and reducing the number of large classes a student will experience. Second, institutions could reinvent the large classroom experience through targeted initiatives to improve the effectiveness of instruction in its large classes. The Carl Weiman Initiative at UBC is an excellent example of such an intervention and may well be the reason that the few positive comments in the study relating to effective large class teaching came from Science students. Institutions could build the capacity of new students to engage with large-class learning. Students who have positive early experiences in large classes, understand the value of engaging in large classes, and employ strategies to learn in large classes may be more likely to have positive future experiences in large classes. (For an example of this type of intervention, see Implications for Policy and Practice at UBC later in this chapter.)

9.2.4 The problem of anxiety. International participants in this study indicated strongly that their predominant perception of in-class participation was anxiety. Again, by anxiety I mean a generalized sense of unease and discomfort rather clinical anxiety necessarily. They further stated that this anxiety severely constrained their likelihood to participate in class. Some
Canadian students echoed this sense of anxiety but it was much less pronounced a concern, and Canadian students also indicated positive experiences participating in class, which was absent from the comments of international participants. So we see that Canadian participants’ experiences were skewed toward the positive compared to those of international students.

A first step to increase international students’ contributions to class discussions and their likelihood to ask questions in class is to reduce their anxiety. The case for action is clear. Anxiety in itself need not be a barrier to action. In fact, an element of anxiety may act as a motivating factor in some situations. Think of the intensity with which one might study when anxious to have a higher score than a rival student. However, most international participants in this study did not allude to anxiety as a motivation to greater class participation. They did not mention anxiety triggering endorphins to motivate them to overcome the barriers they faced in class participation. None of them talked about strategies they used to be more effective in participating in the face of anxiety. The anxiety itself seemed to act as a barrier. In fact, it almost seems that the emotion magnified the challenges so they were actually greater than the intellectual exercise might otherwise present. This is such a huge barrier that the international students could not see past it. It was paralyzing for them. This seems less than ideal.

We can surmise that international participants might have been highly motivated to seek clarity and unload the weight of anxiety they were labouring under. There is tremendous potential to harness this thwarted motivation: to help students identify anxiety as an opportunity for growth, to hand students the rule book for contributing in class, and to engage them in safe spaces to practise and build their skills. This is the opportunity anxiety presents.

Students told us they were motivated to learn. They valued things they thought would help them learn. This result suggests that we may be able to strengthen international students’
belief in the learning value of participating in class. This might allow them to focus on the practices and gain a sense of ease and insider positioning.

Fear of ridicule presented as such a powerful force constraining international students’ participation that we may well consider confidence itself to be a form of desired, albeit prerequisite, capital that can be exchanged in order to acquire other desired forms of capital. Realistic confidence may be the greatest desired student outcome for new international students that has not yet been identified. The reduction of this anxiety is itself worthy of significant institutional attention, because such anxiety poses a significant barrier to the second point, which is that international participants demonstrate evidence of agency and strategy in the way they navigate alternate sources of academic information, utilize social networks, and employ time and energy on class participation differentially based on expected academic benefit. Anxiety reduction related to participating in class should be high on the agenda for the institution.

From this finding, I recommend that institutions consider ways to disrupt international students’ anxiety about, and enhance their competence and confidence in, asking questions in class and contributing to a class discussion. A coordinated effort involving first year supports in and out of the classroom could transform international students’ experiences of engaging in class and unlock their potential to be meaningful contributors in the learning environment.

9.2.5 The role of active and collaborative learning. Canadian and international participants described how active and collaborative learning behaviours were being underused or misused (e.g., no opportunity to make presentations, making presentations but with no instruction or feedback, presentations as time fillers for busy professors, group work with groups so large they could not possibly meet).
International and Canadian participants seemed to be saying that active and collaborative learning activities have potential learning benefits, those benefits are not always realized, and students and faculty members could make more effective use of the activities to promote learning. Clearly both international and Canadian students could become more aware of the learning value of contributing in class and strategies to participate more effectively to ensure that value is realized. At the same time, there is a clear opportunity for faculty members to assign such activities and structure them in ways that will greatly increase their value for learning.

To repeat the summary from Chapter 5, international students themselves have laid out the factors that enable or constrain their in-class participation:

- An open social environment enables participation.
- Large classes constrain participation and small classes enable it.
- The professor has the power to enable participation.
- Home culture can constrain participation.
- Participation is constrained by the fact of being in first year or being new to the behaviour.
- Students are more likely to participate in classes related to their major.
- Language difference constrains participation.

How, then, to capitalize on these factors to increase international students’ in-class participation? Underlying several of the factors international students identified is the sense of being an outsider to the field that is Canadian higher education. The social expectations, the way the “host” professor signals they are welcome, the format of the class that signals their value, the newness of the behaviours, the use the students will make of the material afterwards, and the unspoken cultural and linguistic practices enable or constrain their sense of being an outsider and
therefore unwelcome or ill-equipped for the task. Attending to these factors, increasing enabling factors and trying to remove constraints should have the effect of increasing the ability of international students to engage in their classrooms more effectively.

The challenges of first year and of adjusting to university life were more present for international students than for Canadian students. International first-year students’ participation was somewhat more troubled than that of international fourth-year students. Our knowledge of this fact may provide encouragement for first year students in two ways. First, it provides encouragement to first-year students to know that the barriers to participation they experience in first year may reduce in subsequent years. Second, it suggests that participation may follow an arc of competence, that is, it may be a set of learned skills. If this is the case, and if we expect that learning can be facilitated, then the lessons participants learned over time through experience might be transmitted to others more intentionally in a shorter period of time. This gives hope that intervention on the part of the institution can affect in-class contribution levels among new international students.

According to the student engagement literature, institutional culture should be conveyed to students early and often: “Because students generally benefit most from early interventions and sustained attention at key transition points, faculty and staff should clarify institutional values and expectations early and often to prospective and matriculating students” (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie and Gonyea, 2008, p. 555).

The natural development of cultural capital over time may be enhanced by intentional intervention, such as introducing students to and creating safe spaces for them to practise the rules of the game. Orientations play a unique role in equipping international students for Canadian classroom experiences as they can provide both the rule book and the play book along
with great coaches, teammates, and safe spaces in which to practise the necessary skills of classroom participation. Leveraging students’ desire to learn and alerting them to the power of courage and a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) can begin to turn around some of the unproductive angst international students say blocks their participation and learning. Large classes emerge as particularly troubling sites for learning; yet much can be done to prepare students and to reconceptualize the large classroom as an effective learning space.

This study builds on the conclusions of Irungu when she examined the five NSSE benchmarks as applied to international students. Irungu (2010) challenged practitioners to make clear the value of engagement behaviour to and craft experiences for students such that they are more likely to engage in such behaviours: “Finally, students need to be guided on why seeking and engaging [sic] educationally purposeful activities is important for their college experience. By the time international students graduate from these campuses, they should have had an opportunity to have a well rounded engagement process” (p. 127).

A primary goal of any international student transition initiative should be demystification. Laying bare the underlying cultural schema of academic expectations will provide a road map for newcomers to Canadian higher education. It will allow for accelerated accumulation of desired cultural capital on the part of international students and begin to presage for Canadian students the culturally-bound nature of their own academic experiences. Further, it will provide common language for international and Canadian students and faculty members to dialogue openly about what is expected here and what is expected elsewhere.

Such demystification should spell out the learning opportunities presented by each of the key active and collaborative learning activities, such as contributing in class, asking a question in class, presenting in class, or working in a group of students in or out of class. For example,
presenting in class creates a stage upon which to hone research; it also fosters critical analysis, teamwork, writing, visual presentation, computer, and public speaking skills, all of which have powerful applications for students’ academic, community, and career aspirations. Students who understand the underlying schema, the learning potential, and the desirable outcomes of academic activities will be much more likely to engage fully in them and reap the maximum benefits from them.

Such demystification of academic expectations should fundamentally acknowledge the cultural bias in the academic social practices the university expects of students. This will begin to address the uneasy cultural mismatch experienced by some international students and help them see the pathways by which they can gain the desired skills and integrate new habits of mind. For instance, the cultural dimensions advanced by Hofstede (2001) may be instructive as they are applied to specific elements of in-class participation. One such skill might be the expectation of formulating one’s own critical view on the topic and advancing one’s individual position in dialogue with others who are acting likewise, which begins to make sense in the relatively high-individualism context of mainstream Canadian society.

In some cases, this demystification can also begin to address some of the socio-linguistic challenges some international participants referenced related to in-class participation. For instance, there are acceptable and less acceptable methods to phrase a follow-on comment versus a challenge to the previous speaker’s position. There are syntactic formulations that can be used to show respect for the professor while disagreeing with her point. Fostering such skills may reduce international students’ anxiety and increase the likelihood that they will contribute in class. Such practices can be embedded in academic support programs, as with UBC’s new
Academic English Support program (AES), a free academic English coaching and instructional program that addresses linguistic practices all students need to be successful at UBC.

An essential corollary to demystification of academic expectations, which we may also call the “rules of the game,” are recommended strategies for engaging effectively, which we may also call the playbook. As any middle-school soccer player will tell you, it is not enough to know when one is offside; one must also learn the strategies that prevent one from getting into the situation where one is offside. It is well and good to know that one is expected to formulate a critical position and advance it in dialogue, but it is something else to know how to do such a thing. Critical thinking can be taught. An English-language Canadian classroom discussion format can be taught. The art of allowing sufficient time after the previous speaker to show respect but not so much time that another speaker jumps in and takes one’s place in the flow of the argument can be taught.

And how can it be taught? The essential elements seem to be thoughtfully developed content, effective teaching and learning approaches, professors who act as coaches (to further the sporting analogy), peers with whom to practise, safe spaces in which to practise, and targeted feedback to foster needed improvement. International student orientation seems ideally suited to such an endeavour, as do preparation or pathway programs designed to ready international students for further Canadian higher-education success.

Ideally, not only would international students be prepared for Canadian higher education, but Canadian higher education would be prepared for international students as well. At their best, international student orientation, preparatory, and pathway programs are incubators of innovative teaching and learning among tenure-track faculty members. They inspire professors who teach in them to rethink their teaching approaches. They challenge professors to connect deeply with the
purpose of and effective strategies to benefit from active and collaborative learning activities, such as class discussion, in-class presentations, group work, and more. Such a framework requires significant inputs from those who are expert in bringing to the fore that which is below the level of awareness and in promoting incisive pedagogical approaches that will be accessible both for professors new to the approach and for students new to the context. A small team of influential faculty and expert staff to lead such an endeavour would be critically important, as would clear leadership and strong policy direction from senior administration, as one imagines a considerable amount of coaxing and nudging might be needed to launch such an undertaking among busy faculty members. The benefits from such an incubator of innovative teaching and learning should soon be visible in the first-year and upper-year classes the engaged professors teach.

The question arises whether interventions should occur only in the context of orientation, preparatory, or pathway programs, without interfering with the classroom experience for Canadian students. Does it benefit a Canadian student to know that the way he contributes to a class discussion or receives assignments from a professor is not the universal practice in higher education elsewhere? Does it move a Canadian student closer to desired graduate outcomes to know that the way he is expected to address his professor is rooted in the way he may be expected to address his superiors in Canada in general, which again may not be the norm elsewhere? According to some Canadian participants in this study, understanding how different people think is one of the highest goals of university. For a university that prides itself on educating global citizens, the goal for all students to understand the parts of their skills and habits of mind that do and do not travel well should be paramount. Yes, a Canadian student
benefits from knowing that her worldview is not universal. When accompanied by curiosity, this knowledge builds not only adaptability but also compassion and creativity.

To this point I have focused on the capital new international students may lack. We can also turn this on its head and focus on the forms of desired capital international students bring and the agency and strategies they can employ to accumulate more. When we do so, we truly see the opportunity for broadening the conversation to enfold all students. International participants in this study showed their flair for strategy and agency, their desire to learn, and their existing capital, undervalued as it may be on this new field. Positioning all students as bringing some desired form of cultural or social capital allows us to explore the richness they can contribute to the university community. For example, international students who come from a context focused on rote learning may struggle to gain critical thinking skills. However, they will have a distinct advantage when it comes to the great deal of material in university courses that requires memorization. Their fellow students may benefit substantially from learning these skills. The goal of orientation and transition of international students should not be enculturation but capacity-building, as they are agents of their own learning, capable of selecting between multiple strategies to achieve the best outcome of their learning. This approach will be equally beneficial as institutions welcome Canadian students. Such an approach would ultimately build a campus culture dedicated to capacity-building for all students, with potentially astonishing results.

In this study we learned that participants see learning as a key outcome of their classroom participation. Learning is a compelling desired outcome for international participants and its pursuit provides a strong motivation for them. International students say that contributing in class has the potential to aid learning. Further, students saw factors that helped them learn as beneficial and desirable. Since we are dealing in the realm of perception, another way to rephrase
that last point is that factors which students believe help them learn are beneficial and desirable to the student. The opportunity, then, is to help students see the learning benefits of contributing in class and use this as an additional motivator to push past the anxiety factor discussed above and learn the rules of the game that will assist them to see themselves as contributing insiders in the classroom.

In international students’ comments on language, we see that language is an exacerbating factor that acts on and compounds the effect of other barriers to contributing in class. The effect is worse for first-year students but remains an issue for some students into fourth year. Language difficulties are made worse by large class sizes and fast-paced discussions. Language difficulties undermine self-confidence in the classroom, which in turn reduces the likelihood that students will participate in class. Extrapolating from students’ comments, the best way to counteract the suppressive effects of language on participation would be to increase language confidence in first-year students, clarify linguistic and cultural schema underlying the question-asking and classroom discussion processes, and employ slower-paced discussions, with particular emphasis on smaller classes as a locus for acquiring this kind of cultural capital.

Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie and Gonyea (2008) underscore the benefits to all students, not only those least likely to engage, when institutions implement comprehensive systems of initiatives:

. . . it seems that all students attending institutions that employ a comprehensive system of complementary initiatives based on effective educational practices are more likely to perform better academically, to be more satisfied, and to persist and graduate (Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh et al., 2007). These practices include well-designed and implemented orientation, placement testing, first-year seminars, learning communities, intrusive
advising, early warning systems, redundant safety nets, supplemental instruction, peer tutoring and mentoring, theme-based campus housing, adequate financial aid including on-campus work, internships, service learning, and demonstrably effective teaching practices (Forest, 1985, Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh et al., 2007; Wang & Grimes, 2001). (p. 156)

This conclusion, based on a decade of research into effective educational practices at institutions across the U.S., points out the value of an integrated system of student supports.

Based on this study, I recommend that institutions should consider ways to create environments in which international students feel welcome; in which faculty members play a supportive role; and in which Canadian academic practices are demystified and their underlying cultural schema and appropriate linguistic cues are made plain for the benefit of all students. Further, I believe that institutions could differentially invest in initiatives that support first-year international and Canadian students to learn about, experiment with, and have safe spaces to practice effective engagement behaviours.

9.2.6 The cost of the campus marathon. Participants in this study agreed: Staff are necessary to their well-being, academic success, sense of being well supported, and affiliation with the university. Students rely on staff to navigate the complexities of university life, but they do not expect to have a personal relationship with individual staff members. The negative effects of a failed staff interaction can be devastating; the positive impacts can be deeply meaningful. Students do not describe staff functions as leading them toward stand-alone goals. In this way, we can see the role of staff squarely in service of the academic mission of the university.
An investment in student perceptions of staff effectiveness was critical at this institution. Students described their search for information as a “campus marathon” (Rachel, Canada, year 1) between disconnected offices providing different levels of service. To strengthen this argument, I note there was a striking similarity in students’ desires for staff support regardless of citizenship or major. As a practitioner I know that the content of advising within each office at a university is highly specialized and distinct. I am not suggesting, nor do the students, that staff offices be combined or done away with. However, the nature of the advising interactions seemed from the students’ perspectives to be quite similar. They research online and with peers to find the information they need, and they approach an advising office for missing information or to confirm information they have heard elsewhere.

Further, they want an “expert helper” (Amanda, China, year 1) to lay out the options for them so they can make an informed decision. Where the required action lies in the hands of the advisor, such as setting registration dates, students want the work to be accurate and appropriate for their situation. Where the advisor needs to take further action after seeing the student, students want the follow-up to be thorough. And where exceptions are warranted in their situation, students want to be given every consideration. Ideally, they also want the advisor to go above and beyond, suggesting ideas that had not occurred to the student. In this there seems to be a natural opportunity for close coordination between advising offices to provide seamless referrals, a consistent approach to the student-advisor relationship, and a high level of student service excellence.

A clear observation arises from these conclusions. Since staff’s scope of information and options was equally unintelligible for all students, it was time to fundamentally reconsider the
relationship the university had between its staff, the information and options they provided, and its students. It was time for radical change in the area of service to students.

This finding supports a series of initiatives at UBC that started shortly after the focus groups were held. The university conducted a comprehensive business process review of enrolment services and a review of advising services influenced heavily by the work of Richard Keeling. These initiatives included assigning a generalist advisor for each newly registered undergraduate student, articulating a common philosophy and standards for advising at UBC, creating an online advising records management system, developing an early alert system, establishing a case management approach, conducting a comprehensive overhaul of central student communications (including websites and email), continuously assessing central advising service standards, and initiating an annual advising conference for UBC staff and faculty. As a result, the campus marathon should look considerably different now than it did for the students in this study.

In countries or regions with large power distance (PDI) such as those represented in this study, elders can play an important role by providing wisdom and guidance to the younger generations. For international participants who saw UBC staff as elders, it is not surprising that they were disappointed to be treated unkindly and not find the information and guidance they expected. For students from countries or regions with low individualism scores (IDV), where institutions may be expected to provide for the needs of their members, it is not surprising that participants were disappointed when school representatives did not provide for them. In supporting international students, administrators can gain considerable ground through structures and language that emphasize care. For example, assigning an advisor to every new-to-UBC international student is likely to communicate institutional care in a way that resonates strongly
with students from countries with large power distance (PDI) or collectivism (IDV) and provides a sense of motivation and mattering to help them learn more effectively.

Students commented that UBC had plenty of resources but these were hard to find. If the university is communicating with students and they consistently do not understand, the university is not yet communicating clearly enough. A customer service initiative ideally would be supported by clearer communication with students about campus resources (specifically offices and webpages). If students access the right resource in the first place, the incidence of the “campus marathon” will be reduced.

This study was conducted in the context of an increasingly competitive market as institutions vie to attract international students. Institutions strive to articulate their competitive advantage over their peers. These findings highlight an opportunity for distinctive differentiation at the institutional level. Even a necessary and ostensibly transactional service can be a differentiator if re-examined and assumptions disrupted in pursuit of an outstanding student experience.

Staff provide critical information and decisions that students cannot access from any other source. A clear implication from this study is that international students will be better supported in their success when they have ready access to staff services in ways that are culturally recognizable to them and when staff act as trusted, knowledgeable purveyors of wisdom who deliver personalized interpretations of the rules specific to students’ situations.

This study suggests that institutions could consider assessing advising services and processes for ease of access, sense of supportiveness, effectiveness of referrals, a consistent approach to the

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5 Customer service here refers to the extent to which a person feels that their needs have been met or exceeded by the company or organization, particularly when the person initiates the contact or seeks out information. However, since students are not “customers” of the university, an alternative term would be services for students.
student-advisor relationship, and service excellence. Furthermore, institutions could use the findings from such an assessment to take corrective action to ensure a well-coordinated system of advising is in place to support international and local students. This could include philosophies, standards, training, knowledge banks, assessment initiatives and record management systems that together lead to an outstanding student experience. Finally, institutions could consider the role student communications play in ensuring students can find the information they need when they need it. This could mean presenting information in a way that responds to students’ perceived needs rather than according to the institution’s organizational structures.

9.2.7 Behaviours don’t tell the whole story. NSSE is based on the premise that what a student does in postsecondary education in terms of educationally purposeful behaviours is more important than who he is or where he studies. In this study, students told us that how they perceive a behaviour will make or break their ability to engage in it. If there are too many constraints, or if it is not something they can imagine themselves doing, they will simply not do it. Behaviour may be the story behind NSSE, but perception is the story told by this study.

Learner reflexivity may well emerge as one of the most important methods international students have for acquiring the desired cultural capital to in turn acquire academic credentials and credibility. In international students’ comments about participating in class, we see evidence of strategy and agency. They look to other sources as a way of getting around activities that are emotionally unsettling or inaccessible. They build on their previous or existing expertise: they leverage social skills, social networks, trustworthy sources, and materials readily at hand.

Several approaches from positive psychology and the scholarship of teaching and learning seem particularly fruitful in guiding this focus on agency and strategy. Carol Dweck’s expansive work on growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), Michael Ungar’s application of resilience in
higher education contexts (Ungar, 2008) and Brené Brown’s popular application of vulnerability research (Brown, 2012) make a clear case for interventions to foster more resilient habits of mind. An underlying element of anxiety is the conviction that there is a right answer, a right feeling, and that if one just tries hard enough, it can be attained or discovered. Growth mindset clarifies that, while there may be one right answer in a disciplinary sense, one’s successes and failures can be equally productive if one takes the view that they are both productive. Dweck (2006) has shown time and again that a mindset of growth, or learning from both successes and failures, can be cultivated through intervention. Such an approach would go far toward reducing anxiety for international as well as Canadian students and would position them to be agents of their own learning, free to try new strategies and learn equally from successes and failures. The pressure to “get it right” would loosen its grip. This theory feeds directly into metacognition, the ability to adopt and adapt learning strategies, accurately evaluate the effectiveness of those strategies, and adopt new ones as needed. Meta-cognition allows the learner to drive their own learning without getting stuck in ineffective strategies just because they happened to be at hand or they were dictated by someone else.

According to Wimpeny and Savin-Baden (2013), resilience is a powerful theme in the student engagement literature:

“...it is possibly worrying that a key issue in this study was that engagement as resilience has emerged as a powerful theme... Student engagement as persistence and resilience is arguably a taken for granted factor of learning in HE, but we suggest here, one which deserves greater attention” (p. 325)
This study points to the likelihood that meta-cognitively alert students who are more aware of (habitus) and know how to take advantage of (cultural capital) the learning activities outlined in NSSE will be more successful, and that simply acting out the behaviour may not be sufficient to gain the benefits documented in the engagement literature.

Leveraging students’ desire to learn and alerting them to the power of courage (“feel the fear and do it anyway,” as one of our Jump Start students memorably said) and a growth mindset can begin to turn around some of the unproductive angst international students say blocks their participation and learning.

This is useful information for practitioners as we consider the role of self-awareness and reflection in the learning process. If students are aware of the potential learning benefits of NSSE behaviours, they may be more likely to engage in them and more likely to learn from them (Dyke, 2009).

The real opportunity arises when we consider the varied contexts students named on which they said their NSSE responses depend. Class size, faculty or major, and the types of “other students” and “administrative personnel” affected their interpretation of the NSSE items and led to frustration and a sense the university did not care about their authentic experiences. However, this sense that their answer “depends” gives us a marvellous gift. It points out the extent to which students experience university life as a series of microsites through which they are constantly moving, each of which places its own constraints and enablers on students’ progress through their university life and each of which carries its own sensibility for students as they perceive it.

Understanding how students think is also beneficial because it allows educators to influence students’ perception without necessarily changing the object of their perception. This
study provides evidence of this vast, untapped resource. For example, participants reacted to one another’s stories and declared that they would change their answer as a result of hearing those stories. Participants said they had no experience personally but they were still perfectly confident to answer the question, based on hearsay. And participants with nearly identical experiences gave diametrically opposed NSSE scores because one had scored based on hearsay and the other based on personal experiences.

At a university like UBC, the task of corralling institutional communication to students is vast and daunting. Students report receiving hundreds of emails from the university or some part of the university every week. It became increasingly difficult to reach students by email because they simply were not reading it any more. The administration had exhausted them with a barrage of uncoordinated, ill-timed, mismatched messages. In student focus groups at the time, students were telling the university they just wanted to know what they should pay attention to when and the most effective way to get it done. So the university redeveloped its student communications approach from the ground up and marshalled the bulk of newsletters, emails, blogs, and websites directed at students from the key sending offices into coherent, streamlined, and coordinated channels pushing key messages to students under six umbrella topics timed to match students’ needs. Administrators learned the phrase “curate your content.” We learned how to get students’ attention. And in the process, UBC because a lot clearer about the messages to which we wanted them to pay attention.

This study points to the untapped potential of crafting communication to students in a way that they can imagine doing the things the university believes will be beneficial for them to do and accessing the support that should give them an advantage. As this study has shown, the international participants were particularly attuned to the campus environment—not only the
supportiveness of students, staff, and faculty members, but also the physical campus, the emotional expectations in the classroom, and even the policies as evidence of the university’s care for them.

When I speak about communicating to students, I do not mean to limit that communication to words. For instance, if the institution wants to signal to newcomers to a field, or outsiders, that they are accepted as insiders, what more powerful way than to bring them to campus early, before the others arrive for the start of school? If the university wants to communicate that professors in this new setting are approachable, then why not run orientation programming by incorporating top teachers who are highly respected in their fields and equally committed to effective teaching in an approachable way? If we want students to imagine themselves to be full contributors in their classes, what better way than to create safe (ungraded, emotionally welcoming) spaces for them to practise contributing in classes where they can also receive immediate feedback and see improvement? If we want students to see large classes as loci of learning and discovery, what better way than to bring them into large classes within a supportive social environment in which they can practise best techniques for making a large class work for them? If we position them as a community of learners and show how the university is laid out as a discovery zone for them, they no longer see themselves as sitting in the back of the class while Canadians get their education; they see themselves as legitimate students in the classroom.

This study suggests that institutions could consider the role of student perceptions in guiding students towards educationally purposeful activities. Meta-cognition, resilience and growth mindset could be powerful constructs to discuss openly with students as they emerge as agents of their own learning. A focus on strategies, iterative improvement, and normalizing fear
and failure could foster a culture in which students learn about themselves as learners and strengthen their capacities to engage at increasingly higher levels of academic challenge. As well, institutions could consider the role of student communications in crafting overarching messages that influence students’ perceptions of themselves as self-aware learners and the institution as a willing partner in that endeavour. This study provides evidence for why institutions might use orientations and first-year programming to create safe spaces for all students to understand the learning value of educationally purposeful activities and practice applying strategies to maximize those benefits for themselves. Such initiatives could also communicate by their presence the high level of commitment the institution places on student success and learning.

9.2.8 The race-based lens. This study found that Canadian students saw race as a non-issue, indicated that most conversations were serious and said they had conversations with people very different than themselves indiscriminately, and that residence was the only factor that enabled such conversations. In a sharp contrast, international students saw race as the primary factor governing their social interactions and indicated the conversations they had with people very different than themselves were largely superficial. This finding is consistent with other UBC data indicating that international undergraduate students report a high level of satisfaction with the opportunity to study and live with students from other countries.

Given this awareness of in-group / out-group distinctions voiced by international participants, the opportunity for the university is to tailor communications, programs, and services with specific cultural subpopulations in mind. This need not mean separate offerings but consideration of how groups of students might feel specifically included.
Since residence emerged as the primary factor for Canadian students to enable serious conversations with people very different than themselves, the institution could focus its diversity interventions on communities in residence. Recently UBC V opened the first of many collegia, offering several hundred commuter students a welcoming, relaxing, lightly programmed space to call home between classes. The institution could further target commuter students in intentional ways, such as through membership-based campus spaces for commuter students such as collegia.

Many participants indicated that diverse interactions were an important part of university life. However, many international participants did not have relationships with people outside of their racial or ethnic group, citing awkwardness and lack of opportunity. This high level of interest but low level of engagement calls for a shift in messaging and in structures. Consistent messaging to all new students, domestic and international, and leveraging the expertise within learning communities can positively impact the level of diverse interactions among students. UBC students have many opportunities to interact across difference—nearly every involvement opportunity involves a multi-ethnic population—but this does not mean that such interaction takes place. More diverse interactions, particularly between international and Canadian students, can help achieve the host institution’s goal to “build intercultural aptitudes, create a strong sense of inclusion, and enrich our intellectual and social life” (University of British Columbia, 2009).

Students who are equipped to communicate across cultures are better able to contribute to and will be more effective in a diverse global environment during and after their time at UBC. I am as concerned about Canadian students as about international students. I am concerned about how they will manage in the world of work and in the society that awaits them if they sail through university without learning to work and play well with others who are different than themselves. I hope they are having the deep-down, gut-wrenching debates that make them say,
“Huh. Guess I never thought of it that way.” It would be a huge loss if the grand experiment of a global university failed on the simple point that the students, once brought to their potential paradise of intellect and scholarly debate, failed to interact and learn from each other because it felt uncomfortable to do so. Those who were so courageous to travel halfway around the world—or halfway across the metro area—have come too far to have their dreams of an international education stymied by social disconnects.

The opportunity is tremendous: Create an environment in which all can interact with inclusivity and respect. Meet institutional internationalization goals, achieve desired student outcomes, land students the global social networks they crave, and expect a level of innovation and creativity we have never seen before.

Yet it is unrealistic to expect all students to develop respect across difference unaided. Our habits is often all we know, and our embodied patterns of behaviour and perception make it hard for us to see how our ideas could be modified to make room for someone else’s. Learning communities, academic activities, and clear and frequent high-level communication about the challenges and opportunities of diverse interactions are building blocks to authentic interactions across diverse groups of students.

Findings from the study reinforce the belief that institutions can promote meaningful contact between people different than one another in existing mixed communities, particularly residence and collegia. Additional inroads could be made with orientation programs, the Greek system and classroom communities. Institutions could consider communicating early and often about the challenges and opportunities of diverse interactions. These could be framed as a key benefit of attending university and as a key outcome of a well-equipped graduate. Furthermore, institutions could consider working with students’ cultural subpopulations to build upon their
existing supports to reach out to members of other groups. This could include shared and collaborative spaces on campus, mini-grants and other incentives to work collaboratively, and umbrella events and organizing bodies that intentionally bring together diverse student groups.

9.3 Implications for Policy and Practice at UBC

Kerry: So for 8A, how are your relationships with other students?

Rae-FAC: . . . I made some new friends in Jump Start because we worked together in a small group in Jump Start for a few weeks.

Kerry: So you [and the friends you met in Jump Start] are still together now?

Rae-FAC: Yes. And we still keep contact now. So it’s pretty good. —Hong Kong, year 1

This study arose out of my growing concern that my institution was missing the distinctiveness of international students’ perceptions and that, despite best intentions, their individual and collective potential was not being realized. In this section I describe one specific institutional intervention at UBC V which illustrates implications of this study and which creates critical opportunities for my institution to continue evolving toward fully engaging its international students into the university community. The program, UBC Jump Start, came under my direction the same summer that I became a student in the doctoral program, and the program and this study have been engaged in a mutually beneficial conversation over the years.

Jump Start is a direct response to our belief as an institution that international students are less likely to engage in or benefit from institutional practices that will foster their success at university. As Kuh (2009b) points out,
We need to discover how institutions can productively use [measurement tools] to identify students who are more or less disposed to engage and design pre- and early college socialization experiences to induce them to take part in beneficial activities. (p. 695)

Originally called Academic Success: Summer International Students Transition Program (ASSIST), Jump Start arose out of a particular context. The university’s strategic plan identified international engagement, intercultural understanding and student learning as three of nine institutional commitments. International undergraduates had been identified at the institution as highly desirable for their contributions to global citizenship outcomes for all students and for their contributions to the teaching and research endeavour at this aspiring world-class institution. International student tuition had been uncoupled from taxpayer funding and from provincial limits on tuition increases. The trickle-down effect of international student tuition flowed into faculty and service division budgets and faculties were expected to provide targeted staff resources to support the retention of international undergraduates. These staff with international students in their job descriptions met regularly, at first under the auspices of the international undergraduate recruitment office and later under my leadership in the International Student Retention Working Group. The vice president, students, the only such role in the country, had created a strong vision for student development, including orientation and transition programming for undergraduate students. Consequently, new international undergraduate students already benefited from an intensive three-day conference-style orientation program, followed by the largest one-day orientation for first-year students in Canada, followed by an award-winning international peer program that supported them through the entire first year.
Out of this context, in 2004, the faculty of applied science expressed a concern about the retention and academic success of international undergraduates in engineering programs. Linking the concerns to English for Academic Purposes, they piloted a program for 22 of their own students, targeting technical language and classroom practices. The following year they expanded the pilot to include two additional faculties. Pleased with the results but seeking to consolidate the effort centrally, they invited my team to direct the program on behalf of the faculties.

From the start, a Bourdiesian framework was evident in my approach to the program. In my welcome speeches to the students, I used the following metaphor:

Imagine you have been recruited to play rugby because you are star athletes—in sports other than rugby. To become expert rugby players, you will need to know the rules of the game, so you can understand what is expected. However, that is not enough; you also need the playbook, which will show you the strategies to actually play the game. You will need a safe space to practice your new skills and to see how your existing skills will apply here, coaches to help you shape your skills and to provide feedback so you know how to improve, and peers—new and experienced players—to play with and to guide you. This is what Jump Start is designed to do. You are excellent students but are new to the field of Canadian university life. We will help you grasp the cultural schema underlying the academic social practices at UBC, and we will introduce strategies that will help you be successful in your time at UBC. We will provide faculty members who craft academic experiences for you to test and gain skills, and they will provide personalized feedback so you can make adjustments as needed. We have created learning communities of 30 students in your faculty for you to learn with, and we have trained
senior student leaders to act as peer academic and social coaches. We are confident you will be better prepared to be fully engaged players – students – at UBC Vancouver as a result of your time in Jump Start.

Jump Start addresses and helps shape international students’ perceptions of their academic experiences before they begin studies at UBC. As an intensive academic orientation and first-year experience program beginning two weeks prior to the start of classes, Jump Start helps students create positive, realistic expectations of academic life at UBC. In recent years, Jump Start students have been presented with an engaging workshop in which they learn that a growth mindset (what can I learn from this experience?) will position them to persist and succeed more than a fixed mindset (this experience reinforces what I already knew) (Dweck, 2006). This approach to normalized failure and iterative strategizing is consistent throughout the program and creates a positive social norm in and out of the classroom. The intention is that, in the context of other programmatic supports, the growth mindset approach will free students from some of the crippling anxiety this study uncovered and provide opportunity for them to be active agents of their own learning. As student leader André Malan famously said in his often-quoted welcome speech to new Jump Start students, “You can never stop learning about how you learn.”

Jump Start lays bare the underlying cultural schema of academic expectations and provides a road map for newcomers to Canadian academic social practices. When my office began to direct the program, we set expectations that the faculty who were teaching each learning community of 30 students would explain specific expectations of Canadian academic culture, such as contributing to class discussion, making class presentations, and working with other students in teams. This mirrors the selection of active and collaborative learning activities that this study examined in light of NSSE items and students’ perceptions, as these were behaviours
international students in my practice continually referenced as opaque and vexing. Instructors’ choices were informed by a full day of training focused on the cultural schema that underlie Canadian academic social practices such as interacting with professors and constructing a scholarly argument. The program built on experiential learning approaches to prime students for a kind of activity, such as taking notes in a large lecture class, then having the students take notes in a purpose-designed large lecture class, then designing activities in the learning communities for reflection, feedback, and guided action planning.

Jump Start leverages faculty members as key drivers for students’ academic behaviours, motivation, and learning. Over the years the model shifted from sessional instructors who were hired for their existing expertise in teaching academic practices for first-year students to tenure-track faculty members who are influential in their departments and are in a position to impact the teaching of first-year students in the future. Through their involvement, these Jump Start Faculty Fellows demystify the role of the professor, model approachability, provide timely feedback, and in effect use their accumulated social capital at the institution to increase the interest and expertise in teaching international student within their circles of influence. Recently, Faculty Fellows in the faculty of science took up the challenge to build students’ capacity to succeed despite large class sizes by designing a highly memorable large-class lecture about large-class lectures, creatively simulating the best and worst strategies for professors and students to make the most of this ubiquitous and potentially highly productive format for teaching and learning.

Jump Start fosters the development of robust social networks. The two-week program prior to the start of classes is intentionally designed as an intensive residential experience, in which specially-trained student leaders are assigned to each learning community to deliver a comprehensive socialization experience in the classroom and in the residence. By assigning
students into learning communities of no more than 30 students in the same faculty, most of whom have at least one first-year class in common and are then assigned to live in the same area of university residence, and by continuing the relationship with the learning community and its faculty and student leaders throughout the academic year, the program provides a scaffold for social networks to develop and flourish.

Hikaru: So Sabina and Yasmine, where do you make friends?

Yasmine-FAR: I was part of the Jump Start Program.

Michelle: You were in Jump Start? I thought I recognized you.

Yasmine-FAR: I recognized you! That’s where I met many friends! . . . And I started going to classes, and I just made friends there. —Japan, year 1

Yasmine’s comment is particularly evocative as so many international students complain about how hard it is to meet students in their classes. It may be that the social norming around friend-making fostered by Jump Start allowed students like Yasmine to take the first step in their classes as well. To test that theory, currently the program is participating in an academic study of international undergraduates’ social network development, and early results suggest that participants may have an advantage in this area over non-participants.

During the focus group sessions for this study, several international students spoke about Jump Start, unprompted by facilitators. They indicated that Jump Start breaks down barriers to meaningful interactions with people very different than oneself, as we see from some of the participants’ comments:
Stella-FAR: When I first came here, I participated in the Jump Start orientation. The girl from Nigeria was using the room next to mine and we are still really close. I think I hang around with her most of the time. —Korea, year 1

Bobo-FAR: I think because of Jump Start I have a whole bunch of foreign friends, and I think I get a lot of information from them, and it’s kind of like a cultural exchange, and I think that’s one of the reasons why I am here right now. If I just want to hang out with my Chinese friends then I can just stay at home [in my home country] and I can meet more friends there than here. —China, year 1

Jump Start has had the unique challenge and opportunity to welcome first-year international students, first-year Aboriginal students from Canada, and first-year Canadian citizens who have taken secondary schooling abroad. Through consistent messaging from the program organizers and peer leaders, and by creating multiple experiences for students to showcase their talents and perspectives regardless of their backgrounds, Jump Start creates a safe space for sharing across difference.

Jump Start creates a distinctly supportive campus environment. At the time of the study, there was wide-spread interest to re-engineer student advising at the university. Rachel’s reference to the “campus marathon” (Canada, year 1) she undertakes to accomplish an administrative task on campus became a rallying cry for the effort to improve services to all students. In Jump Start, the staff in the International Student Retention Working Group made a particular commitment to leveraging Jump Start to ensure the students in their faculties would not have to navigate the university bureaucracy on their own. Staff are intimately involved in planning the program, they are highly visible at key events, they meet with student leaders to ensure effective referrals, and they actively encourage Jump Start participants to meet with them:
Zhaohuachen-FCR: I have a really good relationship with my [Commerce] advisor. I met my advisor through Jump Start and he told us, “Please come see us. You paid for this service.”... He is good at communicating with people. Other students also want to see him... — China, year 1

This study found that international participants saw university policies as expressions of the institution’s level of care for them, and as such constitute part of the supportive campus environment for international students. This is consistent with Hall’s (1989) depiction of high-context communication, in which people in certain cultures will tend to attribute meaning not primarily to words but largely to the context of the communication. In this case, we expected that some international students would see the fact of the university’s investment in Jump Start as a sign of care for them. When the university made the decision a few years ago to shift the program from a niche opportunity for 180 students to the expected start-of-school activity for all 1500+ first-year international undergraduate students (“Your UBC experience starts August 13”), we believed this would communicate powerfully to students and their parent the extent of the university’s commitment to their well-being.

Over the years, we were pleased to see that institutional data substantiated our hopes for students’ success from Jump Start (internal memos). In an early study by the Office of Planning and Institutional Research, participants showed a higher rate of retention to second year than non-attenders, even when controlling for self-selection by constructing a comparator group from the year before the program began. A similar study by the same office found that participants’ grade point averages were higher after the first year than those of their peers, controlling for other variables, and that the differential was greater for students with lower grades upon
admission, which is arguably a group at risk. In both studies, the positive results were statistically significant.

Certainly UBC Jump Start on the Vancouver campus has been a highly collaborative effort and my influence has been tempered by other voices, for better or worse. At the same time, I am gratified to see that many of the key findings of this study have a place in the past or present form that this remarkable and impactful institutional intervention has taken.

**9.4 Implications for Policy and Practice Beyond UBC**

This section presents implications for policy and practice beyond the sponsor institution.

*9.4.1 Limitations of NSSE as an instrument.* Offices of institutional research may be interested to note the several points of confusion and complaint expressed by participants regarding NSSE. Results gained from respondents who did not understand the questions or who were not able to find response options to answer accurately weaken the reliability and validity of the instrument. It is a rather expensive and one might say pointless exercise to administer a survey in which students are answering questions that are not actually asked. Canadian institutions would do well to request alterations to the instrument to ensure that their institution and comparator peers yield valid results. Immediate attention could be paid to items that mention faculty members, students, and serious conversations. Far-reaching changes would include providing ways for students to disaggregate responses relating to large classes, clarifying meanings of response options, and adding response options where items may not apply and for things students do rarely or once or twice. Canadian institutions, institutions hosting international students, and institutions outside of the United States should use caution when interpreting their NSSE results if these issues are not taken into consideration.
9.4.2 The potential for faculty members to engage international students:

Approachability and effective teaching. Participants made it clear they believe they learn better from faculty members who are approachable and are effective teachers. They defined approachability as conveying in actions and words that one welcomes contact with students and that mechanisms are in place for students to ask questions, get clarification, and receive feedback. They described effective teaching in terms of using appropriate teaching techniques to good effect, such as engaging students in a topic, teaching a technique before expecting students to learn from employing it (such as a class presentation or a policy paper), and providing meaningful feedback. In addition, international students commented on faculty members’ lack of preparedness to support the learning of international students in the classroom. Attention could be paid to the orientation and equipping of faculty members to understand the role of approachability, effective teaching, and preparedness to teach international students.

9.4.3 Leverage academic practices and cultural schema. Students said there was a lack of effective use of learning practices such as class presentations and class discussion. With the exception of the faculty of Commerce and English classes, they experienced these activities as going through the motions and checking off obligations for faculty members or students.

As Walter Heinz reminded us in his work on the limitations of young people’s ability to exercise agency in setting their own life path, “Transitions and turning points require taking initiative with the available resources in view of an uncertain future” (2009, p. 403).

Vicki Trowler (2010) reminds us that “engagement does not happen by accident. Strange and Banning (2001, 201) call for campuses that are ‘intentionally designed to offer opportunities, incentives, and reinforcements for growth and development’” (p. 36).
9.5 Implications for Future Research

Future research is needed to explore the applicability of student engagement theory in other settings and populations outside U.S. contexts. International students from countries outside the East Asian sample who were at the core of this study might reveal quite different perceptions of NSSE and related behaviours. Examining at-home student populations outside of Canada, such as students who are studying in their home country in East Asia, may show an even greater discrepancy between expected and understood behaviours. This may be the case particularly in contexts where the behaviours are not commonly practised.

The obvious research opportunity is to replicate on a global scale the half-century of research that led to the development of student engagement theory. This would involve taking a transnational approach to the question: What factors explain and predict the success of students in higher education? This rather daunting prospect could be focused by considering the success factors for certain populations of students in their home country and in select settings in which they are international students. Do similar students succeed in similar ways at home as well as abroad? What behaviours are associated with successful students in those disparate settings? What differentiates students who are successful beyond what the current models can explain?

The clear benefit of such study would be to serve as a transnational comparator for higher-education institutions and policy-makers in this age of exploding numbers of mobile students. Institutions could identify and emphasize optimal ways of supporting their home students and could potentially claim to be institutions of higher quality as a result. Those institutions hosting international students could intelligently predict ways those students could best be supported and in turn could benefit from the international reputation such expertise would afford.
The Canadian government has created a number of pathways which create opportunity for international students to become permanent residents more quickly than other applicants. International students are emerging as desirable immigrants due to their host language skills, cultural expertise, and social networks compared to immigrants coming directly from abroad. I wonder if the engagement of international students which is purported to lead to desired outcomes academically also leads to desired outcomes for those students should they become new immigrants of their host country. Further research could consider how the engagement of international students enables or constrains the development of citizenship competencies and prepares international students to be more successful in their settlement in Canada or other host countries.

I would be fascinated to explore the role of home culture in moderating international students’ perceptions of and ability to understand and access academic and social practices in their new study setting. How do students make meaning of transitions to a new place and way of being when the culture distance is relatively small? What elements of culture are most salient for international students who are making transitions to the new setting? How does this differ according to where they are from and where they are going? How does this differ according to acculturation as measured by length of time and level of study undertaken in the host country? Home culture will play an increasingly interesting role as the traditional South-North patterns of student mobility give way to the emerging trends of South-South mobility, particularly within Asia.
9.6 Closing Comments

Will a global village be a mere collection of people or a true community? Will its residents be neighbors capable of respecting and utilizing their differences or clusters of strangers living in ghettos and united only in their antipathies for others?—Barnlund, 1989, p. 1

Of course, I have a dream for Malmö University. I would like to see all our students leaving this university with the added value that an internationalised curriculum can give: Besides good knowledge of their subject area, they should have open minds and generosity toward other people; know how to behave in other cultures and how to communicate with people with different religions, values, and customs; and not be scared of coping with new and unfamiliar issues. I would like to vaccinate all our students against the dark forces of nationalism and racism. I once read in an article that a technical innovation takes 10 years to implement; a medical one, 20 years; and an educational one, 50 years. So be patient and realistic—these kinds of changes in thinking and attitudes take a very long time. —Nilsson, 2003, p. 39

This study shows that international students engage with their institution differently than do domestic students, that there are differences within the international student population, and that differences in engagement are nuanced but significant.

Globalization is a pervasive force in the twenty-first century and calls higher-education institutions to task: How will they respond to the opportunities and challenges it brings? Now is the time to shape international student research, policies, and practices in a way that broadens the thinking of the “confident insiders” (Ridley, 2004, p. 92), that acknowledges the complex nature
of institutional relationships with international students, that enables these students’ personal and academic success, and that fully engages them in the life of the institution for the benefit of the entire academic community.

Globalization has also been connected to homogenization and the flattening of cultural distinctions within and between populations. When Ken comments that he doesn’t “have that Japanese character” and considers himself Japanese “but like a different species or a different type of Japanese person” (Japan, year 1), he demonstrates a cosmopolitanism that is increasingly prevalent among international student populations. Institutions have the challenge to support international students in all their cultural hybridity without homogenizing their experiences or their supports.

As higher-education institutions become increasingly global in their student makeup and in the outcomes they expect for all students, the retention and learning of international students should be at the heart of higher-education research and practice. Institutions that seek to enhance retention and learning of all students must more clearly explicate their own cultural expectations, recognize the power of home culture in impacting how international students engage with their institution, and intentionally create academic and student affairs contexts in which international students can achieve desired outcomes.

Student engagement theory has far-reaching implications for shaping institutional efforts to enhance retention and student learning of undergraduates. In the global pressure for valid institutional comparators, student engagement theory has the potential to reshape the marketing, funding, and structure of higher-education institutions worldwide. However, the relevance of engagement for students and student affairs practitioners outside the United States and Canada cannot be taken for granted. This study addresses issues challenging post-secondary educators
today by addressing the limits of student engagement as a cultural construct and as such makes an important contribution to the dialogue about student engagement in Canada and beyond.
References

This thesis draws on unpublished course assignments written by the author while a student at the University of British Columbia.


Appendices

Appendix A:

Forms Used

Contains:
Engagement Focus Group Script
Engagement Focus Group Consent Form
Engagement Focus Group Acknowledgement Form
Engagement Focus Group Invitation
Engagement Interview Script
Engagement Interview Consent Form
Engagement for All?

International Students at the University of British Columbia

Focus Group Script

v.5 – Final

Source:

This script draws heavily on the NSSE document, "Focus Group Scripts for Evaluating the NSSE Survey" (NSSE, 2007).

Materials:

Audio recorder, microphone and tapes

Video camera, tripod and tapes

Note taker with laptop

Copies of NSSE survey in envelopes (one for each participant)

Mark each survey envelope with:

i. Tape number
ii. Citizenship
iii. Year of study
iv. Date
v. Space for participants to indicate:
   i. residence (yes/no)
   ii. gender (male/female)
   iii. faculty (Arts/App Sci/Sauder/Science)

Copies of Consent Form (one for each participant)

Focus Group Script

Gift certificates

Name placards or sticky nametags, blank

Copies of Acknowledgement Form to indicate that students received gift certificates.
As people enter, ask their first name and write it for them on a name placard or tag. Encourage them to have a seat. Chat with them about non-personal things, such as how midterms are going.

**Facilitator Introduction:**
Co-investigator: In English, introduce yourself, the student facilitator, and the note-taker. Explain that the session will be audio- and video-recorded and ask if anyone objects to being taped. Turn on audio tape and video camera. Hand out Consent Forms and envelopes with NSSE survey.

[In English, read aloud the entire Consent Form, including purpose of the study, benefits and risks, gift certificate information, voluntary nature of the study, consent, etc.]

[Invite each participant to write on the Consent Form a nickname they would like the researchers to use instead of their real name when the results are analyzed and reported later on. If they prefer, they can leave it blank and the researcher will assign them a letter at a later date.]

[Invite participants to sign the consent form. Collect each consent form personally, so that no one else can see their names or student numbers.]

[Have students mark their residence status (are you living in university housing?), gender and faculty on their envelope]

< The remaining script will be translated by the student facilitator into LANGUAGE: all questions will be asked in LANGUAGE except NSSE items. (Omit this and the following paragraph for CONTROL group.>>

**Student Facilitator:**
"Since you all speak LANGUAGE, and since some ideas are easier to say in one language than another, please feel free to speak in English or LANGUAGE. I will be speaking LANGUAGE. Michelle is happy to listen and not understand; she will have plenty of time to read the translation of the discussion later."

"We have plenty of time. We are looking for honest [thoughtful] responses and comments. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

**Opening Question**
"Let's go around the circle: please say your first name, what your major is and why. [OR: please say your first name, what city or region you are from originally, and how long you have lived outside your home country.] Can you start for us?"

"Thank you. Please take few minutes to fill out the survey. The survey asks about a series of things students might experience at university."

"For this study we are only interested in questions 1, 8 and 10. Please circle those numbers right now so you remember. Afterwards we will discuss your impressions of the survey and the items"
it describes. We will ask you to hand in your survey at the end of the session. Any questions about how to complete the survey?"

< 5 minute pause while students fill out survey responses>

We want to know how important you think each item is to your success at UBC. For each item you already answered, please write in the margins: 4 for very important, 3 for important, 2 for not important, and 1 for definitely not important. [OR: use words/initials instead of numbers, e.g., VI, I, NI, DNI.] That means that on Question 1, for example, you would write 4, 3, 2, or 1 in the margin next to each of the responses.

< 5 minute pause while students write in margins>

"Now that you have taken part of the survey, I'd like you to help me understand how you interpreted the questions and the possible responses. The survey has several sections. I'd like to go through each section and pick a few questions and hear from you how you interpreted the items. At the end, there will be time to bring up any items we didn't discuss. There are no right answers and everyone's point of view is welcome.

NSSE Item Questions

1. First, what is your impression of the survey so far?
2. Let's look at Question 1 A. What is it like for you to (in English) "ask questions in class or contribute to class discussion"?
3. How about Question 1B? What is it like for you to “make a class presentation”? How are important are these two items? What makes them harder or easier to do?
4. Let's look at Question 1 P. What is it like for you to (in English) “discuss ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class”? How important is this to you? What makes this harder or easier to do?

<When a participant asks what a phrase in NSSE means, ask the whole group:
   a. There are several ways it could be defined. What definition did you use when you answered?
   b. What other definitions came to mind at the time?
   c. If you had picked definition X, how would your answer have changed?>

5. Let’s look at Question 8 B. What are your relationships like with faculty members?
6. Let’s look at Question 8 A. How would you describe your relationships with other students?
7. Related to this is Question 1 G and H. What is it like for you to work with others in class or outside of class? How important is this to you? What makes it harder or easier?
8. Question 1 U and V refer to “serious conversations” with students different than yourself. What is this like for you?
9. Question 8 C asks about relationships with “administrative personnel and offices”. What is this like for you at UBC?
10. We’ve talked about relationships with faculty, staff and students. How can UBC provide a more supportive campus environment for you?
11. Is there anything important we have not asked talked about so far – anything that you see as very important (rated as 4 or VI) to your experience here at UBC?

**Student Success Questions**
1. Think of a CITIZENSHIP student you know in COUNTRY who you would say is achieving positive outcomes. Thinking of that person, what do you mean by positive outcomes?
2. Think of a CITIZENSHIP student you know at UBC who you would say is achieving positive outcomes. Thinking of that person, what do you mean by positive outcomes?

[If time allows, ask:]  

3. What is going well in your life at UBC?  
4. What is difficult or disappointing about your life at UBC?  
5. What can UBC do to help you?

**Final Questions**
Let's go around the circle: in your opinion, what is the most important thing that was said here today?

**Invitation to individual interview**
"If you feel you still have things to say on this topic, please email us at reachout.10@ubc.ca within a week to set up a time for an individual interview with me. Your participation in the interview will be confidential, and we can schedule a time that works for you. An interview would take about 30 minutes. There is no reward for interviewing – only volunteer if you feel you have more to say."

**Focus group conclusion**
Turn off audio recorder and video camera.

"Thank you for participating in this discussion. Your responses will help faculty, staff and students have a better understanding of international undergraduate experiences at UBC."

Give students gift cards and have each sign an Acknowledgement Forms, making sure they cannot see each other's completed forms.

______________________________

**Suggested follow up questions to use throughout the focus group:**

[Repeat the key word as a question – this encourages the person to explain it.]
- Would you explain further?  
- Can you give me an example?  
- Is there more?  
- Tell me more about that.  
- Does anyone have a different response?  
- Please describe what you mean.  

*Non-CITIZENSHIP may not understand that concept. How would you explain it?"
Focus Group Consent Form

Canadian Group April 9

Engagement for All? International Students at the University of British Columbia

Principal Investigators:
Dr. Donald Fisher, Professor, Educational Studies [snip]
Dr. Amy Scott Metcalfe, Assistant Professor, Educational Studies [snip]

Co-Investigator: Michelle Suderman, Associate Director, International Student Development and Doctoral Candidate, Educational Studies [snip]

Sponsor: This research is sponsored by the University of British Columbia and is funded in part by the Office of Graduate Programs and Research, UBC Faculty of Education.

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) survey results for undergraduate students at UBC Vancouver. Every few years, students are asked to participate in NSSE so that staff, faculty, and students can better understand undergraduate experiences at their institutions. Using students' responses to NSSE 2008, focus groups allow the researchers to understand students' perceptions of the survey and the behaviours the survey is designed to measure. You have been invited to take part in this research because you are a citizen of one of the country groups that has been selected for inclusion in this study. You were selected randomly from among your fellow citizens in the same year of study at UBC Vancouver, with consideration for gender, residency and faculty.
Your participation is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time before or during the focus group. It is normal for some research subjects to decide not to participate, and you will not be penalized in any way for not participating.

**Study Procedures:**

You are invited to participate in a focus group along with other students in your year of study who share your citizenship. The focus group will last 90 minutes and will be held in a public building on the UBC Vancouver campus. A note-taker may also be present. The focus group may be audio- and video-taped for the sole purpose of making an accurate transcription of the discussion. Those not participating will not be videotaped.

Data collected during the focus group will be used in a doctoral thesis which will be publicly available from the UBC library. Data collected will also be used to improve international student programs and services at UBC.

**Potential Risks:**

During this study, you may feel uneasy disclosing your opinions in front of fellow students and a staff member of the university. It may be inconvenient to take time to participate in the study, including travel time. However, participating in this study will not affect your standing with the University, access to university services, or your academic program. No one outside the research team will be informed of your participation. Your academic department and academic advisors will not be informed of your participation.

**Potential Benefits:**

By participating in this study, you will be assisting the university to better understand and support students at UBC. Your responses may help other universities and colleges work more effectively with their students. You will be provided with a summary of the findings by email and will be able to access the thesis through the UBC library.

**Confidentiality:**

Your identity will be kept strictly confidential at all times. Subjects will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. All documents will be kept in a locked, secured location for up to five years, at which time they may be destroyed. The video tape(s) will be destroyed as soon as an accurate transcription has been made. We encourage all participants to refrain from disclosing the contents of the discussion outside of the focus group; however, we cannot control what other participants do with the information discussed.

**Remuneration/Compensation:**

To recognize the inconvenience of participation, each participant will receive a $40 gift certificate to the UBC Bookstore. If you attend the focus group but decide not to participate, you will still receive the gift certificate.
Contact for information about the study:

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, please contact [snip]

Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects:

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail to RSIL@ors.ubc.ca.

Consent:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy to your academic record or your access to services for students.
Focus Group Consent Form – Signature Page

Engagement for All? International Students at the University of British Columbia

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you agree not to disclose comments made in the focus group nor disclose the identity of fellow focus group participants.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

____________________________________________________

Subject Signature  Date

____________________________________________________

Subject Name  Student Number

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Acknowledgement Form

Engagement for All? International Students at the University of British Columbia

By signing this form I acknowledge that I received a gift certificate for the UBC Bookstore in recognition of my participation in the above-named focus group.

________________________________________________________________________

Subject Signature  Date

________________________________________________________________________

Subject Name  Student Number
First-Year Korean Student
Focus Group Invitation

Engagement for All? International Students at the University of British Columbia

You've probably heard someone at UBC say: Getting involved is the best way to be successful at university. That may work for Canadians, but is it true for international students? Right now UBC is conducting a study to ask exactly that – and you can help.

You have been selected randomly to participate in a focus group as part of this study. The focus group is for first-year international students at UBC Vancouver who are citizens of South Korea and speak Korean as a home language. The focus group will take place on Thursday, February 26 from 5:00-6:30 pm. Please email [snip] by February 20 to confirm your attendance so we can make sure every spot is filled.

Participants will receive a $20 gift certificate to the UBC Bookstore.

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to understand how international undergraduate students at UBC Vancouver get involved with the university. We will be talking about the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which is designed to measure students' level of engagement with their university or college. Focus groups will allow us to understand what you think of the survey
and the behaviours the survey is designed to measure. You do not need to complete the survey before coming to the focus group.

**How Results Will Be Used:**

Your identity will be kept strictly confidential. Your participation is voluntary and will not affect your standing with the University, access to university services, or your academic program. Data collected will be used to improve programs and services for international students at UBC. Data collected will also be used in a doctoral thesis which will be publicly available from the UBC library.

**Principal Investigators:**
Dr. Donald Fisher, Professor, Educational Studies [snip]
Dr. Amy Scott Metcalfe, Assistant Professor, Educational Studies [snip]

**Co-Investigator:** Michelle Suderman, Associate Director, International Student Development and Doctoral Candidate, Educational Studies [snip]

**Sponsor:** This research is sponsored by the University of British Columbia, with partial funding from the Office of Graduate Programs and Research, UBC Faculty of Education.

**Contact:** If you have any questions about the study, please contact [snip]
Engagement for All?

International Students at the University of British Columbia

Interview Script

Source:

This script draws heavily on the NSSE document, "Focus Group Scripts for Evaluating the NSSE Survey" (NSSE, 2007).

Materials:

- Tape recorder and tapes
- Copies of NSSE survey for interviewer and subject (for reference)
- Interview Consent Form
- Interview Script
- Retention Data Summary Board (for reference)

<The rest of the script will be translated by the co-facilitator into LANGUAGE.>

Introduce yourself again. Explain that the session will be tape recorded and ask if the subject objects to being taped. Turn on tape recorder. Hand out Consent Form and NSSE survey.

Facilitator Introduction:

[In English, read aloud the entire Consent Form, including purpose of the study, benefits and risks, voluntary nature of the study, consent, etc.]

"We have plenty of time. We are looking for honest, thoughtful responses and comments. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

<Collect the consent form>

"In the focus group, we discussed the groups' responses to certain questions and responses in the survey. We talked about which of the survey items were very important and what made it harder or easier to do them. We also talked about the numbers of first years from COUNTRY who don't
return for second year, as compared to domestic and international student averages. Finally, we talked about what it meant to achieve positive outcomes at UBC and what students from COUNTRY should do to achieve positive outcomes at UBC.

1. Where would you like to start our discussion today? 
   <Skip any question that has already been answered>

2. What else do you want to say about specific survey questions or response options? 
3. What would you like to add about which survey items are important or very important for you? 
4. What more do you want to say about the survey in general, such as what should be added or removed? 
5. How about what we have not asked in the survey - anything else that you see as very important to your learning and ability to stay at UBC? 
6. What about the numbers of students from COUNTRY who don't return for second year. What more do you want to say about that? 
7. What do you think leads to NUMBER% of students from COUNTRY dropping out of UBC? What keeps CITIZENSHIP students from dropping out? 
8. Let me ask a question we asked in the focus group, in case you have more to say about it: when you think of a CITIZENSHIP student you know who you would say achieves positive outcomes at UBC, what do you mean by positive outcomes? 
9. How can UBC help CITIZENSHIP students achieve positive outcomes? 
10. Is there anything else you would like to add to our discussion today?

Suggested follow up questions throughout the interview:
   [Repeat the key word – this encourages the person to explain it.]
   Would you explain further? 
   Can you give me an example? 
   Is there more? 
   Tell me more about that. 
   Does anyone have a different response? 
   Please describe what you mean. 
   Non-CITIZENSHIP may not understand that concept. How would you explain it?

Interview conclusion

Turn off tape recorder.

"Thank you for talking with me today. Your responses will help faculty and staff get a better understanding of international undergraduate experiences at UBC."
Interview Consent Form

Engagement for All? International Students at the University of British Columbia

Principal Investigators:
Dr. Donald Fisher, Professor, Educational Studies [snip]
Dr. Amy Scott Metcalfe, Assistant Professor, Educational Studies [snip]

Co-Investigator: Michelle Suderman, Associate Director, International Student Development and Doctoral Candidate, Educational Studies [snip]

Sponsor: Funding for this research comes from the Office of Graduate Programs and Research, UBC Faculty of Education.

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to learn more about the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) survey results for international undergraduate students at UBC Vancouver. Every few years, students are asked to participate in NSSE so that staff, faculty, and students can better understand undergraduate experiences at their institutions. Using international students' responses to NSSE 2008, focus groups allow the researchers to understand students' perceptions of the survey and the behaviours the survey is designed to measure. You have been invited to take part in this research because you are a citizen of one of the country groups that has been selected for inclusion in this study. You were selected randomly from among your fellow citizens in the same year of study at UBC Vancouver, with consideration for gender.

Consent:
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy to your academic record or your access to services for students. It is normal for some research subjects to decide not to participate, and you will not be penalized in any way for not participating.
**Study Procedures:**
You have volunteered to be interviewed as a follow up to your focus group participation. The interview will be bilingual, that is, you will have the option to speak in English or the home language of the group. The interview will last approximately 30 minutes and will be held in a public building on the UBC Vancouver campus. The interview will be conducted by a bilingual trained senior student from UBC V. The interview may be audio-taped for the sole purpose of making an accurate transcription and translation after the group is over.

Data collected will be used to improve programs and services benefitting international student at UBC. Data collected during the interview may also be included a doctoral thesis which will be publicly available from the UBC library.

**Potential Risks:**
As a result of participating in this study, you may experience some emotional discomfort or be inconvenienced due to time spent. However, participating in this study will not affect your standing with the University, access to university services, or your academic program. No one outside the research team will be informed of your participation.

**Potential Benefits:**
There are numerous benefits to participating in this study. Your participation will assist the university to better support international students at UBC. Your responses may help other universities and colleges work more effectively with their international students. You can have the personal satisfaction of knowing you helped other students to be more successful in their university experience. You will be provided with a summary of the findings by email and will be able to access the thesis through the UBC library.

**Confidentiality:**
Your identity will be kept strictly confidential at all times. Subjects will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. All documents will be kept in a locked, secured location for up to five years, at which time they may be destroyed. The video tape(s) will be destroyed as soon as a certified translation into English has been completed.

**Contact for information about the study:**
If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, please contact [snip]

**Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects:**
If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail to RSIL@ors.ubc.ca.
Interview Consent Form – Signature Page

Engagement for All? International Students at the University of British Columbia

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

__________________________________________________________________
Subject Signature Date

__________________________________________________________________
Subject Name Student Number
Appendix B:

Report to Sponsor

Engagement For All?
A Study of International Undergraduates in Cultural Context
Research Report

Sponsored by the University of British Columbia
with partial funding from the Faculty of Education

Michelle Suderman
Submitted to the University of British Columbia
May 17, 2010
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See also:
- Appendix A – Student Quotations
- Appendix B – Forms Used
- Appendix C – Planning and Research Assistant Documents
- Appendix D – Participant Demographics
- Appendix E – Pilot Group Findings
- Appendix F – NSSE 2008 Paper Form
Executive Summary

International students engage with their university differently than domestic students – and one another – in nuanced but significant ways. The success or failure of this engagement impacts their retention and learning. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) measures behaviours which have been positively associated with retention, academic success and satisfaction among U.S. American students. Based on focus group data, this academically rigorous study considered the relevance of NSSE and student engagement theory to international students. This report describes how UBC international undergraduates from select countries interpret NSSE items and perceive NSSE behaviors, how participants perceive their engagement with their host university, and how home culture plays a role in participants’ perceptions of their engagement.

Hofstede’s (2001) dimensions of cultural difference, particularly Individualism, Power Distance, and Uncertainty Avoidance, help us understand distinctions between and among Canadian and international participant perceptions. Based on these findings, increasing intercultural effectiveness across campus is an essential component in understanding students’ experiences and enhancing their retention and learning.

Methodology

Eighteen focus groups were held in five languages in February, March and April 2009 with a total of 77 participants. Participants were selected using a stratified random sampling technique from the population of first and fourth year international undergraduates registered at UBC Vancouver (UBC V) in 2008/09 who identified as citizens of the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea or Japan. Canadian participants were selected using a similar technique. Each focus group consisted of students from the same year and citizenship and was facilitated by a bilingual undergraduate research assistant. Certified translators translated or verified the final transcripts.

Analysis of Findings

UBC NSSE 2008 results were already disaggregated by international student status and compared to results for UBC V domestic NSSE participants. Few statistically significant differences were found; however, focus groups revealed differences not found in the factor analysis and showed that certain statistical differences in NSSE responses may not be valid.

Participant comments in focus groups revealed subtle but significant differences in perceptions of engagement. Participants expressed a strong desire for change at the institutional level. Regarding NSSE itself, participants said each response was an inaccurate approximation of the plurality of their experiences. Participants wanted more from their professors, whom they perceived as overburdened and therefore unavailable to students. International students were keenly aware of race, while most Canadian participants did not see race as an issue. Many participants could not identify the learning value in NSSE behaviours, such as participating in class discussion, which they said were undervalued or misused by faculty. International students described being hesitant to participate in NSSE behaviours and being unsure of what was
expected. International participants made frequent reference to classroom and campus environment and saw the professor as the most important factor in creating the class environment. Participants were disappointed with staff and described running a “campus marathon” between offices to find answers to administrative questions. International students felt unsupported by UBC in terms of high tuition, the housing lottery and a lack of supports specifically for them. Participants relied on multi-layered social networks to navigate their learning in university. Large class size was cited as a key barrier to motivation, mattering, and connections with faculty and other students. Many participants praised UBC’s involvement opportunities, school spirit and resources. A small number of students in each group indicated that career preparation and job seeking were the most important things that were said in the session. Participants from nearly every group mentioned that resources were lacking or hard to find. Participants said that busyness— including the course load in certain majors - was one of the most common barriers to effectiveness for faculty, staff and students. Participants recognized the value of learning communities such as UBC Jump Start, the Greek system and university residence. First year students were more satisfied than fourth years but the level of satisfaction among both groups was relatively high.

Key Recommendations

Strengthen the validity of NSSE and other assessment tools for international students

Respond to students’ desire for institutional change by making assessment activities highly visible

Replicate this research on a regular cycle

Provide an enhanced toolkit to faculty for intercultural communication and engagement with international students

Promote diverse student interactions across cultures

Provide targeted supports to specific cultural subpopulations

Make academic culture explicit for all new students, domestic and international

Demonstrate the university’s relationship with international students, especially around key policies, e.g., tuition and housing lottery

Implement a campus-wide customer service initiative

Employ language and structures that emphasize institutional care

Help students build intentional, multi-layered social networks

Support effective large class experiences
Continue to offer thoughtfully constructed, highly visible resources and opportunities for involvement

Provide major-specific career supports

Reduce the toll taken by busyness for students, staff and faculty

Continue to invest in learning communities and align with key messages
Rationale for the Study

* Differences in values, circumstance, and intellectual viewpoint have incited humankind's worst conflicts. Considered with respect, they afford great learning. Wholly embraced, they promise to be our greatest strength.* *(Place and Promise, The University of British Columbia, 2009)*

*I believe that it is those who are already confident insiders in academic discourse communities who are most likely to be in the position to change these dominant ideologies, and we are doing those without the valued cultural capital a disservice if we do not consider ways of opening the doors to higher education discourses which may often seem to be locked.* *(Ridley, 2004, p 92)*

International students are one of the fastest growing populations at the University of British Columbia (UBC). In 2009/10, nearly 12% of undergraduates registered at the UBC were international students *(PAIR, 2009)* with an ambitious growth mandate for the next five years. At UBC, it is recognized that international students' retention and learning are not inevitable outcomes but require focused institutional attention. At UBC, student engagement is emphasized as a fundamental way to understand student experiences and guide practice. Yet based on interactions with international students and student affairs colleagues from a great number of countries, there is reason to question the cultural limitations of the theory of student engagement and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)*.

Until now it has been unclear to what extent student engagement theory applies to international students or whether it describes a primarily North American phenomenon. According to an extensive study of international students' NSSE results to date *(Zhao, Ruh & Carini, 2005)*, "little is known about what contributes to the success of international students, how their success can be enhanced or failure mitigated, or what role their institutions do and can play in ensuring their success." Does "what matters in college" *(Astin, 1993)* for U.S. American students matter for students from abroad?

---

1 We will use *domestic* to mean permanent residents and citizens of Canada. We will use *international* to refer to all other students enrolled at Canadian higher education institutions.

2 Student engagement theory is based on several fundamental principles, including: what students do matters more than who they are or where they attend; time and energy on specified tasks is the single best predictor of development; and institutions which engage their students in activities that contribute to desired outcomes can claim to be institutions of higher quality *(Ruh, 2001)*.

3 The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, pronounced "nssia") is administered to students at over 1200 participating institutions and is arguably the predominant instrument and associated theory guiding student affairs work in the U.S. and Canada today.
International students are a particularly fast-growing population in higher education worldwide. In 2007, there were an estimated 2.9 million international students worldwide (Atlas of Student Mobility, 2008), with growth conservatively expected to reach 3.7 million by 2023 (Banks, Olsen & Pearce, 2007). International students contribute significantly to institutional, local and national economies:

In 2008, international students in Canada spent in excess of $6.5 billion on tuition, accommodation and discretionary spending, created over 83,000 jobs; and generated more than $291 million in government revenue. [...] Over all, the total amount that international students spend in Canada ($6.5 billion) is greater than our export of coniferous lumber ($5.1 billion), and even greater than our export of coal ($6.07 billion) to all other countries. (Roslyn Kumin and Associates, 2009, p. III)

Clearly, international students are no longer visitors; they are primary “clients” of higher education institutions, and their retention and learning is critical to institutional success, not only for economic benefit but for their essential contributions to the intellectual breadth and internationalization goals of our institutions. A clearer understanding of international undergraduates’ perceptions of NSSE-related behaviours is vital in planning effective programs and services to enhance their retention and learning.

This study flows out of previous research into international student experiences. Moving beyond pseudo-medical models of a shock from which sojourners must recover (Oberg, 1954; Lysgaard, 1955), Furnham and Bochner (1982) highlighted the active role of sojourner as culture learner and talked about the “mediating man” who can facilitate culture learning for newcomers.

Sojourners initially have to learn the rules of the game and then the game itself. This places the sojourner at a disadvantage, since the people with whom the game is being played already know both the rules and the moves, and expect everyone else to have that knowledge and those skills. (Bochner, 1986, p.352)

Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) shifted the focus of international student research to socio-cultural success and considered the role of social supports in achieving overall success. Success behaviours were further identified through studies on goal setting and coping (e.g., Purdie, O’Donoghue and da Silva, 1998). Ridley (2004) found that academic discourse can be “confusing and mysterious” (p. 91) to newcomers from a different cultural context and that confusion is highest for students lacking the “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1977) that is valued in a particular educational context. She argues that specific cultural schema underlie the social practices of the host environment and that these schema can be learned. Burrell and Kim (1998) emphasize that learning is culturally conditioned, that there are dangers in positioning students as deficient, and that, for example, “both Chinese and American essay writing styles are valid ways to present information but are not esteemed equally in either culture” (p.91).

Research into international students and student engagement converged when NSSE researchers Zhao, Kuh and Carini (2005) examined aggregate international student NSSE responses from the initial years of the survey. They found that first year international students (particularly self-declared Asian students) scored higher on engagement overall than first year
domestic students but that these differences did not persist to fourth year. The NSSE team called for further research within individual institutions into perceptions of specific country groups of students, focusing on Asians. This study flows out of the NSSE team’s recommendations for further research and follows Bochner’s (1986) and Ridley’s (2004) emphasis on culture/schema learning.

In this study, participants were clear in their responses and preferences. They were not always as clear about why they held these views or how the university should address their concerns. Geert Hofstede’s (2001) extensive research into national cultural difference provides a sensitizing framework to help us understand and anticipate ways that international students might engage with their institution differently than domestic students, how their responses to NSSE might differ, and how their institution can support them in achieving desirable outcomes. Hofstede’s (2001) research has yielded specific scores for each participating country along five dimensions of difference. Three are of particular relevance to this study:

**Power Distance (PDI)**

“...the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally.” (p. 46)

**Individualism (IDV)**

“Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.” (p. 76)

**Uncertainty Avoidance (UA)**

“...the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations.” (p. 167)

Based on focus group data, this academically rigorous study considered the relevance of NSSE and student engagement theory to international students. This report describes how UBC international undergraduates from select countries interpret NSSE questions and perceive NSSE behaviours, how participants perceive their engagement with their host university, and the role of home culture in participants’ perceptions of their engagement.

**Methodology**

This study followed the recommendation of NSSE researchers Zhou, Kuh & Carini (2005) by interrogating international student perceptions of NSSE on a single campus while distinguishing between cultural groups. Focus groups were conducted using standard protocols from the social sciences (Krueger & Casey, 2009). To increase the authenticity of responses (specifically limiting language, culture, and “host” filters) each focus group consisted of students
from the same year and country and was facilitated by a bilingual undergraduate research assistant. Authors in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* summarized that:

…focus groups can be used strategically to inhibit the authority of researchers and to allow participants to “take over” and “own” the interview space. […] Focus groups also facilitate the exploration of collective memories and shared stocks of knowledge that may seem trivial and unimportant to individuals but that come to the fore as crucial when like-minded groups begin to revel in the everyday. (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005)

The study included first and fourth year international undergraduates registered at UBC V in 08W who identified as citizens of the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea or Japan. Students from these countries accounted for 1596 or 40.8% of UBC V international undergraduates at the time the study was designed (PAIR, 2007).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citizenship</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal</strong></td>
<td>948</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal</strong></td>
<td>648</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1596</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
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</table>

* Percentage of international undergraduates at UBC V 2007/08 (total: 3912)

Source: PAIR, 2007

This grouping allowed for multiple but related viewpoints (as per cultural dimensions in Hofstede, 2001), creating a greater depth of field than a single country study and presenting stronger results for policy implementation.
Figure 1. Relative Cultural Distance of Selected Countries. Legend: C: China, H: Hong Kong, J: Japan, K: Korea, T: Taiwan. PDI: Power Distance Index, IDV: Individualism Index, MAS: Masculinity Index, UAI: Uncertainty Avoidance Index, LTO: Long-Term Orientation. Values based on Hofstede (2001)

For comparative purposes, focus groups were also held with first and fourth year undergraduates who identified as Canadian citizens.

The Office of Planning and Institutional Research disaggregated and analyzed international and domestic UBC Vancouver student responses to NSSE 2008. Factor analysis indicates that only one of five broad NSSE benchmarks and three of sixteen specific NSSE scales showed statistically significant differences between domestic and international student responses. These are: student faculty interaction (course-related and out-of-class), out-of-class interaction with faculty, use of technology, and diversity. At the same time, institutional sponsors were surprised to see no statistically significant differences on benchmarks related to active and collaborative learning and supportive campus environment. Questions were added to the focus group script to mine these topics more deeply.

In January and February 2009, five undergraduate research assistants from the target countries (four international students and one permanent resident) were hired and trained to facilitate, transcribe and translate academically rigorous focus groups and interviews. Six pilot groups were held, after which scripts and protocols were revised. Students were randomly selected using a stratified random sample in proportional representation regarding residence status (resident/commuter), sex, and faculty (Applied Science/Arts/Commerce/Science). Smaller faculties, whose students we understand to have very different experiences of engagement, were not included. Canadian citizens were selected using the same stratified random sampling technique. Persistent non-responders were replaced using the same technique. Selected participants received numerous invitations sent from a UBC email address, in English and later in home language, and in some cases invitations by phone in English and later in home language. If sufficient numbers did not respond, up to the full population were invited (maximum 100
Canadians per group). Gift certificates to the UBC Bookstore were offered as incentives, with higher dollar values and food offered to populations with persistent under-attendance.

Eighteen focus groups were held in February, March and April 2009 with a total of 77 participants. In each group, participants were asked to complete NSSE questions 1, 8 and 10 and in addition to rate each completed item on a scale of very important to definitely not important. Questions were asked about NSSE in general, specific NSSE questions and the behaviours they describe, what positive outcomes a home country student is achieving at a home university and at UBC, a number of omnibus questions (what is difficult or disappointing about your life at UBC, what is going well in your life at UBC, what can UBC do to help you, and how can UBC provide a more supportive campus environment for you) and the most important thing that was said here today (answered individually). No participants responded to the offer for an individual follow up interview, which we take to indicate satisfaction with the focus group experience.

Focus group texts were transcribed and translated by the student facilitators and then proofread or translated by certified translators.

Between 6% and 24% of the invited sample attended each group, with between 25% and 100% of attendees recruited in the first round of invitations. Participants were roughly proportional by residence and gender, with a slight overrepresentation of females. Students from Canada and Hong Kong were hardest to recruit and required multiple emails, phone calls and incentives.

The distributions within the populations themselves merit further study. For instance, the proportion of Japanese enrolled as BAs shoots from 50% in first year to 93% in fourth year. One hundred percent of Japanese first years live in residence, compared to 33% to 60% for other international populations in the study. There are also differences in residence status by gender within certain country groups; men or women from certain countries may have stronger expectations of institutional care in the form of the residence system. China, Hong Kong and Japan have significantly more fourth years than first years, their transfer student experiences may merit particular attention. Korea and Taiwan see attrition from first to fourth year, which raises questions about academic performance, military service and status changers (those 50 or so students each year who “leave” the international student population by becoming permanent residents).

The study was conducted in a way that met or exceeded institutional standards for ethical practice in research and ethical clearance was given by the institutional review board.

Findings, Discussion and Recommendations

The NSSE finding, discussion and recommendation is presented first. The remaining findings are presented in descending order of robustness. To determine these themes, consideration was given to frequency of mention, specificity of detail, intensity of emotion, and extensiveness across participants, countries, and years (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Analysis provided by the research assistants contributed greatly in identifying relevant themes and their robustness. Key student quotations are presented here with many more in the appendix.
About NSSE

Michelle*: [...] What’s your impression of the survey? What was it like to answer the questions you did?

Titus Nelson-MAC: Relatively straightforward.

Mr. Yolts-MEC: Straightforward also. I’ve answered these types of questions before on other surveys. Wasn’t too different from other surveys I’ve filled in. – Canada, 4th year

Hailey-FAC: I would have liked for some of the questions if there was a “not applicable”...

Misa-FAC: [...] When I was completing the questionnaire, I was stuck because I don’t know what difference is between “often” and “sometimes”.... I don’t know where to draw the distinction. It goes the same for the ranking that we were asked to do. This is why I think it is better to just voice our thoughts, like what we did for the last question. – Canada, 4th year

Waka-FAC: For the answers, if there was a choice between “sometimes” and “never”, it would’ve been easier.

[everyone agrees] – Japan, 4th year

Yvonne-FSC: Depends on the classes. If it’s for your major or not... If it’s a large class or not... – Korea, 4th year

Hannah-FAC: [...] Since questions don’t really distinguish between different situations, it’s really hard to answer it with a single number or a choice. – Korea, 4th year

Bubble-FAC: For number 8A, it says other students, I would interpret that as my friends that are in the same faculty. But this one (8B) would be people in the same faculty, but not necessarily friends. – Canada, 1st year

Samantha-FSR: [...] I would have rated completely differently as well, depending on what “faculty members” meant. And depending on how I interpreted it. – Canada, 1st year

First impressions of the survey were that it was unremarkable, which is desirable in such an instrument.

Participants said their answers were inaccurate approximations of the plurality of their experiences. They might participate in English class often but never participate in other classes that year; how should they answer the question about participating in class? This led to a sense of frustration and a feeling their opinions did not matter to the university. Factors influencing their responses include class size, whether it is a required major class, the culture of the

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* Participant pseudonyms were selected by the participant or the researcher and include an acronym indicating gender (Female/Male), faculty by nickname (Arts/Commerce/Engineering/Science), and status in university housing (Resident/Commuter). E.g., Georgia-FSR is a female Science student who lives in residence. Facilitators are denoted by names without acronyms.
department/faculty offering the course, and how the items are interpreted (e.g., “other students” as close friends versus students they know versus the whole student body). Several students commented that focus group discussions were a better way to capture their experiences.

Several participants appreciated the reflective element of the survey to help them think back on their time at UBC. Some observed a disconnect between their NSSE response and their response to the importance rating, which led them to question why they did not engage in important behaviours more often.

Students wanted a response option between never and sometimes (e.g., rarely, to describe items they had done once or twice) and a response option such as don’t know or doesn’t apply. When these options were lacking, they felt frustrated and unable to answer the question.

International participants interpreted some items differently than Canadians. Some took faculty members to mean fellow students in their faculty, or staff, instead of professors. There was no consistent interpretation for serious conversations, which meant anything from confiding personal problems to participating in class discussions to enlightening others about Chinese politics. Even terms like outside of class were taken in unexpected ways, such as students who were not taking the class. Rewording or discarding these items will allow for more robust comparisons of international and domestic responses and greater validity of institutional NSSE results. Validity of international student responses to these items is questionable.

Recommendation:

Strengthen the validity of NSSE, by rewording or discarding NSSE items easily mistaken by international students, such as faculty members, serious conversations, and outside of class; pilot assessment instruments (surveys, focus groups and interview scripts) with international students before administering.

Importance of the Research

Kerry: Can you three tell us what the most important thing that was said here today?
Wade MAC: I think the most important thing is what UBC can improve on. – Hong Kong, 4th year

Yvette-FAC: I’ve never had a chance to think through and reflect specific points about my school life so it was good to understand how I felt about my university life.
[…]

---

5 Faculty member appears in items 1O, 1P, 1S, 8B of NSSE 2008 US English (paper version)
6 Serious conversations appears in items 1U and 1V of NSSE 2008 US English (paper version)
7 Outside of class appears in items 1H, 1P and 1T of NSSE 2008 US English (paper version)
Yulia-FAR: I thought it was good that UBC took time to ask international students’ opinions because I don’t think that’s ever happened before. So I felt that UBC cared for us. – Japan, 4th year

Yvonne-FSC: I also agree that what we discussed should be implemented and also that our issues should be known to others. I believe there are lots of people out there who have experienced something that we discussed today at least once. If things can be improved by understanding our issues, that would be great. – Korea, 4th year

Gabriel-MSC: [...] The most important thing is [...]. I would say what I said last time: listening to students more about their needs, because those evolve, too, and if you want to stay on top of student education in 2009/2010, you just have to keep talking to them. Things are going to change, I'm sure. – Canada, 4th year

Participants consistently identified the most important thing from the focus groups to be the research itself: the opportunity to reflect, the chance to connect with other students from their home country, and the evidence of UBC’s desire to better serve students. Participants commented on the value of focus groups to obtain information not captured in surveys.

Domestic and international students expressed a strong desire for institutional change and for their ideas to be heard. The most frequent response to the question, "What was the most important thing that was said here today?" was that the university ask for student input and act on the results. Conducting high-visibility assessment, including focus groups, and reporting publicly on the results will communicate an institutional commitment to student-driven improvement.

Recommendation:

Respond to students' desire for institutional change by making assessment activities highly visible, including resulting changes that impact students.

Recommendation:

Replicate this research on a regular cycle by conducting bilingual focus groups with other national groups of international students in rotation.

Student-Faculty Interaction

Sabrina-FAC: [...] The professor has taken on too much this year. We've had a lot of professors away in [my department] this year so she's taken on a bunch of extra courses. She's cross-listed in [another department] so she has a lot of other responsibilities as well. She's just so overwhelmed that she just can't facilitate the class. She doesn't engage the students at all, so the whole year [the class] has just been just zoned out for the whole year and resisting being part of the project. [...] – Canada, 4th year
Leveoss-FAC: Some faculty members are not available at all.
Jiefang: Could you give an example?
Leveoss-FAC: For example I wanted to see a professor to talk about a presentation, she goes, “I can’t be here Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday...it’s in conflict with my schedule.” So I can’t actually go to see her except that I have to skip another class to see her. I don’t like that at all.
Jiefang: Do you think that they should have an alternative arrangement?
Leveoss-FAC: No, because they are busy themselves, with their research in addition to teaching. It is difficult to find a time we are all available. So it is not all their fault. It’s just hard to work out. – China, 4th year

Michelle: [...] in your opinion, what’s the most important thing that was said here tonight? [...] [...] Nadia-FAC: The profs should be more approachable. [...] – Canada, 1st year

Mr. Volts-MEC: I gave it a 4 [of 7] because I’ve had some good profs who I’ve gone up to and they were always available. At the same time, there’s been some professors that are very unhelpful and they don’t show any care for students. They’re just doing their thing and leaving. – Canada, 4th year

Nicole-FSR: I think professors in faculties should pay more attention to international students. – China, 1st year

Kaatje-FAC: [...] I think what’s more important with faculty members is that they inspire you to work hard. There are some professors...who are really good and understanding and you just really want to perform well in that class. That’s what I think is the best type of professor. – Canada, 4th year

Jacey-FSC: Even if it’s something I know, even if it’s something I actually did understand, just by talking to them [faculty members] my perception becomes broader. [...] As students, we probably don’t know as much as they do; but since they are already experts in their fields, they have a broader perspective and guide us on what to find more on, where I should be looking at, and what other resources are out there. It’s very beneficial that way. – Korea, 4th year

Participants wanted more from their professors. Further, they were able to articulate the specific behaviours expected. They sympathized with faculty, whom they perceived as overburdened and therefore unavailable to students. (They were less forgiving of staff.) They identified numerous pressures under which professors operate, including overcommitted schedules, dual department-dual institution reporting, no time between classes, funding limitations, and research obligations and interests. However, they indicated that contact with professors who are approachable and are effective teachers is a significant motivator for learning. International participants commented on the role of faculty to create the classroom environment, which is a key factor in their ability to participate and learn. To that end, participants wanted more training for faculty and more recognition for exemplary teachers.
Canadian and international participants described how NSSE behaviours were being underused or misused by faculty (e.g., no opportunity to make presentations, making presentations but with no instruction or feedback, presentations as time fillers for busy professors, group work with groups so large they cannot possibly meet).

Approachability emerged as a key theme within the faculty questions. Participants identified specific faculty members who were and were not approachable, and they listed approachability factors that faculty could adopt, including encouraging students to approach them and stating preferred method(s) (in syllabus and in class), visibly listening during presentations, giving feedback to papers and presentations, and responding to email promptly or indicating how email will be managed.

This desire for contact may be explained in part by the role of professors in many high power distance (PDI) countries, where respect for teachers extends to the person ("guru") and not just the position. Faculty members are important in a number of the target countries not only as educators but as key players in students' professional networks. In many high uncertainty avoidance (UA) countries such as Korea, faculty may be seen as the source of content expertise which the students are meant to absorb rather than contribute to or challenge. Students' desire that faculty signal their approachability may be rooted in a low individualism (IDV) cultural practice of observing and adapting to others' moods for the sake of harmony, whereby the onus is on faculty to signal their openness rather than on students to assume they are welcome.

International students will be more likely to remain at UBC and to learn effectively if faculty are well equipped to communicate interculturally, engage with international students, and use NSSE learning behaviors effectively. Retention and learning should be impacted positively when faculty are seen as approachable, when exemplary teachers are recognized, and when faculty are freed up to be available to students.

Recommendation:

Provide an enhanced toolkit to faculty for intercultural communication and engagement with international students by providing faculty with progressive levels of targeted, research-based training and resources; targeting effective use of key NSSE behaviors (e.g., student presentations involving clear expectations and constructive feedback); targeting faculty approachability; providing more recognition for exemplary teachers; and recognizing the toll which overburdening faculty takes on student motivation and learning.

Diversity

Titus Nelson-MAC: I think it’s very important. I think part of the reason or a great part of coming to university is you come to a place where you can share different ideas and generally speaking if everyone is from same background or ethnicity, generally you share a lot of ideas automatically. Then if you’re talking to someone from a different ethnicity, they come from a very different background, very different kind of social structure, they
have very different ways of seeing things, and thinking what’s good, what’s bad. I think it’s important we learn there are different ways of doing things and different pros and cons, different systems. – Canada, 4th year

Georgia FSR: Just ‘cause I live with them all, and we’re all put into a floor where everybody’s so different, yet, you live together and so you hang out together and you end up chatting and talking. It’s really good ‘cause it opens your eyes to other things where you’re like, “No, this is what it is,” and they say something and you’re like, “Really? Maybe, that’s true.” – Canada, 1st year

Ray Ray FAC: We should communicate more with foreigners [international students from other cultures] but we have different cultural background. Our cultural background is very different from that of Canadians. With Chinese friends we have the same experience and background and we can help each other. [With Canadians], it looks like you are getting along well on the surface but it is difficult to have heart-to-heart talks. – China, 4th year

Participants cited conversations with people different than themselves as an important part of university life. However, most Canadian participants did not see race as an issue, indicating these NSSE items seemed “weird”⁸. Most Canadian participants said they had serious conversations with people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds indiscriminately.

Mr. Big MAC: It’s like asking if we have serious conversations with people of another gender. It just kind of seems like it’s the 1950s we’re being asked this in. – Canada, 4th year

On the other hand, most international students were keenly aware of race. Many said they hung out primarily with other Asians; others developed friendships among international students. Some international participants described interactions with members of different language and culture groups as tiring and awkward.

Over a dozen definitions were given for diversity-related NSSE items, which were cited by international students to be confusing. The lack of consistent interpretation calls into question the validity of international respondents’ NSSE responses to these items.

Learning communities were mentioned as sites of diverse interactions. These included UBC Jump Start, university residences, and the Greek system.

Koreans in particular indicated they avoided other Koreans so they could expand their international networks. However, they said that university students in Korea focus on developing long-term networks with professors and joining clubs through which senior students guide

⁸ Mr. Big, Canada, 4th year
younger students. This network was lacking at UBC. Some Korean participants spoke about how hard it is to meet “the right people” at UBC, which may reflect Korea’s high UA score.

The target countries score lower on Hofstede’s IDV than does Canada, and students from those countries may struggle to navigate a diverse social system that is not tightly bounded by clear cultural expectations. International participants were keenly aware of in-group/out-group distinctions (low IDV), preferred making friends within their perceived in-group (low IDV), and valued learning communities as an opportunity to create a clear in-group and understand behavioural norms (low IDV and high UA).

Given this awareness of in-group/out-group distinctions, the opportunity for the university is to tailor communications, programs and services with specific cultural subpopulations in mind. This need not mean separate offerings but considering how groups of students may feel specifically included.

Social stratification theory suggests that those with greater privilege in a society will be unfamiliar with the constraints experienced by those with less privilege (Lenski, 1966). If some Canadian students have never felt disadvantaged related to race, ethnicity or country of origin, it is not surprising they would be less attuned to these issues. It is unrealistic to expect all students to develop respect across difference unaided. Learning communities, academic activities, and clear and frequent high level communication about the challenges and opportunities of diverse interactions are building blocks to authentic interactions across diverse groups of students. Students who are equipped to communicate across cultures are better able to contribute to and will be more effective in a diverse global environment during and after their time at UBC.

Some participants indicated that diverse interactions were an important part of university life. However, most international participants did not have relationships with people outside of their racial or ethnic group, citing awkwardness and lack of opportunity. This high level of interest but low level of engagement calls for a shift in messaging and in structures. Consistent messaging to all new students, domestic and international, and leveraging the expertise within learning communities can positively impact the level of diverse interactions among students. UBC students have many opportunities to interact across difference — nearly every involvement opportunity involves a multi-ethnic population — but this does not mean that such interaction takes place. In-class activities, such as assigning groups for group work, may be leveraged to promote diverse interactions. More diverse interactions, particularly between international and Canadian students, can help “build intercultural aptitudes, create a strong sense of inclusion, and enrich our intellectual and social life” (The University of British Columbia, 2009).

The approach to programs and services for international students at UBC in recent years has minimized cultural distinctions: for instance, all materials are in English and students are encouraged to see any advisor regardless of cultural expertise. While this approach creates equal opportunity for access, it fails to acknowledge the distinctions within international students’ actual experiences. Participant comments demonstrate distinct needs and unique perspectives within specific subpopulations. Retention efforts that overlook such distinctions are missing critical information about what students need and how they view programs and services.
Targeted supports which are incorporated into existing structures can impact retention and sense of mattering among specific subpopulations.

Recommendation:

Promote diverse student interactions across cultures by messaging this consistently to all new students at the highest levels, acknowledging discomfort, highlighting benefits, and recommending strategies; leveraging the expertise within learning communities, particularly residence, as sites of international diverse interactions; encouraging faculty to promote diverse interactions through existing academic activities, e.g., assigning project groups in first year classes; and emphasizing effective intercultural communication and equitable interactions.

Recommendation:

Provide targeted supports to specific subpopulations by cross-functional teams working with cultural informants (e.g., student representatives, clubs and student staff) to identify and implement targeted supports; and regularly examining data on non-returners and first year check-ins to identify possible interventions.

Active and Collaborative Learning

Bobo-FAR: I think that for Chinese students, we are used to getting information from the professor, like reading a book or stuff like that. When it comes to ask questions in class, we don't know what to ask or ask questions after the class. I think that's a problem that at least I am facing right now. I want to change it but the thing is I have get used to it, so...

Leoveosa-FAC: It is tough when you first come to Canada because you don't know this culture or the Canadian academic structure. It was hard to know a direction in which you can move forward. You are not sure about everything. So it's really important for us to know more about the information in the academic area. The university should give guidance...

Julia-FAR: Yes, and it [final exams] was traumatizing for me. I did study hard but I don't think I knew how to study for my exams. I simply felt despair...

Kaatje-FAC: [...] You don't ever get any support; you'd never get a professor saying, "This is how to do an effective presentation." It's just like "present" so you stand up there and some people are doing the 'ums' and the shuffling and the leaning against desks... Professors might not give them as good a mark, but they're not going to get taught, "Oh, you should stand up straight and project and not use verbal crutches."...

Canada, 4th year
**R-MAR:** Professors don’t really word the question in a clear, precise way in terms of the topic or the process. I hate unclear or confusing things so I ask about them and ask for clarifications. Since it is directly related to my marks, and if I understand the question incorrectly, my marks won’t look so appealing later. — Korea, 4th year

There is a missed potential for learning. Many participants could not identify the learning value in NSSE behaviours (e.g., asking questions in class, participating in class discussion, making presentations) and did not rate them as important. International students described being hesitant to participate in NSSE behaviours and being unsure of what is expected. Their comfort in participating depended heavily on the classroom environment (see Supportive Campus Environment below).

Students from low IDV countries may have grown up with homogenous in-groups and may be reluctant to engage in situations where behavioural norms are unclear. Diverse UBC classrooms include out-group members, making it hard for low IDV country students to navigate. The classroom environment or mood would play an important role because sensing the mood of the group is integral to maintaining group harmony in more collectivist cultures such as those in the study.

Sensitivity to unclear expectations may be particularly pronounced among students from high UA countries, such as Japan, Korea and Taiwan. In high UA countries, there may also be a heightened discomfort with student-centered learning environments in which students contribute their scholarly perspectives rather than listening to the “expert” instructor. Students in low IDV and high UA countries are often socialized to internalize material rather than engage critically with it and to learn from instructors rather than make substantive contributions in their own right.

“Learning how to learn” is a cultural value associated with high IDV whereby the individual is responsible for his or her own learning. It is also a common approach to enhancing student engagement. Because this emphasis on “learning how to learn” is uncommon in more collectivist cultures, safe spaces (such as UBC Jump Start) to practice with instructor feedback are crucial for new skills to be internalized.

International students bring valid academic skills but those skills may not be equally valued in a Canadian context. International participants did not know the value in NSSE learning behaviours and did not know what was expected of them, possibly because they were operating from a different set of cultural assumptions. Students from low IDV or high UA countries may feel more comfortable and better equipped to engage in learning behaviours when we clarify academic expectations, identify them as culturally grounded, and provide safe spaces to practice with instructor feedback.

By making the cultural bases for academic expectations explicit, the university can reduce barriers to learning for international students and facilitate global awareness for domestic students. Retention and learning for international students are positively impacted by their understanding of key learning behaviours and strategies to benefit from them.

**Recommendation:**
Lay out for all new students the underlying “rules of the game” (Bourdieu, 1977) of university academic culture by identifying key components of academic culture; making academic culture explicit through orientations, learning communities, first year classes, LEAP and academic coaching; explaining the purpose of key learning behaviours and strategies to benefit from them; and creating safe spaces to practice, with instructor feedback.

Supportive Campus Environment

Yulia-FAR: Not because I’m an international student, but when I ask questions I wonder if everyone else feels the same way [everyone nods and agrees] or if it’s just me, so when I don’t understand something I wait until the end of class. Sometimes my professor tells me that I should’ve spoke out in class but it depends on the atmosphere too [everyone nods and agrees]. – Japan, 4th year

Geoff-MAC: Sometimes for instance, to a first year student who is taking a third year course, other students all look like older brothers and sisters. What they say sounds very reasonable and rational. So when you ask a very stupid question, even the TA will look at you in a funny, awkward way and it seems like other people will laugh at you. So a psychological barrier keeps building up which causes me to listen more [instead of asking questions]. – Hong Kong, 1st year

Ray Ray-FAC: […] in terms of looking after international students in their daily life, the university doesn’t do well. For example, we came to UBC directly from China and we are not community college transfer students. We could not find an apartment at all except for living on campus. The university can at least make arrangements for us to live on campus in the long term, and allow us to have a place on campus to get settled down in the first several months after we get off the flight. In other words, the university should do more to take care of us in our daily life. Students like us have just come to Canada from our country and we have no friends. There are many students like us. As an educational institution, the university should look after us better so that we can keep our mind on studies. – China, 4th year

Stephen MSC: Okay, now that you mention UBC housing […] I think they should make sure international students can get a room. I was kicked out in 2nd year. I don’t understand why international students, who come from so far away, still need to enter into the lottery. Because we pay so much tuition already, so they should provide accommodation. They should not kick us out and leave us to “survive or perish on our own” [Note: That is the literal meaning. He meant UBC should not leave international students to find a solution and deal with this matter on their own]. […] – Hong Kong, 4th year

Pleasant-FCC: The tuition fee is so expensive! And it’s going up every year! I don’t know if international students get additional services or better service because they pay
so much for their tuition. I don't know if the tuition includes the fees for the services. Anyway I don't think the access [to services] is good enough. — China, 4th year

Ian-MAR: I think the international tuition [everyone laughs] ... I understand it is increasing with inflation but the speed of increase is extreme. Usually international students have support from their parents to study abroad so I don't want to burden them too much. [everyone nods and agrees] — Japan, 4th year

Yolanda-FAC: I feel like I'm buying a degree. [everyone laughs and agrees] When I look at SFU tuition I think, why am I paying so much more than my friends in SFU? Is that because they cannot buy the prestigious names or whatever that we could buy here? I don't know... […]— Japan, 4th year

Yvette-FAC: To go back to what Ian said about tuition, since there is very limited amount of scholarship offered for international students, I went to go ask an advisor about whether they could do anything about it. And they told me that I should've known how much it would cost to study here so... Well, I understand but all I wanted to know was whether they had any help they could offer so that was somewhat unfortunate. — Japan, 4th year

Miu-FAC: ...every time you see the tuition going up you feel you're spitting up blood [it's so painful]. — Taiwan, 4th year

International participants, more than Canadians, made frequent reference to environment. Classroom environment was an important factor in determining whether they participated in class discussion, asked questions in class, or talked to a professor outside of class. They framed their participation in relation to the group: ask if others are asking, only ask if you know you will not waste others’ time, etc. They saw the professor as the most important factor in creating the classroom environment.

It was also important to them that UBC have a positive campus environment in terms of physical beauty, friendliness and safety.

Participants in every international group identified high international tuition and fees and a lack of financial assistance and awards as barriers to a supportive campus. One student said she felt she was buying her degree. Several participants identified high tuition as the most important thing that was said in the group. Tuition was described as unreasonable high, increasing at an unreasonable rate without clear rationale, placing an undue burden on parents and disconnected from services for international students. Participants expressed disillusionment about their relationship with the institution and wanted to know how the university supports them specifically.

An additional policy which students saw as unsupportive was the housing lottery, in which certain current residents are not guaranteed a place in residence the following year. Several international students said the lottery left them feeling abandoned by the university.
Students from countries with a low IDV score may be more holistically attuned to their environment and may place greater value on group harmony than Canadians; this is a social necessity in many collectivist cultures. Likewise, in low IDV countries such as those represented in the study, institutions have traditionally functioned with a kind of benevolent paternalism, providing for basic needs such as affordable food and housing. International participants saw tuition and the housing lottery as a betrayal of the trust they placed in the university to act in their best interests.

There is an important story which, if backed with action, can reframe the institutional relationship with international students. UBC has a thoughtfully constructed, Board mandated tuition policy which includes financial assistance and award commitments, the largest international major entrance award program in Canada which creates tremendous opportunity for individuals and for the university community, award winning services specifically for international students, and some of the top international students who are making a difference on campus and around the world. There is an opportunity for UBC to stop downplaying its international tuition, international major entrance awards, services specifically for international students and contributions made by international students. These stories would be more compelling if backed by action, such as publishing the guidelines for disbursing emergency funds to international students and consulting with international students in more visible and substantive ways on issues that affect their sense of institutional support.

Regarding the housing lottery, students would feel more supported if every new resident saw their first year as a launching off point to build their social network and find off-campus housing for future years and understood that they were making way for another new student to have the same opportunity. This story would be more compelling if backed by action, such as more robust supports for those seeking off-campus housing after first year.

Participants pointed out that more resources and an easier way to find resources, such as study spaces and transit services (to campus and on campus), would help them feel more supported at UBC. Forefronting the university’s ongoing efforts in these areas would positively impact Canadian and domestic students’ experiences at UBC.

**Recommendation:**

Demonstrate the university’s positive relationship with international students regarding key policies (e.g., tuition, housing lottery) by laying out international tuition calculations and allocation year-round, not only for consultations (including financial assistance and awards, ILOT/ISHA, etc.); publishing guidelines for international student emergency funds; articulating the services and programs provided for international students; showcasing international students and their contributions to the university community; repositioning first year in residence as a launch point for social networks and off-campus housing; increasing practical supports for students looking for off-campus housing; and emphasizing international student input into expanding resources, e.g., transit (to campus and on campus) and study spaces.
Staff

Rachel-FSC: It means I have to schedule all three hours of a campus marathon to ask a question. Last time I spent three hours going from here to there, back and forth. And I still don’t get an answer.  — Canada, 1st year

Samantha-FSR: I’ve gone back there and tried to clarify the same question three times. I got a different answer each time and different sheets of paper that may or may not help me. And it’s very — achh — I don’t know how you could really fix that, but it’s very annoying. We’re paying so much to be here and our time that I would like to do it right the first time and get my degree, and not do something wrong that I find out later. I rated that very, very important, and yet I gave it only 2 out of 7.  — Canada, 1st year

Amanda-FAC: They do not actively offer their help and […] they just do what they are required to do […] They just want to reduce their workload.

[...]

Amanda-FAC: At least what they offered provides an alternative, which is helpful to us. Because we are not “experts” in the field, we do not know what solutions are available. As an “expert helper” [professional staff], your job is to provide advice on how to solve the problem with possible solutions. It doesn’t matter whether they are useful or not, what I look for is just these solutions.  — China, 1st year

Geoff-MAC: Tutoring. I remember one time I went to Brock Hall to try to find a Japanese tutor, but they said there is no tutor service. But the professor clearly asked me to go to Brock Hall to find one. After I tried to look for a tutor, they [people in Brock Hall] wrote me a piece of paper and asked me to check with the Asian Language [Asian studies department]. Then I went to see the professor with the paper, but the professor said, “It shouldn’t be, they should have [Japanese tutor] in Brock Hall”. I was stuck there and finally I didn’t try to look for one.  — Hong Kong, 1st year

Gabriel-MSC: I had a bad experience. They messed up my registration date for this year and as a result, they pushed my course registration date back, which meant that I couldn’t get into my fourth year courses because they were full. They told me they couldn’t do anything, and that was that. And so I have to take another semester because of that.  — Canada, 4th year

Waka-FAC: First, I try to figure it out by myself and if I can’t find the answer, I ask my friends. If my friends didn’t know then I ask where I can get the help.

Ian-MAR: That’s true.

Waka-FAC: There are too many resources so I don’t know where to go. [everyone nods and agrees]

Yoelands-FAC: I don’t want to go because I don’t want the process of getting referred to different people. [laughs]  — Japan, 4th year

Miu-FAC: I think actually these people can be helpful to me. I worked at a coffee shop next to UBC Bookstore before, and in the morning, people working in the offices nearby
came in to buy coffee, and when they were waiting for their coffee, they were chatting with me, and giving me so much information, either about on campus or off-campus. [...] I learned a lot from them, because they are elders after all.

Miu-FAC: I can gain something that I cannot obtain when talking to people my age. Talking to them allows me to get different information. – Taiwan, 4th year

Participants expected more from staff. Questions about relationships with staff elicited story after story of unsatisfactory interactions, with severest critique going to Science Advising and mixed reviews for Arts Advising. Participants reported being sent back and forth between offices (a “campus marathon”) and still not finding answers to their questions. Staff was described as busy, overworked and unhelpful, or as well-intentioned but ill-informed. This was described vividly by international students, who felt unsupported by their “elders.” Impacts on students can be severe (e.g., loss of a semester). Unlike faculty, staff did not garner sympathy of participants as their primary job is serving students.

In high power distance (high PDI) countries such as those in the study, elders play an important role by providing wisdom and guidance to the younger generations. For international participants who saw UBC staff as elders, it is not surprising that they were disappointed to be treated unkindly and not find the information and guidance they expected. For students from low IDV countries, where institutions may be expected to provide for the needs of their members, it is not surprising that participants were disappointed when school representatives did not look out for them.

Participants did not indicate a desire to be told what to do by staff, but they did ask for correct information and for options relevant to their particular situations. In particular, Japan, Korea and Taiwan score high on Uncertainty Avoidance (high UA), which makes it not surprising that participants were especially frustrated when they could not find the right answer to their questions.

Increasing the sense of welcome and the accuracy of information at each point of contact with staff would reduce international students’ sense of being unsupported and unwelcome at UBC and would benefit all students. Since behaviour is interpreted differently across cultures, supports that help frontline staff be interculturally effective would reduce student perceptions that staff are unhelpful or busy. For instance, staff who acknowledge people while they wait in line may help diffuse the sense of being ignored which students from multi-tasking cultures (i.e., polychronic orientation, in Hall, 1959) may feel.

There is a tacit belief that North American institutions should help their students move toward greater independence in everyday life. This belief may not serve our students from high PDI/low IDV countries well. However, we can gain considerable ground through structures and language that emphasize care. For example, assigning an advisor to every new-to-UBC international student is likely to communicate institutional care in a way that resonates strongly with students from high PDI/low IDV countries and provides a sense of motivation and mattering to help them learn more effectively.
Students commented that UBC had plenty of resources but these were hard to find. A customer service initiative therefore needs to be supported by clearer communication with students about campus resources (specifically offices and web pages). If students access the right resource in the first place, the incidence of the “campus marathon” will be reduced. If we are communicating with students (e.g., about course selection) and they consistently do not understand, we are not yet communicating clearly enough.

Recommendation:

Implement a campus-wide customer service initiative to improve students' experiences at points of contact such as academic advising offices, student development and services offices, and department advising offices.

Recommendation:

Communicate clearly with students about campus resources, specifically offices and websites related to enrolment services, student development and services, academic supports, and academic advising (faculty and departmental).

Recommendation:

Employ language and structures that emphasize institutional care, such as assigned advisors.

Social Networks

Michelle: [...] In your opinion, of all the ideas that we said here today, or all the things that were said in this room today; what do you think is the most important? [...]  
Fagan-MAC: I was going to say the same – the different aspects of social life, from doing assignments together to talking about different opinions together. It’s just the whole support system it builds, for you to have something to do, I guess. – Canada, 1st year

Michelle: What do you think is the most important idea you heard today? [...]  
Amanda-FAC: It really depends on your network. It will be easier if you know more people and it will be more difficult if you don’t. [...] – Canada, 4th year

Michelle: [...] How would you describe your relationship with other students?  
Georgia-FSR: Mine are actually really good ’cause I live on ras, and I have an amazing floor, so my floor and all the girls are good, and then the brother floor is really good.

9 Customer service here refers to the extent to which a person feels that her needs have been met or exceeded by the company or organization, particularly when she initiates the contact or seeks out information. However, since students are not customers of the university, an alternate term would be services for students.
too. And so I have a good relationship with all of them that I live with, and in class, too, there’s a fair few that we always hang out and sit together and that makes it a lot better, too. Especially when you have the, I don’t know, social support, it makes everything else easier.

Sydney-FSC: Uh-huh. 'Cause then you understand that you’re not the only person who’s going through this, and everyone else is. – Canada, 1st year

Lewes-MEC: I think the key is that if we are talking about Chinese students getting together and having a social network, there is no problem about it. [There’s no problem] about social resource since we all come from the same country, or attended same high school before so we had a good social network. Once you come here [in this country], however, you are a new first-year student, everything is new, and your English is not good enough so that it’s difficult to jump over the hurdle and get in there to build up your social network; therefore, you cannot get to know many people. – China, 4th year

Sabina-FAR: […] Except for the fact that sometimes I see that some people just stick to their own race. Like, only Japanese or only Koreans, and maybe only Canadians because sometimes when I talk to someone who I don’t know if they’re Canadian or American; sometimes they can be a little cold to me. To be honest, I don’t think it’s anything offensive but there might be some distance, I guess. And I guess it’s also hard because once you develop a group of friends then it’s hard to interact with other people. And for the first week of residence you might be talking, or saying hi to everyone, or interacting a lot but when it comes to right now, it’s mostly that you only stick to your own friends. – Japan, 1st year

Nadine-FAC: Friends of friends are easy to get along with [everyone agrees] – Japan, 4th year

Hannah-FAC: If you want academic help, you have to find the people studying your major; however, if you want personal support, such as how to cope with living here, you should find other international students. They are the ones who also experience similar language barriers or culture barriers. – Korea, 4th year

Janet-FSR: I think, because UBC is too big, it’s difficult to get to know the right people. – Korea, 1st year

Julia-FAR: […] In Korea, clubs are such a crucial component of everyone’s university life and through those clubs, students seem to meet a lot of upper year students and lower year students. Then, the upper year students help out the lower year students. I know there is KISS [Korean club] here, but I don’t think we get any advice directly from the upper year students in UBC. – Korea, 1st year

Alix-FSC: […] I just worked on a paper with some students in my class and I found… you made friends out of it. I just worked on an Anthro paper and I got to meet these other people and I became good friends with them. – Canada, 1st year
Participants relied on multi-layered social networks to navigate their learning in university. Many cited social networks or connections as the key purpose of university life. Students used different levels of their networks to clarify academic issues and assignments, develop their intellectual ideas, cope with stress and discouragement, gain broader perspectives, manage academic overload regarding readings and assignments, and develop their professional network.

Not all students were successful in developing social networks. Commuter and transfer students were more likely to express difficulty developing social networks and connecting to campus activities, citing the late hour of activities and the time lost to commuting. First year was seen as an important leverage point for social connections, as were learning communities like university residence, UBC Jump Start and the Greek system. Students cited the potential of academic structures to build social networks (e.g., assigned group work). Students asked for an easier way to know about campus events to meet people from other faculties. (This was prior to launching the UBC Events online calendar, which may be meeting this need.)

Social networks were important for students in every group, but there were subtle distinctions in ways students talked about them. International participants emphasized smooth relationships and being well-liked. They positioned social interaction as networks, such as clubs in Korea and circles in Japan, networks with older students and connections with professors. Canadians focused on being independent and outgoing. Both valued a diversity of friends, but international participants found it difficult to make friends with students outside their circle of friends or who come from other countries or faculties. A number of participants commented how hard it is to feel comfortable with students from other cultural groups.

It makes sense that people coming from low IDV countries would struggle to connect with people beyond their in-group because it is the in-group that gives a sense of security and clear behavioural expectations. In low IDV countries, long-term friends are often made at an early age or through a personal introduction, which serves as a signal that the person is trustworthy. In some high PDI countries, it is linguistically difficult even to speak to a person unless it is known whether they are senior or junior to the speaker and to what extent Korea scores high on UA, which may explain why Korean participants found it difficult to meet the “right” people at UBC, i.e., people who can make further introductions to expand one’s social and professional network.

Left to their own devices, students from low IDV countries may lack the expertise to forge social networks in diverse settings. We can support students in their network development by acknowledging diverse friend-making as culturally contextual learned behaviour, creating safe spaces for practice (such as learning communities), facilitating meaningful interactions in and out of the classroom and working with cultural insiders as informants and role models.

**Recommendation:**

Help students build intentional, multi-layered social networks by acknowledging friend-making in a diverse group as a new skill, explaining “rules of the game” and
recommending specific strategies for new and experienced students; further leveraging orientations, learning communities and first year experience programs to facilitate peer networks; communicating more clearly with students about upcoming campus events (UBC Events may address this); and encouraging faculty to include learning events which facilitate social interaction.

Class size

Katje-FAC: [...] You’d just get more excited about learning in smaller classes. In big classes it can be boring; you’re just sitting there taking notes, you might find the subject really interesting but you’re less likely to be excited about it. In a small class, especially if the professor’s really enthusiastic, you can really get passionate about it. – Canada, 4th year

Rachel-FSC: It depends. If it’s a smaller classroom, of course it’s better - smaller class is better – but if it’s a big class, profs have to know how to deal with it and still make it as good as a small class. Because my Chemistry Prof had the ability to do that, so I’m pretty sure it’s not impossible. They just have to put in the effort and try to make everyone move – not move, but involved and participating. – Canada, 1st year

Large class size was cited in every group (Canadian and international) as a barrier to motivation, mattering, and connections with faculty and other students. Small classes were described as ideal for learning. This sentiment was particularly strong for international students, whose concerns about large class size were compounded by classroom environment sensitivity (see Supportive Campus Environment above). First year English was mentioned repeatedly as an example of effective class discussion and interaction and as the only small class first year students experienced. Several students identified best practices for effective large groups, including Personal Response System clickers, “smart neighbor time”, and triage of email questions by the professor.

By creating a campus culture of effective large class experiences (both teaching and learning), targeting first year but continuing throughout undergraduate programs, we can expect a significantly improved learning experience for international and domestic students that will extend beyond the specific classes involved.

Recommendation:

Support effective large class experiences by identifying and disseminating best practices among faculty; improving faculty recognition/reward structures for exemplary teaching; considering new ways to create small class experiences, e.g., tutorials; and offering Large Class 101 (resource): equipping students with strategies to take full advantage of large classes.
Involvement opportunities

Haira-FAC: I'm actually pretty happy with the whole outside-of-classes aspect. There's an event going on, there's definitely UBC spirit and stuff, it's kind of fun, you get to go hang out. I'm pretty satisfied. Seems like UBC does a good job at getting the student body involved, or trying to. It depends on how many of us come out. – Canada, 1st year

Many participants praised UBC's involvement opportunities, school spirit and resources, including Storm the Wall, International Week, peer programs and student clubs. There was a consistent theme of making the most of what UBC has to offer and taking initiative to find what one needs. First years were more likely to say that UBC provides everything they need and it is up to them to take advantage of it. Comparisons to other institutions were generally very favorable.

Recommendation:

Continue to offer thoughtfully constructed, highly visible resources and involvement opportunities.

Career preparation

Barbie-FAC: Before students choose their major, is it possible to introduce different majors to students, at least to give students general ideas and let us know which major is doing what? If so, we won't choose a major blindly. [...] – China, 4th year

Chloe-FAC: I think it's the career workshops that the school provides, or the opportunities they provide to us. I think these are very important. We all need to find a job after graduation from university, therefore the career information is very important. – Taiwan, 4th year

Kaatje-FAC: I wish there was someone I could sit down with and talk to about, they would look over my transcripts and discuss options and what they thought about different ideas and jobs, what types of jobs there are out there for you if you just have your undergraduate degree. Just a real conversation, not where you just have to ask your question and get your one sentence reply. – Canada, 4th year

A small number of students in each group indicated that career preparation and job seeking were the most important things that were said in the session. Career preparation came up in nearly every omnibus question and in each group's description of positive university outcomes. A number of students expressed disappointment that, when choosing a major, they did not know which careers matched their major. Commerce students were the most likely to express satisfaction with their career preparation. Engineering students did not see it as an issue as their career choice was clear. Participants from Hong Kong were adamant that students should have a job offer – in Hong Kong – before graduation. Canadian fourth years asked for one-on-one
career consultations about jobs and graduate schools in their major, preferably from faculty members in their field ("an invitation to talk").

Recommendation:

Provide major-specific supports for students’ career/grad school search by offering fourth year check-ins with faculty/staff members; offering tailored career-preparation programs and services, including country-specific job-seeking/networking assistance; and further developing major-specific career information for students choosing majors in Arts and Science.

Resources

Janet-FSR: I think several things are equally important. But I realized that there are many opportunities out there for us. Stella was talking about sports teams and other people mentioned clubs. There is academic advising for our studies and also tutorials, office hours and more. Since we have all these benefits, it’s important that students should be aware of this benefit. – Korea, 1st year

Jacey-FSC: I came here, knowing no one, and also transferred from a college. But now that I’ve been at UBC for a couple of years, I realized that if I had known more things before I’ve done so much more than I have done so far! I didn’t know much about Co-op or any other programs that could be of my advantage, even though I did go to the orientation for transfer students. Even when I was choosing my major, I wasn’t so aware of many things that I could have done. I think there is a lack of care toward transfer students. – Korea, 4th year

Participants from nearly every group praised UBC’s resources but mentioned that resources were lacking or were hard to find. These included transit to campus, transit within campus, 24 hour libraries or places to sleep when studying overnight, another Irving K. Barber Learning Centre, study spaces, tutoring for every core subject, a focus on international student English language needs, opportunities to socialize with students from other faculties, higher quality and less expensive food, better vegetarian options, and more opportunities to volunteer as a way to connect with the Canadian community.

Busyness

Michelle: [...] So what’s difficult or disappointing about your life at UBC?

[...]

Mr. Volpe-MEC: Volume of courses. There is no time to get involved with any of the activities that’s going on, like extracurricular activities. I have no time to do it. I do spend 90% of my time on campus studying, and it’s just too busy. I don’t even have time to sleep. – Canada, 4th year
International and Canadian participants cited busyness as one of the most common barriers to faculty approachability, staff effectiveness, and student involvement in campus life. This included concerns about unrealistic course loads, especially in Engineering. Reducing the course load was listed as one of the key ways UBC could provide a more supportive campus environment. Participants from Japan said the pace of study at UBC was shocking. Students said they were too busy to seek out professors, join clubs, discuss their learning with other students, or sleep. Reducing the toll taken by student, staff and faculty busyness will go far towards creating a more sustainable campus environment and a more successful student experience.

Recommendation:

Reduce the toll busyness takes on student, staff and faculty by recognizing the heavy toll taken by course load requirements for certain majors; streamlining university and faculty communication to students, i.e., fewer emails; moving from smorgasbord model of involvement (pick whatever you want) to concierge model (based on your previous selections, you might want to try...); and changing campus involvement messaging for students from "get involved" to "choose wisely".

Learning communities:

Georgie-FSR: ...students, yeah. And again, I'm going to go back to res, but they always have boards up, and do this, and tips for learning night, and tips for studying and, deal with April now, which is the exam one, and how to get through those. Through that it's really good, 'cause they always have programs and meetings and info going on. – Canada, 1st year

Bubble-FAC: Going good. I guess making friends was much easier than I thought, after I got into the Greek community. The schedule, like I said, is really intense. We have things going on almost every week. So that helped passing time and getting involved and learning for me. – Canada, 1st year

Barnaby-MER: I feel that with engineering students we're all very close because after first year we branch off into different disciplines and we stay with the same group of people for three years. So we become really good friends and if we have questions we always ask each other. So we're always around to help each other. […] – Canada, 4th year

Bobo-FAR: I think because of Jump Start I have a whole bunch of foreign friends, and I think I get a lot of information from them, and it's kind of like a cultural exchange, and I think that's one of the reasons why I am here right now. If I just want to hang out with my Chinese friends then I can just stay at home [in my home country] and I can meet more friends there than here. […] – China, 1st year
Participants recognized the value of specific communities, which we have called learning communities, as key factors in successful relationships with other students, having diverse conversations, getting involved, receiving academic support, and more. This included UBC Jump Start, university residence, and the Greek system. Retention and student learning will be enhanced as we continue to invest in these communities and align them with key messages.

Recommendation:

Continue to invest in learning communities and align with key messages, such as academic culture “rules of the game”, importance of diverse interactions, and importance of multi-layered social networks.

Satisfaction

Geoff-MAC: I think everything is very good. The overall learning experience is very good. And I have entered into a very good university. I hope I can contribute to making this university even better. Though I do not participate in a lot of activities, I still want to be part of the team. I don’t want to just study, but I want to make the reputation of this university even better. – Hong Kong, 1st year

Janet-FSR: Yes. If people say that UBC isn’t good, there must be something that person does not know about. Even from a small group like this, we talked about so many things that UBC provides. – Korea, 1st year

Kaafje-FAC: I guess everything I’ve talked about is fairly negative. But overall I wouldn’t say it’s disappointing with my time at UBC. I still feel like I’ve gotten a good education, I’ve made good friends and I’ve developed as a human being. I mean, I’m happy with UBC. I just guess there’s always room for improvement. – Canada, 4th year

In general, first year participants were more positive about UBC and its resources than fourth years. First years spoke at length about the opportunities UBC provides and stated that it was up to them to take advantage of them. Fourth years had somewhat more critical comments, but the tone was still very positive regarding their experiences at UBC.

Conclusion

This study shows that international students engage with their institution differently than do domestic students, that there are differences within the international student population, and that differences in engagement are nuanced but significant. This study further shows that changes that benefit international students do in large part benefit domestic students as well.

As higher education institutions are increasingly global in their student make up and in outcomes desired for all students, the retention and learning of international students is at the heart of higher education research and practice today. Institutions which seek to enhance retention and learning of international students must more clearly explicate their own cultural
expectations, recognize the power of home culture in impacting how international students engage with their institution, and intentionally create academic and student affairs contexts in which international students can achieve desired outcomes.

Engagement theory has far-reaching implications for shaping institutional efforts to enhance retention and student learning of undergraduates. In the global pressure for valid institutional comparators, engagement theory has potential to re-shape the marketing, funding and structure of higher education institutions world-wide. However, the relevance of engagement for students and student affairs practitioners outside the U.S. and Canada cannot be taken for granted. This study addresses issues challenging post-secondary educators today by addressing the limits of engagement as a cultural construct and makes an important contribution to the dialogue about engagement in Canada and worldwide.
References


# Appendix C:

Sample NSSE 2008 US English (Paper Version)

## National Survey of Student Engagement 2008

### The College Student Report

#### 1. In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following? Mark your answers in the boxes. Examples: □ or □

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions</td>
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<td>b. Made a class presentation</td>
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<td>c. Prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in</td>
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<td>d. Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources</td>
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<td>e. Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussions or writing assignments</td>
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<td>f. Came to class without completing readings or assignments</td>
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<td>g. Worked with other students on projects during class</td>
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<td>h. Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments</td>
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<td>i. Put together ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments or during class discussions</td>
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<td>j. Tutored or taught other students (paid or voluntary)</td>
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<td>k. Participated in a community-based project (e.g., service learning) as part of a regular course</td>
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<td>l. Used an electronic medium (listserv, chat group, Internet, instant messaging, etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment</td>
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<td>m. Used e-mail to communicate with an instructor</td>
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<td>n. Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor</td>
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<td>o. Talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor</td>
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<td>p. Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class</td>
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<td>q. Received prompt written or oral feedback from faculty on your academic performance</td>
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</table>

#### 2. During the current school year, how much has your coursework emphasized the following mental activities?  

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Very Much</th>
<th>Quite a Bit</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>Very Little</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Memorizing facts, ideas, or methods from your courses and readings so you can repeat them in pretty much the same form</td>
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<td>b. Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory, such as examining a particular case or situation in depth and considering its components</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships</td>
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<td>d. Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of their conclusions</td>
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<td>e. Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations</td>
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437
3 During the current school year, about how much reading and writing have you done?
   a. Number of assigned textbooks, books, or book-length packs of course readings
      None  1-4  5-10  11-20  More than 20
   b. Number of books read on your own (not assigned) for personal enjoyment or academic enrichment
      None  1-4  5-10  11-20  More than 20
   c. Number of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more
      None  1-4  5-10  11-20  More than 20
   d. Number of written papers or reports between 5 and 19 pages
      None  1-4  5-10  11-20  More than 20
   e. Number of written papers or reports of fewer than 5 pages
      None  1-4  5-10  11-20  More than 20

4 In a typical week, how many homework problem sets do you complete?
   None  1-2  3-4  5-6  More than 6
   a. Number of problem sets that take you more than an hour to complete
   b. Number of problem sets that take you less than an hour to complete

5 Mark the box that best represents the extent to which your examinations during the current school year have challenged you to do your best work.
   Very little  Very much

6 During the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following?
   Very often  Often  Sometimes  Never
   a. Attended an art exhibit, play, dance, music, theater, or other performance
   b. Exercised or participated in physical fitness activities
   c. Participated in activities to enhance your spirituality (worship, meditation, prayer, etc.)
   d. Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue
   e. Tried to better understand someone else’s views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective
   f. Learned something that changed the way you understand an issue or concept

7 Which of the following have you done or do you plan to do before you graduate from your institution?
   a. Practicum, internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment
   b. Community service or volunteer work
   c. Participate in a learning community or some other formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together
   d. Work on a research project with a faculty member outside of course or program requirements
   e. Foreign language coursework
   f. Study abroad
   g. Independent study or self-designed major
   h. Capstone course, senior project or thesis, comprehensive exam, etc.

8 Mark the box that best represents the quality of your relationships with people at your institution.
   a. Relationships with other students
      Unfriendly, Unsupportive, Sense of alienation  Friendly, Supportive, Sense of belonging
   b. Relationships with faculty members
      Unavailable, Unhelpful, Unsympathetic  Available, Helpful, Sympathetic
   c. Relationships with administrative personnel and offices
      Unhelpful, Inconsiderate, Rigid  Helpful, Considerate, Flexible
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Options</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9 About how many hours do you spend in a typical 7-day week doing each of the following?</td>
<td>a. Preparing for class (studying, reading, writing, doing homework or lab work, analyzing data, rehearsing, and other academic activities) 0</td>
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<td>b. Working for pay on campus</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Working for pay off campus</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Participating in co-curricular activities (organizations, campus publications, student government, fraternity or sorority, intercollegiate or intramural sports, etc.)</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>e. Relaxing and socializing (watching TV, partying, etc.)</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>f. Providing care for dependents living with you (parents, children, spouse, etc.)</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>g. Commuting to class (driving, walking, etc.)</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 To what extent does your institution emphasize each of the following?</td>
<td>a. Spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work</td>
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<td>b. Providing the support you need to help you succeed academically</td>
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<td>c. Encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds</td>
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<td>d. Helping you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)</td>
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<td>e. Providing the support you need to thrive socially</td>
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<td>f. Attending campus events and activities (special speakers, cultural performances, athletic events, etc.)</td>
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<td>g. Using computers in academic work</td>
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<td>11 To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas?</td>
<td>a. Acquiring a broad general education</td>
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<td>b. Acquiring job or work-related knowledge and skills</td>
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<td>c. Writing clearly and effectively</td>
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<td>d. Speaking clearly and effectively</td>
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<td>e. Thinking critically and analytically</td>
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<td>f. Analyzing quantitative problems</td>
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<td>g. Using computing and information technology</td>
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<td>h. Working effectively with others</td>
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<td>i. Voting in local, state, or national elections</td>
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<td>j. Learning effectively on your own</td>
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<td>k. Understanding yourself</td>
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<td>l. Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds</td>
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<td>m. Solving complex real-world problems</td>
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<td>n. Developing a personal code of values and ethics</td>
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<td>o. Contributing to the welfare of your community</td>
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<td>p. Developing a deepened sense of spirituality</td>
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<tr>
<td>12 Overall, how would you evaluate the quality of academic advising you have received at your institution?</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 If you could start over again, would you go to the same institution you are now attending?</td>
<td>Definitely yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
24 Are you a student-athlete on a team sponsored by your institution’s athletics department?
- Yes
- No (Go to question 25.)

On what team(s) are you an athlete (e.g., football, swimming)? Please answer below:

25 What have most of your grades been up to now at this institution?
- A
- B+
- C+
- A-
- B
- C
- B-
- C- or lower

26 Which of the following best describes where you are living now while attending college?
- Dormitory or other campus housing (not fraternity/sorority house)
- Residence (house, apartment, etc.) within walking distance of the institution
- Residence (house, apartment, etc.) within driving distance of the institution
- Fraternity or sorority house

27 What is the highest level of education that your parent(s) completed? (Mark one box per column.)

Father
- Did not finish high school
- Graduated from high school
- Attended college but did not complete degree
- Completed an associate’s degree (A.A., A.S., etc.)
- Completed a bachelor’s degree (B.A., B.S., etc.)
- Completed a master’s degree (M.A., M.S., etc.)
- Completed a doctoral degree (Ph.D., J.D., M.D., etc.)

Mother
- Did not finish high school
- Graduated from high school
- Attended college but did not complete degree
- Completed an associate’s degree (A.A., A.S., etc.)
- Completed a bachelor’s degree (B.A., B.S., etc.)
- Completed a master’s degree (M.A., M.S., etc.)
- Completed a doctoral degree (Ph.D., J.D., M.D., etc.)

28 Please print your major(s) or your expected major(s).

a. Primary major (Print only one):

b. If applicable, second major (not minor, concentration, etc.):