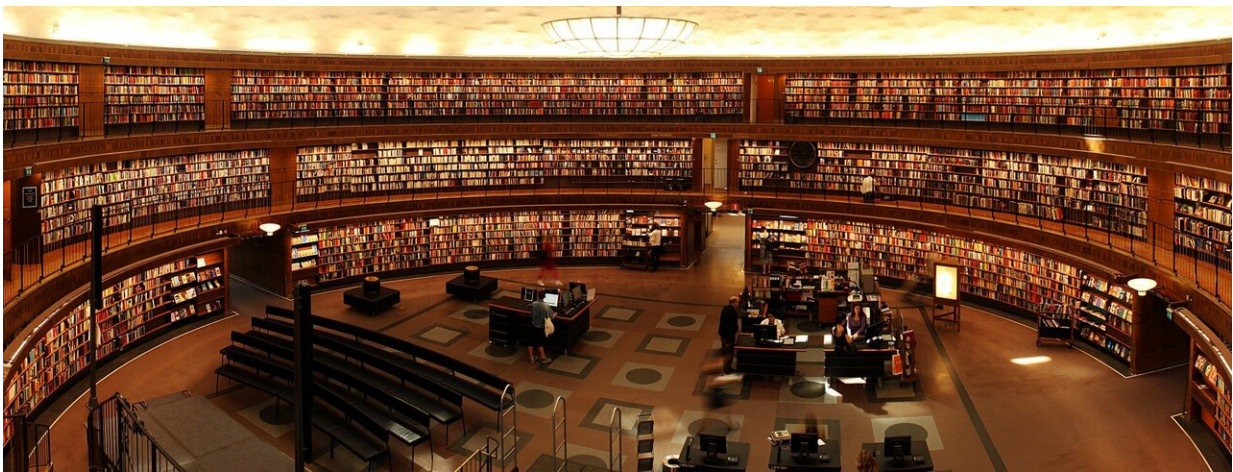# How universities may help bridge social divide between international, domestic students

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Self-esteem is a valuable resource for undergraduate international students trying to socialize with their domestic counterparts at American universities, but new research by a University at Buffalo psychologist suggests that while self-esteem predicts better socialization with domestic students, it is curiously unrelated to how international students socialize with other internationals.

"Self-esteem affords confidence," says Wendy Quinton, a clinical

associate professor of psychology in UB's College of Arts and Sciences. "So people higher in self-esteem have more belief in themselves and their abilities, and that is particularly helpful when trying to initiate contact with people from the host culture."

Understanding that self-esteem—someone's feelings of self-worth and personal value—contributes to socialization with one group and not the other is among the factors distinguishing Quinton's study, recently published in the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*.

"These results underscore the importance of examining individual differences to better understand how international students adapt to their new learning environment," says Quinton, Ph.D., an expert in the international student experience. "The findings also indicate that self-esteem may be viewed as a coping resource for international students when they interact with domestic students."

In addition to self-esteem, Quinton also examined university identity and perceived discrimination in the current study.

University identity, the degree to which students feel connected with their university community, was associated with greater socialization with both groups, although not as strongly as self-esteem. Perceived discrimination, the feeling that you or a group you belong to is the target of prejudice, was unrelated to socialization.

Previous research in this area hasn't looked at these predictors of socialization together, nor has it explored the interesting divergence between the two student groups, a method that enabled Quinton to statistically control for socialization with one group in order to investigate the other.

"This approach allowed for a specific test of what predicts socialization

with each student group, above and beyond an individual's general level of sociability," she says.

International students often prioritize interacting with host nationals as an important part of their experience while studying in the U.S. But for the vast majority of international students, that aspiration is a challenging and often unfulfilled goal, hampered by structural barriers that range from cultural adaptation to navigating the trials of higher education.

But socialization has benefits beyond human interaction. It's associated with less depression, lower levels of homesickness, better stress management, and greater life satisfaction. It is not friendship, but rather an entry-level interaction between people with the potential to become friendship, which Quinton measured as time spent doing joint recreational activities, with whom people are studying and with whom they choose to spend their free time.

Quinton's study focused on East and Southeast Asian students, the largest international demographic attending American universities.

"This group also has some of the largest cultural divides to bridge when coming to the U.S.," says Quinton. "The independence emphasized in Western culture is often at odds with the emphasis on cooperation and interdependence in collectivistic cultures like China, South Korea and many Southeast Asian countries. That's a very different orientation to what these students are accustomed to in their home culture."

But it's something universities can address, according to Quinton. Anything that fosters a connection and sense of a shared experience between international and domestic students, both the stress and anxieties, as well as the joys and pleasures, is going to be a "win-win." Quinton also highlighted low self-esteem as "a potential risk factor for

international students, one that universities might look for in terms of identifying students who are potentially vulnerable for missing out."

"International students who fall short of the expected connection with U.S. students are clearly disappointed, but there's also a loss for the domestic student population, entering a global community, who are deprived of the benefits associated with interacting with people from varied and different backgrounds.

"Domestic students, in this case, are undoubtedly losing out, by not getting to know international students," says Quinton.

Provided by University at Buffalo