

Issues of Inclusion: Examining the English-Only Policy in an International Student Support Program

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Tags

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Setting

Sue Wang is a third-year international student from China studying at a public university in the U.S. Despite having experienced language and cultural barriers in the past, Sue is an honors student and has held many leadership roles on campus. Confident with her accomplishments and motivated to help other international students succeed, she accepts a campus job working as a Peer Coach for Summer Bridge International, an academic and cultural transition program for a select number of incoming international students.

International students enrolled in Summer Bridge International get to live on campus two months prior to the start of the academic year. During this time, they are required to take a credit-bearing writing course and participate in a series of workshops, field trips, and social events. Peer Coaches are responsible for facilitating intercultural discussions, holding weekly one to one meetings with their assigned students, and organizing all other non-academic activities. The goal of this program is to help new international students develop strong knowledge about the American university life and local culture, improve their academic English skills, and become empowered to make a positive impact in the U.S.

Summer Bridge International has an English-only policy, which mandates that all students and staff must speak English while engaged in program-related activities. The program also includes an assessment component for Peer Coaches. Each coach receives a mid-program evaluation and a post-program evaluation, on which they are assigned a score based on their overall performance. "Promoting inclusion" is a category that holds the most weight in the evaluation criteria. After the program, Peer Coaches whose scores meet the predetermined benchmark receive a certificate of recognition and recommendation letter from the Student Leadership Center.

Case

A majority of students participating in Summer Bridge International are from China and speak Mandarin. Sue is very happy at first because she always wants to mentor those who share her cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Despite the English-only policy, Sue makes sure to let the Chinese students know that they can always speak Mandarin to her if needed. She strongly believes that international students like herself should always be proud of their origin and should not be pressured to “Americanize” for the sake of gaining acceptance from others.

After the first week of the program, a few non-Chinese students in the Summer Bridge International program express frustration toward the fact that their Chinese peers speak Mandarin most of the time and are hesitant to communicate in English. They report that not only does Sue not remind the Chinese students to speak English during activities, she also joins in to speak Mandarin with them sometimes, which makes the program feel exclusive. Ashley, Summer Bridge International Coordinator who supervises all Peer Coaches, asks Sue to honor the English-only policy of the program out of respect for non-Chinese students and the program’s goal. Sue explains that she is only speaking Mandarin to the Chinese students at this time to build trust and give them time to step out of their comfort zone. Sue is also afraid that if she refuses to speak Mandarin, Chinese students in the program will perceive her as snobby and arrogant.

Ashley listens to Sue, but still thinks that it is unprofessional for a Peer Coach to prioritize the needs of one group of students over those of others. She also believes that in the long term, not speaking English on a daily basis is counterproductive to the Chinese students’ learning experience and reduces opportunities for cross-cultural exchange on campus. Sue argues that for the sake of promoting inclusion in the program, she will continue to speak Mandarin because based on her personal experiences, the language one speaks does not determine how much they learn or whether they can contribute to the campus community.

Sue also raises concerns over the English-only policy being forced upon students outside the context of the writing course. She thinks that Chinese students in the program are justified to speak their home language as long as they speak English during class time, avoid inside jokes about non-Chinese peers, show up to events, and strive to do well in college after the program. Ashley maintains that the English-only policy applies to all parts of Summer Bridge International because it is the best way to promote inclusion.

Weeks after Ashley and Sue’s conversation, Peer Coaches receive their mid-term evaluation. Sue is disappointed to find out that Ashley criticizes her inability to accommodate the needs of all students in the program in a fair way and significantly lowers her performance score for that reason. From Sue’s perspective, Ashley disregards her input and supports discriminating against international students who are not comfortable speaking English all the time. Sue begins to resent her supervisor and lose interest in her job.

Sue is worried that she will not qualify for certificate and the recommendation letter after the program ends. She feels as if she’s being punished despite all her hard work in caring for and speaking up for her fellow international students. Sue considers meeting with Ashley to talk things out but does not trust that an American woman and native English speaker will ever be able to understand where she is coming from. With only two more weeks until the end of the program, Sue must decide on how to proceed.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- With regard to promoting inclusion in Summer Bridge International, how are Sue and Ashley interpreting their duties differently?
- What are the underlying reasons for Sue and Ashley's differences?
- What could Sue and Ashley have done differently during their conversation to resolve their disagreement?
- Given where the case is now, what intervention strategies can be used to help Sue and Ashley identify a common ground moving forward?
- Is the English-only policy in Summer Bridge International reasonable? Should it be adjusted? Why/Why not?
- What approaches and practices can be implemented to encourage international students in a program to connect with people outside their home countries?