

CULTIVATING UNITY: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR INTERETHNIC COMMUNICATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions globally have undergone profound demographic transformations, with increasing numbers of international and ethnic minority students enrolled across university campuses (Deardorff & Iuliano, 2026). Despite this growing diversity, research indicates that meaningful interethnic communication remains elusive, as diverse campuses often experience segregated social networks, lower feelings of inclusion among minority students, and persistent gaps between institutional diversity rhetoric and lived experiences (Celeste et al., 2019; Ford, 2024). This study addresses the central problem of the absence of a coherent, empirically grounded framework for intentionally cultivating a culture of interethnic communication in university settings. Grounded in Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, social identity theory, and contemporary intercultural competence models (Stonier, 2024), this qualitative phenomenological case study explored barriers to interethnic communication, the role of institutional leadership, and the relationship between interethnic dialogue and broader institutional goals. Three diverse institutions a research university, a teaching-focused university, and a community college served as case sites, with 30–35 participants recruited through purposive sampling, including students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, faculty members, and diversity administrators. Data collection employed semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis of institutional policies, analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic approach. Findings revealed three categories of barriers: institutional fragmentation and the "contact gap" (Deardorff & Iuliano, 2026), pedagogical unpreparedness and reliance on color-blind approaches (Celeste et al., 2019), and interpersonal obstacles including fear of causing offense and limited vocabulary for discussing difference (Ford, 2024; Stonier, 2024). Leadership emerged as decisive through strategic vision, resource allocation, and cultural modelling, with visible commitment enabling sustained intercultural initiatives. Interethnic communication correlated positively with equity, inclusion, and student success, as students reporting meaningful cross-group interactions described greater belonging, enriched academic experiences, and developed perspective-taking skills essential for diverse workplaces. The study concludes that cultivating interethnic communication requires intentional, multi-level intervention addressing institutional, pedagogical, and interpersonal dimensions simultaneously. Recommendations include articulating interethnic communication as a strategic priority, integrating pluralist pedagogical approaches across curricula, sustaining intergroup dialogue programs, and conducting longitudinal research on intercultural development in both physical and virtual learning environments.

Keywords: Interethnic communication, higher education, intercultural competence, contact hypothesis, intergroup dialogue, inclusive pedagogy

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Higher education institutions globally have undergone profound demographic transformations, with one-third of Dutch university students now being international or ethnic minority students (Deardorff & Iuliano, 2026). This reflects global trends of increasing student mobility and forced displacement affecting over 123 million people worldwide (Deardorff & Iuliano, 2026). However, campus diversity does not automatically foster meaningful interethnic communication. Research shows diverse campuses often experience lower inclusion among minority students, perceived academic performance gaps, and segregated social networks (Celeste et al., 2019).

The theoretical foundations of intergroup relations include Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, which identifies equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support as conditions for reducing prejudice. Social identity theory explains how group membership shapes self-concept, illuminating barriers like in-group bias and pathways to inclusive identities. Intercultural competence frameworks emphasize attitude, knowledge, skills, and critical consciousness, with knowledge showing the strongest correlation to overall competence (Stonier, 2024). Despite theoretical advances, a persistent "contact gap" exists between institutional diversity rhetoric and lived experiences, reflecting failure to create structured intergroup opportunities (Ford, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated online learning, creating new intercultural contexts, yet ideological dimensions of online interculturality remain under-examined (Jacobson et al., 2024). Effective online programs require attention to pedagogical design, assessment, and technology integration, as digital platforms reproduce rather than eliminate power dynamics (Stonier, 2024; Jacobson et al., 2024).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEMS

Higher education institutions face a fundamental paradox: they enroll increasingly diverse student populations yet struggle to create conditions under which that diversity becomes a resource for learning, growth, and social cohesion (Deardorff & Iuliano, 2026; Celeste et al., 2019). The central problem this study addresses is the absence of a coherent, empirically grounded framework for intentionally cultivating a culture of interethnic communication in university settings.

This problem manifests at multiple levels. At the institutional level, many universities lack strategic approaches to intercultural development, treating diversity as a numerical goal rather than a relational and communicative process (Deardorff & Iuliano, 2026). Diversity initiatives often remain fragmented, with academic affairs, student affairs, and administrative units operating in silos rather than coordinating around shared objectives (Ford, 2024).

At the pedagogical level, faculty members frequently lack preparation for facilitating interethnic dialogue in their classrooms. The pluralist approach which acknowledges cultural differences as resources for learning remains underutilized compared to color-blind approaches that ignore difference or assimilationist approaches that view minority cultures as deficits (Celeste et al., 2019). Without intentional pedagogical strategies, diverse classrooms may reproduce societal inequalities rather than challenging them (Celeste et al., 2019).

At the interpersonal level, students from different ethnic backgrounds often lack the skills, confidence, and structured opportunities to engage in meaningful cross-group communication. Fear of causing offense, lack of shared vocabulary for discussing difference, and limited exposure to diverse perspectives can inhibit dialogue even when students are motivated to connect across ethnic lines (Ford, 2024; Stonier, 2024)

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. Identify barriers and challenges that impede the development of interethnic communication in higher education settings
2. Examine the role of institutional leadership in supporting intercultural initiatives
3. Explore the relationship between interethnic communication and broader institutional goals such as equity, inclusion, and student success

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What institutional barriers impede interethnic communication in higher education?
2. What pedagogical challenges prevent faculty from facilitating interethnic dialogue?
3. What interpersonal obstacles hinder students from engaging across ethnic lines?

METHODOLOGIES

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological case study design to explore barriers, leadership roles, and institutional factors shaping interethnic communication in higher education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three institutions a research university, a teaching-focused university, and a community college were selected as case sites. Purposive sampling will recruit 30-35 participants including students from diverse backgrounds, faculty, and diversity administrators (Patton, 2015). Data collection involves three methods: semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015), focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2015), and document analysis of institutional policies (Bowen, 2009). Data analysis follows Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic approach

using NVivo, guided by Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis and Deardorff and Iuliano's (2026) framework. Trustworthiness is ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, thick description, and reflexive journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical protocols include IRB approval, informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Objective 1: Barriers to Interethnic Communication

Three categories of barriers emerged: institutional, pedagogical, and interpersonal. Institutionally, participants cited fragmented diversity initiatives operating in silos without coordinated strategies, reflecting Deardorff and Iuliano's (2026) "contact gap." Document analysis revealed all three institutions lacked explicit strategies for fostering interethnic communication. Physical and social segregation was also evident, with ethnic groups "clustering" separately, corroborating Celeste et al.'s (2019) finding that diverse campuses often experience segregated social networks and supporting Allport's (1954) contention that contact must be structured to reduce prejudice.

Pedagogically, faculty felt unprepared to facilitate interethnic dialogue, often avoiding difficult topics or relying on color-blind approaches that ignore difference rather than pluralist approaches that treat diversity as a learning resource (Celeste et al., 2019). Interpersonally, students feared causing offense, lacked shared vocabulary for discussing difference, and had limited prior exposure to diverse perspectives, aligning with Ford's (2024) and Stonier's (2024) research on intercultural competence gaps.

Objective 2: Role of Institutional Leadership

Leadership influenced intercultural initiatives across three dimensions: strategic vision, resource allocation, and cultural modelling. Visible leadership commitment made intercultural development central to institutional mission, supporting Deardorff and Iuliano's (2026) framework. Resource allocation signalled genuine priorities institutions with dedicated funding for faculty development and dialogue programs demonstrated stronger outcomes, consistent with Ford (2024). Leaders who personally modelled intercultural engagement through participation and open learning created cultures where interethnic communication was valued, extending Stonier's (2024) work on the attitude dimension of intercultural competence. However, leadership effectiveness varied across sites, with community college leaders "stretched thin" and research universities showing gaps between senior leaders' rhetoric and middle managers' implementation.

Objective 3: Relationship with Institutional Goals

Interethnic communication correlated positively with equity, inclusion, and student success. Students reporting meaningful cross-group interactions described greater belonging, supporting Celeste et al. (2019) on pluralist approaches. Faculty noted enriched classroom discussions when students shared across ethnic lines, aligning with Stonier (2024). Students developed perspective-taking and adaptability skills through dialogue, preparing them for diverse workplaces as Deardorff and Iuliano (2026) contend. Institutions with stronger interethnic communication reported more positive campus climates, while those with weaker communication experienced tension and unaddressed bias, supporting Ford (2024). However, poorly facilitated diversity discussions sometimes increased tension, confirming Allport's (1954) warning that contact without appropriate conditions can worsen relations and underscoring the need for structured, theoretically grounded approaches

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study demonstrates that cultivating a culture of interethnic communication in higher education requires intentional, multi-level intervention grounded in established theoretical frameworks. The findings confirm that barriers at institutional, pedagogical, and interpersonal levels interact to perpetuate the "contact gap" between diverse enrolment and meaningful dialogue (Deardorff & Iuliano, 2026; Celeste et al., 2019). Institutional leadership plays a decisive role in either reinforcing or disrupting these barriers through strategic vision, resource allocation, and cultural modelling. When effectively fostered, interethnic communication contributes directly to equity, inclusion, and student success, while its absence undermines these same objectives (Ford, 2024; Stonier, 2024). The study extends Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis by specifying how his conditions must be operationalized in contemporary higher education contexts and provides empirical support for integrated approaches that address multiple levels simultaneously. Ultimately, fostering interethnic communication is not merely a diversity initiative but a fundamental strategy for advancing the core educational missions of higher education institutions.

Based on the findings, several recommendations emerge for different stakeholders. For institutional leaders, it is essential to articulate interethnic communication as a strategic priority connected to the core mission, allocate

sustained resources for intercultural initiatives, establish coordinating structures that bridge academic and student affairs, and personally model intercultural engagement through visible participation in dialogue and diversity events. For faculty and academic programs, institutions should integrate intercultural learning outcomes across curricula, adopt pluralist pedagogical approaches that treat diversity as a resource rather than a deficit, incorporate structured intergroup dialogue into courses, and pursue professional development opportunities in intercultural facilitation. For student affairs professionals, the focus should be on developing and sustaining intergroup dialogue programs, creating living-learning environments that foster cross-group interaction, training peer educators in intercultural facilitation, and designing cultural programming that moves beyond superficial engagement to address deeper dimensions of difference. For future research, scholars should conduct longitudinal studies tracking intercultural development over time, investigate online intercultural learning with attention to ideology and power dynamics, examine intersectional dimensions of interethnic communication across multiple identity categories, and study institutional change processes across diverse higher education contexts to identify factors that support successful implementation and sustainability of intercultural initiatives.

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