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If You Don't Know, You Cannot Love: Intercultural Contact Theory in Indonesian Higher Education

Chiara Logli
Honolulu Community College (USA)

*874 Dillingham Blvd., Honolulu, HI 96817, USA
0000-0002-0160-9761*

ABSTRACT: *This paper examines how cross-cultural encounters shape student learning and development in higher education. Guided by the local adage “If you don’t know, you cannot love,” the study situates intercultural contact theory within Indonesia, the world’s fourth-most populous nation and the largest Muslim community. It highlights the experiences of interisland students, who face linguistic, academic, and social challenges similar to those faced by international students. Using grounded theory methodology, the study encompasses document analysis, observations, surveys, and interviews with 650 administrators, professors, and students at a public university. Region of origin, ethnicity, and religion emerge as key markers of identity. Positive contact is the most memorable aspect of college and is fostered through friendships, student organizations, service learning, and the encouragement of authorities. Negative contact is related to religious fundamentalism, minority resentment, and inadequate institutional support. Affirmative action is vital, as student variety is a prerequisite for preparing graduates for civic engagement and leadership in an interconnected world.*

Keywords: Higher education, Indonesia, intercultural contact theory, learning, diversity.

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INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian saying, “If you don't know, you cannot love” (*Tidak kenal, maka tidak sayang*), frames the discussion of intercultural contact theory in higher education. According to contact theorists, interactions among members of different groups can, under certain conditions, foster mutual understanding and meaningful collaboration, with long-term impacts on democratic prosperity. This chapter explores how cross-cultural encounters shape the Indonesian college experience.

Indonesia offers a unique case study in diversity as the world's fourth most populous nation and largest Muslim community, encompassing 700 languages, 300 ethnicities, and multiple religious groups across 6,000 inhabited islands. This research employs grounded theory methodology, combining document analysis, observations, surveys, and interviews with administrators, professors, and students at a leading public nondenominational university on the island of Java.

This chapter is significant for three main reasons. First, it broadens the scholarly discourse on diversity in higher education beyond the dominant Anglo-American context. While contact theory has primarily been tested in Western settings, this study focuses on Indonesia, a Southeast Asian context that remains understudied. Second, it provides empirical support for affirmative action by demonstrating the positive impact of student diversity on personal growth and national welfare. Third, it draws parallels between international and domestic peripheral students. In Indonesia, many students travel long distances—often by air—to attend college and face financial barriers that prevent frequent home visits. They navigate new linguistic, academic, and social environments, adapting to unfamiliar customs, cuisines, dress codes, and communication styles. In many ways, interisland students experience adjustment processes similar to those of international students.

This study argues that universities must cultivate diverse learning environments to prepare students for professional leadership and civic engagement in an interconnected world. This mission is far-reaching in developing countries, where college access is limited, and graduates are positioned to become the next generation of leaders. Promoting diversity within the student body and across the institution is essential in building a vibrant democracy. The national motto, “Unity in Diversity” (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*), embodies the idea of achieving unity without uniformity and diversity without fragmentation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories of Diversity

The theoretical premises of this chapter expand the lens through which diversity is analyzed. In this study, diversity refers to variability both within and across groups. Groupism is problematic because it conceptualizes society as “a multichrome mosaic of monochrome ethnic, racial, or cultural blocs” (Brubaker, 2002, p. 164). Conflict does not arise from culture itself but rather from organizations that claim to represent a group while neglecting its internal heterogeneity. These organizations enforce conformity through mechanisms such as the “black sheep effect,” in which disliked in-group members are devalued more than disliked out-group members, as they pose a greater threat to in-group cohesion (Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988, p. 288; Shin, 2006).

Second, diversity is framed through the lens of hybridity. “Hard” boundaries cause intolerance, including exclusion, denigration, and stereotypes of others’ cultural resources (Duara, 1996, p. 49). Boundaries harden when politicized and polarized, as seen in census categories or binary labels (Jiang, 2006). In contrast, “soft” boundaries allow members to share and adopt practices across groups (Duara, 1996, p. 49). For example, boundaries soften when the curriculum evolves from teaching religion (i.e., transmitting dogmas) to teaching *about* religion (i.e., studying dogmas) and to ultimately teaching *from* religion (i.e., studying how faiths can resolve global problems) (Grimmitt, 1987). The human capacity for multiple identities is foundational to democracy.

Third, diversity moves beyond mere variety. In the “zoo” metaphor, variety is a “quantitative index” of differences that are externally imposed and separated (Hershock, 2010, p. 11). In educational zoos, various students and programs merely coexist. In contrast, diversity in an “ecosystem” is a “qualitative index” of differences that are internally emergent, mutually enriching, and contributing to shared welfare (Hershock, 2010, p. 11). Educational ecosystems discern “how most effectively and sustainably to enable the differences of each to make a difference for all” (Hershock, 2010, p. 19). They shift the focus from how much individuals “differ *from*” each other to how they might “differ *for*” one another (Hershock, 2010, p. 18). Through this diversity lens, education “deethnicizes” cultures, framing them as “shared human capital,” rather than as cultural appropriation (Parekh, 2000, p. 230).

Intercultural Contact Theory

Late adolescence and early adulthood are critical periods for forming personal and social identities (Gurin et al., 2002). Identity formation is best supported by a “psychological moratorium”—a time for experimenting with social roles before committing to one’s career, relationships, ideology, and worldview (Gurin et al., 2002, p. 334). Universities provide such opportunities for growth by placing students in unfamiliar situations that demand adaptation and knowledge acquisition. Classrooms function as “contact zones”—“social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, 1991, p. 1).

Since Allport's (1954) foundational work on contact theory, scholars have investigated the conditions under which intercultural interaction reduces prejudice. The contact hypothesis asserts that segregation fosters ignorance, which in turn perpetuates stereotypes and hostility (Dixon et al., 2005; Pettigrew, 2021). Scholars have extended contact theory to the university context, examining the frequency and patterns of intercultural interaction. Compared with homogeneous campuses, student variety increases the likelihood of engagement across cultural lines, exposure to a broader spectrum of perspectives, and encounters with both ingroup and outgroup positive exemplars (Antonio, 2001, 2004; Halualani, 2008; Halualani et al., 2004; Nagda & Gurin, 2007; Sorensen et al., 2009; Wright et al., 1997).

Positive outcomes of intercultural contact include enhanced intellectual engagement, perspective-taking, sense of commonality, commitment to intercultural understanding, civic involvement, and belief in individuals' capacity for social change. They also lead to higher college satisfaction, academic performance, cultural awareness, social self-concept, and postgraduate aspirations (Gurin et al., 2002).

Prejudice reduction is most effective when contact occurs under certain conditions. Prior socialization plays a key role; for example, early interracial contact increases the likelihood of later cross-racial friendships (Antonio, 2004; Ellison & Powers, 1994). The everyday campus experience is also crucial, as students benefit from rooming, dining, studying, socializing, participating in organizations, attending events, and forming friendships or romantic relationships (Antonio, 2001). Additionally, initiatives against racial bias include diversity courses (e.g., culture and gender), peer-facilitated programs (e.g., living-learning communities and collaborative projects), and community initiatives (e.g., service learning and volunteering) (Engberg, 2004). Overall, the key conditions for successful contact include equal status, voluntary participation, shared goals, meaningful interaction, and institutional support (Chavous, 2005; Robinson & Preston, 1976).

Mere variety does not guarantee meaningful engagement. In Engberg's (2004) review of 73 studies on intercultural interventions, 52 reported positive outcomes, 14 reported mixed outcomes, and only seven reported nonsignificant effects. Students may report frequent intercultural encounters but still experience racial prejudice, segregation, and conflict (Antonio, 2004). They may express support for diversity but allow ethnicity to outweigh shared interests or values in friendship selection (Duster, 2009). They may interpret "intercultural interaction" merely as the presence of demographic differences rather than the formation of inclusive friendships or social networks (Halualani, 2008; Halualani et al., 2004). Intergroup encounters can also trigger anxiety or perceived threat (Barna, 1998; Sorensen et al., 2009).

Several factors contribute to racial polarization on campuses: (a) limited prior contact with diverse peers, (b) peer influence, (c) competitive or high-stress environments, (d) external ideological or media pressures, (e) shifting values, (f) fear of the unfamiliar, and (g) perceptions of inequality (Dalton, 1991).

The Indonesian context: Regionality, ethnicity, and religion

In Indonesia, regional origin generally shapes individuals' ethnicity and religion (Aspinall, 2009). Its 6,000 inhabited islands are home to heterogeneous ethnic groups, each with distinct languages, customs, belief systems, and political orientations. Achieving democratic balance is a challenge when one religion—Islam—represents 87% of the population, and one ethnicity—Javanese—holds the most political power. Foreign influences have further destabilized the archipelago by displacing syncretic traditions with purist ideologies. Evangelical missions from the U.S. have targeted the periphery of the archipelago. Extremist currents from Saudi Arabia have infiltrated Indonesia's sociopolitical landscape, with the government enabling a minority of radicals to exert outsized influence (Christiani, 2005; De Jong, 2012; Woodward, 2011). Stringent interpretations of Islam have prompted new regulations on media, marriage, attire, and worship (Bertrand, 2003; Binawan, 2011; Conte, 2006; Harsono, 2024b; Sullivan & Lucas, 2001). For example, a Muslim woman received a two-year prison sentence under blasphemy laws after reciting a prayer and then eating pork on TikTok (Rachmawati, 2023).

The Indonesian Council of Ulama (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI) has issued an Islamic ruling (*fatwa*) opposing pluralism, liberalism, secularism, and the Ahmadiyah sect (Gillespie, 2007; Ricklefs, 2008). Exclusivist doctrines have disrupted the traditional balance between religion and culture (De Jong, 2012; Woodward, 2011). For example, youth attending purist Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) often reject ancestral beliefs as superstitions, sometimes calling Islamist militias to intervene (Ricklefs, 2008). Universities have also become centers for underground extremist networks (Chandrakirana & Chuzaifah, 2006; Fox, 2004).

Religious violence is predominantly carried out by Sunni hardliners, who target Christian, Ahmadi, and Shia communities (Harsono, 2024b; Nor, 2019). Muslim migration to minority-faith regions, such as Kalimantan and Ambon, has caused socioeconomic and political tensions, erupting into deadly conflicts (Bertrand, 2003; Sullivan & Lucas, 2001; van Klinken, 1999). Islam- and Java-centric policies risk disenfranchising parts of the archipelago and threaten national unity, as seen in Aceh, Papua, and Timor (Christiani, 2005).

By law, citizens must declare one of seven recognized religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, or a 2024 category labeled “belief in the one God,” which aggregates other faiths (Forge, 1980; Harsono, 2024a; Said, 2007; Yang, 2005). Religious affiliation appears on national ID cards, affecting treatment in education, employment, and public services. Religious education is mandatory from kindergarten through college but is provided only within a student's own faith group (e.g., Hindu lessons by Hindu teachers for Hindu students) (Parker, 2010).

Despite these challenges, civic society is advancing democratic ideals. For example, youth have protested corruption, a new law has expanded the list of recognized religions, interfaith declarations have promoted human and environmental rights, and the most prominent Muslim organization, *Nahdlatul*

Ulama (NU), has endorsed the United Nations' Charter for peace-based jurisprudence (Harsono, 2024a, 2024b; Students Protest, 2025; Radhiyya, 2024).

Indonesia has the world's fourth-largest education system, followed by China, India, and the U.S. (OECD, 2025). However, the combination of a large population and a developing economy limits access to higher education (Buchori & Malik, 2004; Hartanto, 2009; Welch & Aziz, 2022). While over 43% of the population is under the age of 25, only 9.5% of adults aged 25 and older hold bachelor's degrees, 0.6% hold master's degrees, and 0.05% hold doctoral degrees (OECD, 2025; UNESCO, 2020). Law No. 12/2012 mandates that public universities prioritize students from disadvantaged or remote areas in admissions and scholarships, but implementation remains challenging.

Students from Java, urban centers, and higher social classes are overrepresented due to disparities in educational quality and financial resources (Logli, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). Educational inequality begins early. Java offers higher-quality K–12 schooling, giving its students an advantage in national exams, university access, and academic success. The island also hosts most of Indonesia's universities—including all top-tier institutions—and 75% of the country's college students. Scholarships for students from other islands are scarce, despite the added costs of relocation and living expenses, further entrenching regional disparities.

In line with contact theory, research on Indonesian education highlights the pivotal role of institutions in fostering welcoming and supportive environments through initiatives such as service learning, field studies, living-learning communities, and interpersonal engagements (Ali et al., 2021; Hastowohadi & Ma'rifatulloh, 2025; Hidayat & Balakrishnan, 2024; Irayanti et al., 2025; Logli, 2016, 2023; Sunarto et al., 2004). Classrooms can also enhance intercultural contact by integrating local and global perspectives and adopting pluralist approaches to religion (Christiani, 2005; Logli, 2022; Suprpto et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study follows Charmaz's (2010) constructivist approach to grounded theory, which emphasizes rigorous coding. While I developed familiarity with the literature on higher education, I did not impose preexisting theories on the data. As Charmaz (2010) explains, "preconceived theoretical concepts may provide starting points for looking at the data but they do not offer automatic codes for analyzing these data" (p. 68).

Data collection methods include surveys, interviews, observations, and document analysis at a prominent public, nondenominational university in Indonesia. Institutional review board (IRB) approval was obtained, and research standards were upheld throughout the study. To ensure confidentiality, I anonymized names, affiliations, dates, and other identifying information.

Open-ended survey responses, fieldnotes, public documents, and interview transcripts were analyzed through two cycles of coding—"initial" and "focused" (Charmaz, 2010, p. 43). To mitigate social desirability bias, I employed triangulation, survey anonymity, interview confidentiality, neutral question

phrasing, and requests for concrete examples (Roccatto, 2003). NVivo software was used to identify descriptive statistics and thematic patterns. A total of 633 students completed the questionnaire, which represented the following:

- Major: All 18 colleges
- Enrollment: 17% first year, 25% second year, 43% third year, 15% fourth year
- Housing: 72% in guest houses (*kos*), 2% in dormitories, 26% with family
- Parents' degrees: 33% first-generation students (i.e., no parent attended tertiary education)
- Gender: 55% female, 45% male
- Ethnicity: 38 ethnicities
- Religion: All six legally recognized religions plus agnosticism, atheism, and *Kejawen* (a syncretic Javanese spiritual tradition influenced by Islam, Animism, and Hindu-Buddhism)
- Origin: 30 of 33 provinces
- Hometowns: 41% from large cities, 36% from small cities, 23% from villages

The interview participants included 31 undergraduate students, reflecting the religious, ethnic, and geographic diversity of the larger sample, as well as members of 10 campus organizations. I also interviewed outgoing and incoming university rectors, 15 professors (some in administrative roles), and two alumni in leadership positions outside the university.

RESULTS

Students' Variety as the Prerequisite to Contact

In Indonesian higher education, student variety extends beyond mere majority–minority quotas. One professor remarked, “Representation is not about a mathematical calculation of the different sizes of ethnicities, religions, and islands.” Another added, “Indonesia became possible because the majority gave up their rights as a majority.” For example, the country’s founders chose a trade-based form of Malay language and a broad monotheism to foster national unity, rather than selecting Javanese and Islam. Preventing both majority hegemony and minority parochialism is essential for a thriving democracy.

At the macro level, student variety contributes to national peace and democracy. As one professor explained, “It’s very important for this country, not only for our campus, to ensure that every part of the community has a place here at this university. We cannot disregard students from impoverished areas because they do not meet certain qualifications.” The incoming rector emphasized, “This university has the responsibility to develop justice and promote more equitable development.” An alumnus echoed this sentiment: “If higher education does not train the next generation to be sensible about diversity, the unity of Indonesians becomes questionable; we’ve already lost East Timor, and we could lose Aceh or Papua.” Students agreed that homogeneous graduates would result in homogeneous leadership, limiting perspective and weakening democracy.

At the micro level, student variety supports personal development. The outgoing rector stated, “Students cannot learn to respect people from other

provinces, religions, and perspectives if they don't have anyone to practice with." Similarly, the incoming rector argued that "strong leaders will come from diverse campuses, where they are trained to manage complexity through dialogue." In line with this view, 93% of survey respondents agreed that ethnic, religious, and regional diversity enriches the university experience.

For decades, the university in this study has pioneered affirmative action to recruit qualified students and build capacity across the archipelago. It employs alternative entrance exams, invitations, and 28 additional diversity-based indicators to break ties between applicants with identical scores. It offers a bridge program (*matrikulasi*) to support college readiness for students from remote islands. Additionally, its mandatory Community Service Program (*Kuliah Kerja Nyata*, KKN) places students in rural communities, fostering both civic engagement and cross-cultural connection. Affirmative action enjoys strong support on campus: 73% of surveyed students agreed that universities should provide additional support to students from ethnic and religious minorities.

Despite the university's efforts, only 17% of the student body comes from outside Java, and only 15% identify as non-Muslim. Nevertheless, the diversity on campus surpasses that of most other social contexts and shapes student life. Many students encounter meaningful diversity for the first time at university. For example, a Hindu student from Bali recalled that before college, she had never met anyone from other provinces or religions. University life, she said, allowed her to "view Indonesia in a broader sense." Reflecting this sentiment, 96% of survey participants believed that students came from a variety of ethnic, religious, and national backgrounds.

Positive Contact: Service Learning, Campus Organizations, and Campus Life

This study reinforces the core tenets of contact theory, which posits that intercultural interactions are among the most memorable and transformative elements of the college experience. The most effective spaces for positive contact at the university are the mandatory two-month community service program (63%), student organizations (78%), and informal daily interactions, including with international students—such as friendships (90%), peer conversations outside of class (87%), shared meals (81%), cohabitation (73%), conversations with professors outside class (66%), dating (58%), and discussions with administrators (54%). Formal coursework is less conducive to intercultural engagement (49%), although the interviewees noted that STEM students tend to be less open-minded and interculturally versatile due to the lack of relevant training.

Among these key spaces of positive contact, the interviewees discussed student organizations in the greatest depth. The university sponsors some of the student-led groups, whereas others operate informally. Student organizations form around shared interests, religions, political affiliations, or academic disciplines. One student recalled, "The critical point in my life was in my freshman year when I joined different organizations. I exposed myself to issues and contexts I had never considered before". An alumnus emphasized the

enduring nature of the bonds formed: “My organization became my second family, more than just friends. These strong bonds last forever—we are still connected.”

Faith-based student organizations provide a unique lens through which to examine intercultural interaction. Even within the same dogma, students encounter regional, ethnic, and religious variations. For example, while the university-sponsored Muslim club (JS) meets in a mosque due to its large membership, other religious groups share space and, as a result, collaborate in caring for religious supplies, attending each other’s events, and respecting each other’s prayer times. Their presidents participate in biannual interfaith dialogues and contribute to social initiatives that span religious lines. A student shared:

During orientation, members of the Christian club saw my confused face and asked if they could help me. I had just arrived in the city, did not know anybody, had nowhere to stay, and I was afraid to ask. They were Christian, and I was Buddhist, but they helped me find my first home. I think it only happens at this university.

Service learning, campus organizations, and everyday campus life act as catalysts for the development of students’ professional and civic capacities. First, students gain insight into the perspectives of peers from various ethnicities (87%) and religions (86%). Second, they develop skills in teamwork, dialogue, and perspective-taking (90%). Many students describe how direct interactions challenge and correct stereotypes. One student shared, “I thought Lampung had the best culture because I didn’t know about the others. Now I see that every ethnicity has its value. We are all human, and we should not discriminate.” Another reflected:

I studied in a pesantren, where I had few opportunities to meet people from other backgrounds. I used to judge other religions. That changed at this university. The more I socialized with people from different religions, the more those feelings disappeared. I realized religion is a personal choice.

Third, the students reported a strengthened sense of social self-concept and expressed a commitment to deepening their understanding of their own religion (97%) and ethnicity (95%) in the future. Fourth, they express a long-term commitment to Indonesian pluralism. Many students are determined to give back to their home regions: “I want to be the first one with a law degree in my village and bring my success back to my island.” Another student explained, “If I become successful, I will contribute to my island—and to Indonesia, because the country is made up of the achievements of all cultures.” Survey responses reflect strong support for promoting international (92%), multiethnic (90%), and interfaith (85%) understanding, in contrast to promoting only one’s own religion (70%) or ethnicity (70%). Students also intend to maintain diverse networks: 98% plan to stay in touch with peers from different backgrounds, 95% aim to form new intercultural relationships, and 84% plan to send their children to religiously and ethnically diverse schools. Additionally, 73% hope to make a positive difference for Indonesia.

Institutional endorsement plays a crucial role in supporting the establishment and flourishing of academic curricula, student clubs, and campus life. Service

programs are specifically designed to immerse students in unfamiliar regions, whereas the student building (*Gelanggang Mahasiswa*) physically collocates student organizations, promoting daily interaction. The campus regularly hosts cultural performances, national dialogues on sensitive issues, and international conferences. Most participants described the university as courageous in addressing controversial topics—such as Papuan conflicts, interfaith dialogue, or Sunni–Shia tensions. Most students condemn censorship and emphasize the importance of academic freedom. As one student noted, “Everyone is welcome to speak. If you disagree, confront those ideas through discussion—not force.”

Negative Contact: Religious Prejudice and Self-segregation

Instances of negative contact are relatively rare but include religious and, to a lesser extent, ethnic prejudice and self-segregation. Survey respondents reported experiencing ethno-religious discrimination (9%) and cliquishness (31%). Intergroup encounters sometimes elicit discomfort, with 18% of participants admitting to feeling threatened by people of different ethnic or religious backgrounds. This mirrors findings in the contact theory literature, which highlight the role of anxiety in shaping intergroup dynamics. The factors contributing to such discomfort include peer-group pressures, off-campus ideological influence, and perceptions of unequal treatment, particularly among ethno-religious minorities.

Peer influence plays a key role in religious exclusion, with fundamentalist Muslim students exhibiting the highest levels of prejudice and self-segregation. While the university promotes moderation, there is growing concern over the increasing influence of rigid religious norms—such as prohibitions on physical contact with the opposite sex, criticism of secular attire, and a tendency to distance oneself from ideological differences. Many students and faculty members criticized the rise of Wahhabi-inspired practices, with one noting: “The Middle East is a totally different place but wants to change our society into Arab.”

Such stringent behavior is often rooted in secondary education at faith-based schools and extends into university life. Purist followers of Islam reject pre-Islamic traditions and promote literalist readings of scripture. One student expressed this view: “People should not combine culture and religion, because it destroys the true way of religion. We must learn again what Islam is—truly—in Arabia.” These students may pursue contact across ethnic lines but only within accepted Muslim circles. Groups such as LGBTQ+ students, Shia Muslims, Ahmadiyah Muslims, and even Kejawan Muslims are often excluded as ideological outliers or “black sheep.” One student shared, “We must be the same; we must be on the same line. It hurts when you have principles as a community and others bring new ideas but want to stay in your group.”

Radicalized students frequently organize through groups such as the Indonesian Muslim Student Action Union (*Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia*, KAMMI). Although not officially sponsored by the university, KAMMI has operated on campus since the late 1990s and is affiliated with the nationalist Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*, PKS). Former members described the group as promoting a narrow reading of the Quran,

male-dominated leadership, and doctrinal conformity. The participants described KAMMI as “strict,” “for pure Islam,” and “for extreme Islamic ways.” Despite its unofficial status, KAMMI has exerted disproportionate influence, even controlling the Student Association presidency for over a decade and infiltrating other Muslim student groups. The incoming rector remarked, “Muslim student organizations are monolithic and monopolized by one single group, KAMMI.”

KAMMI has also infiltrated the Islamic Assistance Program (*Asistensi Agama Islam*, AAI), which consists of small weekly discussions required as part of the university’s mandatory Islam course for all Muslim students. The participants described AAI as “an indoctrination group,” where KAMMI members serve as instructors, promoting a narrow Sunni view, attempting to convert nonmainstream Muslims, and penalizing those involved in pluralist initiatives. Some students reported receiving lower grades for participating in intercultural activities.

Although rare, violent Islamic factions have a covert presence on campus. These groups are subtle in their recruitment methods, often targeting new students. Despite their small numbers, their influence is significant. A professor warned, “Ignoring their demands can be dangerous—they are capable of using force, intimidating students, and even destroying facilities.”

Non-Muslim students are aware of their minority status. One student shared: If your culture is different from the dominant culture, you must push hard to protect it. If you lose your identity, you are not yourself anymore. What I fear the most is that my culture is gone. On my island, we may become extinct because we are so few.

Owing to their demographic makeup—primarily Muslim and Javanese—non-Muslim students rarely hold leadership positions. A student reflected, “Some minority students avoid joining groups outside their religious communities because they feel they need to stick together.” She recounted difficulty adjusting to a predominantly Muslim environment: “Everyone says *Assalamualaikum*—nobody cares about my identity. It’s hard.”

The university faces significant challenges in countering the influence of fundamentalism, partly due to political entanglements and government inaction. However, participants pointed to institutional accountability in the skewed management of campus facilities and student organizations. For example, minority religious groups do not have dedicated or interfaith worship space, whereas Muslim students have both a central mosque and departmental prayer rooms (*musollah*). Minority religious groups often struggle to access classrooms for meetings, and staff members have discouraged non-Muslim artistic expression, including Western classical music of Christian origin. As a result, students interested in interfaith and peace initiatives frequently turn to off-campus organizations. One student shared:

When I was a freshman, I felt alone—I had nobody here. I almost became a Catholic fanatic because of oppression by Islamic groups. I felt like I had to be more religious and learn more about Catholicism. Then, I realized I didn’t need to be like that. I found another way to start a movement and see the

world. I joined an off-campus peace youth organization with members from all backgrounds. This is the Indonesia I look for.

Recommendations: Leadership, the curriculum, facilities, and organizations

The participants consistently emphasized that universities must take an active role in fostering positive intercultural engagement. While student agency is valuable, institutional leadership is critical. As one professor stated, “The university is not neutral—it has values and must implement them.” Participants called for “deliberate institutional efforts to exploit intercultural opportunities” and support affirmative action.

First, faculty and staff should plant pluralist values throughout students’ time at university, encouraging students to “care for minority peers” and “build friendships regardless of origin, religion, or culture.” Second, course offerings should be diversified to reflect a wide range of domestic and international perspectives. For example, religion courses could shift from a mono-religious framework to a comparative framework, engaging multiple faiths in addressing global issues such as poverty, energy, and corruption. Local wisdom could contribute valuable insights to global discourse. This is especially important within STEM fields, where ideological isolation tends to be more pronounced.

Third, campus facilities should reflect religious and cultural inclusivity. Worship spaces should be interfaith or at least equitably accessible to all religious groups, as seen in Nusa Dua, Bali. Essential services must serve diverse needs, including during observances such as Ramadan, so that academic activities can continue. The presence of international students often leads to more inclusive accommodations, such as diverse dining options and library resources that cater to various practices and views.

Finally, universities must support diverse student organizations and intercultural programs while banning exclusivist groups that undermine multicultural values. Supporting peace-focused organizations can encourage cross-cultural dialogue and global awareness. Universities should also encourage student engagement in issues that affect both Indonesia and the world, building international solidarity.

DISCUSSION

This study provides theoretical insights into the importance of institutional support for diversity as a means to foster student development and democratic prosperity, with specific contextual relevance to Indonesia. As posited by Chavous (2005) and Robinson and Preston (1976), authorities’ encouragement for intercultural contact is vital not only for individual learning but also for broader national well-being.

Strategic admissions, scholarships, and bridge programs ensure that a variety of students not only gain access to but also thrive in higher education. While race is central to U.S. research, identity markers in Indonesia encompass origin, religion, and ethnicity, which includes language, with additional weight on intragroup variations (Antonio, 2001; Brubaker, 2002; Ellison & Powers, 1994;

Halualani, 2008; Halualani et al., 2004). A broad range of disciplines is also critical in addressing national needs and strengthening national capacity.

Once students from various backgrounds enter the university, opportunities for meaningful contact are created through service-learning, student organizations, and personal relationships. These spaces align with contact theory's conditions for prejudice reduction—equal status, voluntary participation, shared goals, rich interaction, and institutional support (Chavous, 2005; Robinson & Preston, 1976). The intent is to encourage students to interact daily, such as through rooming, dining, studying, and socializing (Antonio, 2001; Engberg, 2004). College-led experiences create both a contact zone and a psychological moratorium—a time for immersion, experimentation, and growth (Gurin et al., 2002, 2004; Pratt, 1991).

At the micro level, students overwhelmingly report that campus diversity challenges stereotypes, fosters knowledge, and sharpens collaboration (Antonio, 2001, 2004; Gurin et al., 2002; Halualani, 2008; Halualani et al., 2004; Nagda & Gurin, 2007; Sorensen et al., 2009; Wright et al., 1997). They experience counterstereotypical exemplars and overcome prejudice. These interactions enhance intellectual engagement, perspective-taking, and intercultural understanding. Students collaborate across academic disciplines, interests, and identities, softening boundaries and sharing resources as human capital (Duara, 1996; Hershock, 2010, 2012; Parekh, 2000).

At the macro level, diversity is not just a numerical issue but also a vital tool for national unity, democratic resilience, and equitable development. Professors and alumni argue that student diversity is crucial for effective leadership—supporting theoretical arguments that mutually enriching differences contribute to a thriving ecosystem (Hershock, 2010, 2012; Parekh, 2000). This idea underpins the university's affirmative action policies, which extend beyond quotas to include nationally responsive recruitment, support, and programs.

However, the discussion must also acknowledge the limitations and contradictions of contact in practice (Antonio, 2004; Barna, 1998; Dixon et al., 2005; Duster, 2009; Halualani, 2008; Halualani et al., 2004; Pettigrew, 2021; Sorensen et al., 2009). Despite institutional efforts, students from outer islands remain underrepresented, and non-Muslim and non-Javanese students often experience exclusion in leadership roles and cultural expression. These findings echo theoretical concerns that, in the absence of sustained affirmative support, campus spaces can become segregated and unequal. Minority students describe emotional labor and the risk of identity erosion, compounded by a lack of institutional infrastructure for nonmajority groups.

Groupism and self-segregation, as discussed in theory (Brubaker, 2002; Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988; Shin, 2006), emerged as key dynamics, especially among conservative Muslim students. These students often limit contact with narrowly defined Muslim communities, excluding LGBTQ+, Shia, Ahmadiyya, and Kejawan peers as “black sheep.” The influence of groups such as KAMMI reveals how student organizations can perpetuate exclusion rather than inclusion and how ideological polarization undermines the transformative potential of contact (Dalton, 1991; Dixon et al., 2005; Duara, 1996; Grimmitt, 1987; Jiang,

2006). This aligns with Hershock's (2010) contrasting metaphor of the "zoo," where differences coexist without genuine integration.

Moreover, the infiltration of fundamentalist ideologies into formal educational structures—such as the Islamic Assistance Program—raises concerns about academic neutrality and freedom. Students' testimonies about grade penalties and indoctrination indicate the erosion of the shared, safe, and voluntary spaces necessary for meaningful intercultural engagement (Chavous, 2005; Dalton, 1991; Robinson & Preston, 1976). These findings highlight the need for institutional oversight, clear boundaries between ideology and pedagogy, and support for pluralist student initiatives.

Nevertheless, despite these tensions, many students remain committed to pluralism. They plan to maintain diverse friendships, raise interculturally aware children, and contribute to national unity, demonstrating that the university has successfully nurtured civic consciousness. The consistent demand for further institutional support suggests that students not only experience diversity but also value and want to protect it. They advocate for active university leadership—through faculty modeling, inclusive facilities, intercultural student organizations, and firm action against exclusivist groups.

CONCLUSION

This study advances theoretical claims about the impact of intercultural contact and underscores the central role of institutional support in translating student diversity into democratic flourishing. Campus diversity fosters collaborative capacity and civic growth when intentional policies and meaningful initiatives accompany it. In other words, the benefits of contact are not automatic—they depend on sustained institutional commitment.

This chapter also refines existing intercultural theories by situating them within Indonesia's distinctive sociopolitical landscape, where demographic asymmetries, ideological contestations, and historical legacies shape the dynamics of university life. In Indonesia, intercultural contact unfolds primarily along regional, ethnic, and religious lines rather than racial categories, which are typically emphasized in U.S. scholarship. For many students, these encounters represent the most formative and memorable aspect of their university experience, offering a rare opportunity to engage with the full breadth of the archipelago in a single setting. Such interactions occur through service learning, student organizations, and everyday social exchanges, fostering transformative knowledge and skills essential for the nation's future—such as perspective-taking, intercultural collaboration, and the recognition of counterstereotypical exemplars across identities, interests, and disciplines.

Negative contact is uncommon and generally associated with religious exclusivist organizations or perceived inequities affecting minority students. Intercultural initiatives should also include students in STEM fields, who may be more vulnerable to religious indoctrination due to their relative isolation from civic discourse.

Universities occupy a unique position in society as spaces where young people gather during a critical developmental period. Intercultural coexistence in these settings can yield significant educational benefits, as students learn with and from one another. However, these benefits are not self-generating; institutions must actively cultivate meaningful interactions. The Indonesian case reinforces broader scholarly insights: universities must move beyond mere numerical representation to build dynamic ecosystems in which differences are not only present but also actively engaged in mutually enriching ways.

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Author bio

CHIARA LOGLI, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor and Institutional Assessment Specialist at Honolulu Community College (Hawai'i, USA). Her research centers on international and comparative education. She holds an M.A. in political science from the University of Bologna (Italy) and a Ph.D. in educational foundations/international cultural studies from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. She has held professional roles at the University of California Berkeley's International House and the University of California Santa Barbara's Multicultural Center, and she has taught college-level courses in the USA and Indonesia. Her project experience includes work with UNICEF, UNDP, USAID, the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, CAST/International Baccalaureate Schools, and Italian Consulate. She is the recipient of fellowships from the European Union's Erasmus/Leonardo Program, Rotary International Peace Program in Thailand, East–West Center, Foreign Language and Area Studies Program, and United States–Indonesia Society. Email: logli@hawaii.edu
