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ACCULTURATION AND SENSE OF BELONGING: ENGAGEMENT PATTERNS FOR INDIAN GRADUATE STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

Graduate international students often experience cultural, academic, and social changes while transitioning to U.S. educational environments. How can college administrators better support and engage them for increased personal and professional success? Findings from this qualitative study on graduate students from India revealed key themes driving the engagement patterns of international students while navigating acculturation stressors and transition barriers. Data also showed the significance of how adjustment factors affect the nature of graduate international student engagement. Filling voids in relevant literature, acculturative factors that emerged in the study— including: linguistic, academic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and financial challenges— showed how cultural differences influenced the experiences of the studied population.

INTRODUCTION

Students from India have consistently ranked one of the top international college student populations in the United States. Driven by graduate enrollment growth, their numbers increased by over 29 percent in 2014/15 to reach 132,888 (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2015). Despite the prevalence of Indian students at U.S. institutions, relatively little research exists on their adjustment experiences and the ways in which they engage on college campuses (Rahman & Rollock, 2004). While previous studies examined challenges of adjustment for international students (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006), a large number of these focused on international students in general and grouped students by region, overlooking potential cultural differences that exist within each region (Mukminin & McMahon, 2013; Trice, 2004). Furthermore, literature on the relationship between acculturation and student engagement is largely limited (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). Resulting in a lack of qualitative research on graduate international students, most studies use large-scale, quantitative surveys that do not differentiate between the experiences of undergraduate and graduate international students (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011). Existing studies on graduate international students largely include students at institutions outside the U.S. (Coles & Swami, 2012; Myles & Cheng, 2003). Hence, current data does not adequately represent the lived experiences of these students on U.S. campuses. Therefore, this study aimed to explore key factors influencing the adjustment and engagement experiences of Indian graduate students at a Midwestern U.S. university through three main perspectives: mentoring relationships, socialization, and factors of perception. Specifically, the study aimed to explore answers to the following research questions: 1) What
factors influence graduate international student adjustment?, and 2) How do these factors impact interactions with peers and faculty, participation in campus social and educational initiatives, and sense of belonging?

METHODS

The study was conducted at a private, religiously-affiliated university situated in the Midwest with a predominantly white student population. The university grants bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees in several disciplines. With a total student population around 10,000, international students make up slightly over 30 percent of the graduate student population, among which students from India are the second-largest subpopulation. The study involved 16 Indian graduate students (4 female; 12 male); 13 master’s students, and three doctoral students. All participants were pursuing degrees in computer science or engineering with varying durations of stay in the U.S. from a few months to four years.

FINDINGS

Three key themes influencing the adjustment and engagement of graduate Indian students are presented in this section: mentoring relationships, socialization, and factors of perception.

Mentoring Relationships

Interviewed students who expressed a sense of belonging and perceived themselves to be academically and socially adjusted to the university identified significant individuals such as faculty, coworkers, and staff who served as mentors and sources of academic or cultural knowledge, challenged students to grow, and supported them in their adjustment process. Most students who indicated that they felt well-adjusted to their academic program mentioned faculty members who were supportive through new academic experiences. All of the students interviewed were employed part-time on campus, and a few described seeing supervisors or coworkers as parental figures or mentors who helped them through homesickness and cultural adjustment, and increased their feelings of belonging on campus. Moreover, students participated in a program hosted by the international student services office that paired incoming students with staff and their families. They met regularly with students and invited them to their homes during holidays such as Christmas and Thanksgiving. Students described how his assigned family taught them how to behave according to U.S. cultural values and developed a very close relationship with their assigned families.

Socialization

Social ties were both an advancing factor and a product of students’ engagement and involvement on campus. Different types of interactions influenced the social, cultural, and academic adjustment of students in varying ways. Friendships with U.S. students increased students’ cultural adjustment and opened up access to academic and social opportunities, while interactions with other international students influenced participants’ global knowledge and provided a sense of social support. Relationships based on shared cultural values, such as co-national friendships, tended to be formed first and served as sources of support prior to and after students arrived on campus. Among the three types of social ties identified by participants,
friendships based on shared cultural values were predominant, followed by friendships with other international students and friendships with Americans.

Perceived self-efficacy

Factors influencing perceived self-efficacy, such as fear and language-related challenges, also affected the engagement levels of students and their willingness to be involved on campus. Students who shared that they had very few to no interactions with U.S. students talked about fear being a major barrier in preventing them from participating in activities on campus or stepping out of their comfort zone. This fear presented itself in different forms, such as uncertainty regarding how to navigate social and cultural norms, fear of being discriminated against or being ostracized, and an aversion to discomfort. Language was another particular barrier to communication that lowered students' perceived self-efficacy and subsequent willingness to engage in interaction with others. Though students studied English in their education in India, they struggled with the pace of conversation and slang that their American peers used. As English in India was British-influenced, students had to adjust from terms that they were accustomed to using to words and phrases that their peers used.

Perception of engagement

As graduate students, most students perceived academic achievement and completing their degree to be their first priority, expressing that they had chosen the U.S. based on positive perspectives of the education system and the career benefits such an education would afford them. This emphasis on fulfilling academic needs often took precedence over social involvement. In particular, the three doctoral students interviewed were very engaged academically due to strong relationships with their advisors that increased their interest and commitment to research. They were also highly involved in academic-related opportunities such as joining and volunteering with professional organizations, presenting at conferences, and teaching undergraduate students.

DISCUSSION

In examining the adjustment and engagement of Indian students, high-quality relationships were found instrumental to facilitating transition and positively influencing academic and social engagement on campus. As Indian students considered academics and completing their degree to be their main priority in being in the U.S., the relationships they had with faculty members were crucial to their university experience. Interviewed students who indicated close personal and professional relationships with their faculty members also expressed higher levels of satisfaction with their overall experience in the U.S., reinforcing the significance of faculty as a form of social support for international students (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992).

Students also mentioned ethnicity and perceived cultural similarities as factors in gravitating toward certain faculty members. Findings also revealed that some Indian students reported the role of parental figures in their workplace and on-campus pairing programs hosted by the international office. Such relationships with university staff were significant for several
reasons: they provided students with useful cultural knowledge on how to adjust to cultural and social norms, and also buffered acculturative stress, reducing homesickness among students and increasing their sense of belonging.

Essential to the findings was Bhugra’s argument (2004) that cultural identity consists of several aspects including language and rituals, and adhering to these cultural markers assists individuals in feeling part of their culture during acculturation. Low ethnic density or the size of an ethnic group compared to the overall population in a location, and the dissonance that occurs when an individual’s cultural characteristics varies from their surrounding population, can lead to feelings of isolation (Bhugra & Becker, 2005).

Though many participants expressed a willingness to be involved on campus and to engage in more interactions with U.S. students, they encountered varying factors that affected their ability to be engaged on campus, including: fear, language-related difficulties, conflicting class and work schedules, academic priorities, financial pressures, and dietary restrictions. Results also revealed the role of student organizations in international student adjustment. While all students mentioned one form or other of acculturative stress that corresponded with existing literature (e.g. Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006), students who contacted the Indian student organization on campus encountered less stress in their initial transition to the U.S.

Students also identified relationships with faculty, staff, and peers as sources of support that buffered adjustment stress, though different types of connections had varying implications on how they engaged on campus. Students who developed strong relationships with professors were more academically engaged, but this focus on academic engagement also correlated with lower social involvement and fewer interactions with peers, though it did not seem to affect the sense of belonging to the institution.

When it came to making friendships, frequency of contact was instrumental to deepened relationships, which acted as an incentive for students to be more involved and also increased perceived social support. Social ties that students formed with American and other international students also increased their motivation to participate in social initiatives on campus, and which further expanded the opportunities they had to interact with others, increasing their social circles.

Overall, this study found that the adjustment process of Indian students impacted how they engaged academically and socially on campus. Additionally, an interdependent relationship was further found between academic and social engagement, with an increase in academic engagement corresponding with a decrease in social involvement, and vice versa. In particular, social interactions and social support in the adjustment process were crucial to buffering acculturative stress and influencing student engagement. Students who described themselves to be better adjusted were more likely to feel a sense of belonging to the campus community, though higher cultural adjustment did not necessarily predict their level of participation in social or academic activities. However, high student involvement in academic and social activities reinforced students’ cultural and academic adjustment through increased interactions and feelings of social support.
FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Few limitations surrounded the nature of this study. As the sample was limited to a specific population of international students within an institution, the findings from this study are not necessarily generalizable to all Indian student populations at other institutions. Additionally, since the study focused on Indian graduate student adjustment and engagement, where master’s students were focused on completing their program within two years and doctoral students were involved in research, it would be interesting to see if this emphasis on academic achievement over social involvement remained the same for Indian undergraduate students in the U.S.

REFERENCES


