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Encountering American Higher Education: First-Year Academic Transition of International Undergraduate Students in the United States

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Abstract

This study explored how international undergraduate students perceive their academic transition into American higher education. Schlossberg's (1984) 4S Transition Theory served as the framework for exploring what academic challenges, if any, international students experience during their first year of undergraduate studies in a new cultural and educational setting. The findings revealed that students' academic transition into the U.S. higher education was characterized by difficulties in understanding the academic system of their new environment; overcoming educational, instructional and pedagogical differences; building social relationships with domestic students; and receiving the support necessary from the appropriate institutional services.

Keywords: student success, teaching and learning, college adjustment

Introduction

In the 2018-2019 academic year, the United States set a global record in the number of international students hosted in a single country. According to the Institute of International Education (2019), 1,095,299 students from around the world chose to pursue their higher education in the United States. This phenomenon has benefited U.S. higher education institutions by making them more attractive among global competitors, and it has provided support for the economy in numerous ways. Although the financial benefits to the United States have been significant, the advantages of high international student enrollments extend far beyond economic value. Global learners bring immeasurable academic and cultural value to their host institutions and communities. These students make significant contributions to under-enrolled programs and disciplines such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), thus supporting the national initiative of increasing enrollments in these fields (Institute of International Education, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Collaboration with international students has multiple positive outcomes for domestic students from other disciplines as well, as it can significantly increase their knowledge and expertise in various areas, from career and technical skills to language and cultural competencies (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013).

As a result of this phenomenon, scholars and educators have been investing in increased efforts to better understand and support this student population, to ensure their smooth transition to new educational settings, and to facilitate their academic progress. With international students

constituting a substantial portion of college students in the U.S., the scholarship in this field continues to grow, focusing on different educational settings and student sub-populations.

An extensive review of contemporary literature conducted for this study revealed that researchers have mainly distinguished between undergraduate and graduate learners. As a result, the undergraduate population has often been perceived as a homogenous group, even though many researchers have already agreed that no generalizations should be made regarding international student experiences and adjustment (Heng, 2019; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Wu et al., 2015). Despite these findings, very little research has been conducted regarding first-year undergraduate international students as a distinct sub-population.

This limitation in the literature becomes even more evident in the context of the research on the first-year experience of domestic students and the effectiveness of first-year programs designed to make students' transitions smoother and successful. Researchers have identified the first-year experience of college students as a decisive factor in academic success, retention, and graduation (Connolly et al., 2017). Furthermore, the unique challenges and barriers pertaining specifically to first-year students have been documented in the literature as an international phenomenon (Whitehead, 2012). In their attempts to better understand this phenomenon, scholars have noted that the barriers that incoming students face are multi-faceted and context specific. Consequently, the factors affecting first-year student transition, learning attitudes and behaviors, and overall success were found to be very diverse and hard to predict, ranging from site-specific institutional characteristics to student socio-cultural attributes (Krsmanovic et al., 2020; Whitehead, 2012).

To address these deficiencies, this phenomenological research sought to understand how international students transitioning to a large research institution in the southeast region of the United States perceived and described their academic adjustment. Specifically, this inquiry addressed the following research question: What academic challenges, if any, do international undergraduate students in the United States experience during their first year of college?

Literature Review

Challenges to Academic Transition

A positive academic transition may be a particularly hard goal to achieve for international students as it requires them to make sense of and become accustomed to practices of their host institutions which, quite often, can be very different from those of their home countries. Such an argument is supported by the scholarly evidence demonstrating that international and domestic undergraduate students significantly differed in their levels of satisfaction with their college experience, with international students being much less satisfied (Kim et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2015). Moreover, the same findings illustrated that students' satisfaction with their academic experience served as an important predictor of their cognitive engagement and development. Due to these low levels of satisfaction and cognitive development, international undergraduate students displayed low levels of classroom engagement and invested their academic efforts outside the class.

It is also interesting to note that international students identified similar barriers to their academic adjustment, regardless of their country of origin. These barriers mainly included faculty-student relations, classroom communication, familiarity with the U.S. educational system, and

understanding the institutional culture and academic resources (Kim et al., 2017; Leong, 2015). Additional barriers were recorded in the areas of writing proficiency and completing unfamiliar types of writing assignments (Curtis, 2019) and students' lack of familiarity with educational practices (Chen, 2018). Further, Mamiseishvili (2012a, 2012b) highlighted that international student second-year persistence was strongly related to students' degree plans, academic integration, academic advising, and faculty interactions. For example, international first-year students were much more likely to re-enroll if they had frequent meetings with their professors and advisors. However, it is alarming that the same findings also indicated that almost 40% of these students had never met with their academic advisor during their freshman year.

Next, international undergraduate students were found to be particularly challenged by engaging in a research process and developing information literacy skills (Avery, 2017), as well as being actively involved in critical reasoning classroom activities (Kim et al., 2017), all of which constitute an integral element of undergraduate student success. As documented by Kim et al. (2017), engaging in a research process with a faculty mentor served as a powerful predictor of cognitive skills development among international juniors and seniors. Similarly, connecting with faculty members early in one's academic journey and seeking mentorship was identified as one of the most important factors in academic integration and success of non-domestic undergraduates (Kim et al., 2017; Mamiseishvili, 2012b). Despite all these findings, the recurring evidence continued to illustrate that international undergraduate students were much less likely than their domestic peers to establish relationships with faculty or seek support, mentorship, or feedback (Kim et al., 2015, 2017; Leong, 2015). The importance of early intervention was further demonstrated by the recent finding that, among the first-year international students in the United States, the patterns of separation, either voluntary or involuntary, was the most frequently adopted acculturation strategy, superseding both integration and assimilation (Krsmanovic, 2020). This finding is not surprising knowing that international students consistently reported lower levels of social satisfaction and feelings of not being welcome and respected on campus (Horne et al., 2018).

Contributors to Academic Transition

On a positive note, the literature on the academic adjustment of international undergraduate students identified several practices that can alleviate their initial challenges. For example, Mamiseishvili (2012a) found that having clearly set degree plans and aspirations positively affected international students' persistence. This particular assumption had already been confirmed by previous scholarly work which revealed that having a strong commitment to academic goals served as a powerful motivator for international undergraduate students to persist in college (Andrade & Evans, 2009). Consequently, it is not surprising that international undergraduate students have been shown to dedicate significantly more time and effort to academics and curricular activities than their domestic peers and have purposefully sought educational activities in which to participate (Zhao et al., 2005).

Academic advising and faculty interactions constitute another significant factor in the first-year success and persistence of international students (Mamiseishvili, 2012b), as well as their overall undergraduate success (Kim et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2017). Furthermore, research engagement with faculty, satisfaction with advising experience, and extracurricular engagement were all recognized as important predictors of their cognitive skills development (Kim et al., 2015).

In addition to the academic factors found to be conducive to international student transition, a socio-academic integration was identified as an instrumental element for fostering the sense of belonging among this student group. Specifically, several scholars have argued that a successful transition for international students cannot be accomplished without accounting for the social aspect of their experiences (Garcia et al., 2019). Thus, they advocated for re-envisioning campus diversity by providing an integrated system of academic and sociocultural support for this student group (Lee et al., 2019).

Undoubtedly, successful academic and social integration are critical components of international student success, which is not surprising knowing that academic and social enrichment are leading motivators for global learners to study in the United States (Haisley et al., 2021). However, the presented findings may allow one to argue that international undergraduates encounter an additional, and a unique, set of challenges to their academic adjustment. Consequently, the role of institutional support during the first year of college becomes even more critical as these students attempt to transition to U.S. higher education and succeed academically. As this review of the literature elucidated, international undergraduate students greatly benefited from additional guidance and resources strategically developed to support their academic transition from high school to college but, more importantly, from one cultural setting to another. Thus, the national efforts for promoting the success of First Time in College students need to be accompanied by additional empirical investigations addressing the needs of the international student population.

Theoretical Framework

Schlossberg (1984) argued that all transitions are characterized by certain common features that can be recognized among the adjustments of all types, contexts, and impacts. These features represent potential strengths or deficits that individuals bring to a transition and shape the possible ways in which they adjust to new life events and circumstances. These can be grouped into four major categories, traditionally defined as the Four S's: (a) *Situation*, (b) *Self*, (c) *Supports*, and (d) *Strategies*.

Applying the factor of Situation to the context of this study allowed the researcher to examine how situational characteristics influenced the academic transition of each participant. Specifically, the Situation factor served as the framework for identifying different characteristics of international students' academic transition which acted as potential assets or liabilities and, consequently, accelerated or inhibited the transition process.

The application of the Self factor provided the researcher with an opportunity to examine how international students' personal and psychological resources affected their academic transition. The fundamental purpose of applying the Self factor to this research was to investigate how different personal characteristics that international undergraduate students brought to the transition served as either assets or liabilities during the process.

The factor of Support was of relevance for this research as the tool for exploring what First-Year Experience (FYE) programs and services, if any, served as a support to international undergraduate students transitioning to the U.S. higher education. In that regard, the application of Schlossberg's model allowed the researcher to examine the function and role of institutional programming in international students' academic transition.

This factor of Strategies includes possible coping mechanisms that individuals can develop and apply to respond to a transition. The factor of Strategies is particularly applicable to this research, as the fundamental purpose of this study was to examine the strategies and academic behaviors that international undergraduate students adopt during their transition to U.S. higher education.

Research Design

The research design guiding this study was descriptive phenomenology. Structuring this study as a phenomenological inquiry allowed the researcher to explore participants' experiences and the shared commonalities as they experience a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The main assumption in such an exploration is the existence of essence to a shared experience (Patton, 2015). Thus, the purpose of this study was to portray the essence of international students' experiences with a phenomenon of academic transition to a U.S. institution of higher education.

Setting and Participants

The participants of this study attended a large public university in a metropolitan area in the southeast United States, with undergraduate enrollments greater than 20,000 and an incoming first-year student population of approximately 4,000. The university serves a diverse population of learners. During the 2018 academic year, when this study was conducted, approximately 49% of students were White, 25% were Hispanic, 11% were Black, 6% were Asian, and 4% were international students.

The sample of this study was drawn from the general population of first-year international students who were recruited through the Office of International Student Services. In selecting the number of participants for this study, the researcher applied a frequently adopted recommendation for participant selection in phenomenological research and aimed to recruit up to 10 participants (Cohen et al., 2000; Dukes, 1984).

Data Collection

Upon obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board, the researcher contacted International Student Services and obtained email addresses of all international first-year undergraduate students who were invited to participate in the research. At the time of the study, the institution enrolled 198 international first-year students. The first invitation mail was sent to all students from the list and resulted in five participants volunteering to take part in the research. Before sending the second invitation, the researcher conducted a second level of sampling. To maximize the diversity of the sample and the heterogeneity of participants' experiences, the researcher carefully examined the demographic information of students who had volunteered to participate. Then, the researcher attempted to increase the heterogeneity of her sample by sending the second invitation only to students from countries and academic majors that were not yet represented in the sample. After selecting five more participants from the students who responded to the second invitation, the researcher attained a diverse sample represented by students from ten countries and ten academic majors.

Once the interview participants were recruited, the researcher sent a request to schedule an individual face-to-face interview with each student. All interviews were audio-recorded, and participants were informed of this in advance. All audio recordings were transcribed by the

researcher immediately after the interview. According to Siedman (2006), by transcribing their own audio materials, interviewers become more familiar with the content of their interviews.

Instrument

Moustakas (1994) defined a phenomenological interview as an intentional, conversational, and interactive interview consisting of open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' experiences. Similarly, Siedman (2006) described it as the interview approach adaptable to a wide range of topics and composed of open-ended questions designed to explore and build upon participants' responses to those questions. The open-ended questions in the present study were developed to elicit participants' perceptions about the research questions developed for this study. The interview guide used in this research is presented in the Appendix. Specifically, the interview guide used for this research focused on eliciting participants narratives about the following experiences: educational background and prior academic experience, overall first-year experience, the transition to the U.S. higher education, academic experiences, academic challenges (if any), and coping mechanisms (if any). The interviews ranged between 30 minutes and one hour.

Data Analysis

In total, 10 international students in their first year of undergraduate studies participated in this research. The demographics of the participants are displayed in Table 1. As illustrated, the sample was comprised of 10 students from 10 countries, nine academic majors, three enrolling cohorts (spring, summer, fall, 2018), with a male to female ratio of 6 to 4.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Country / Nationality	Academic Major	2018 Cohort
Participant 1	Male	Oman	Computer Science	Spring
Participant 2	Male	Iran/UAE	Mechanical Engineering	Spring
Participant 3	Male	Pakistan	Marketing	Summer
Participant 4	Male	India	Electrical Engineering	Fall
Participant 5	Female	Brazil	Forensic Science	Fall
Participant 6	Female	Ukraine	Psychology	Fall
Participant 7	Male	Macao/China	Hospitality Management	Fall
Participant 8	Female	Mexico	Theatre	Fall
Participant 9	Female	Bolivia	Architecture	Fall
Participant 10	Male	Russia	Computer Science	Fall

In analyzing the interview transcripts, the researcher applied Saldana's (2012) structural coding which was selected as the most appropriate analysis tool due to its wide use in exploratory investigations aimed to produce topics, themes, or categories related to a specific research question. In particular, structural coding involved examining the data to identify commonalities, differences, and relationships among participants' narratives. Specifically, the researcher followed several steps to obtain a rich description of the phenomenon.

First, the researcher transcribed all interviews verbatim to become more familiar with their content. This first step also included prolonged engagement with the data by reading and re-reading each transcript. Next, the researcher identified the participants' responses which described their experiences with the phenomenon of academic adjustment and their views of these experiences. This step involved grouping significant statements into larger units of meaning. Specifically, the

researcher sought to assign meanings to each of the units or themes describing different aspects of students' academic experiences. To facilitate this step, the researcher developed a table of formulated meanings and the associated significant statements.

Next, the identified unit of meanings (i.e., themes) were organized into clusters. This objective was achieved by carefully examining emerging elements common to all participants as they experienced the phenomenon and the ways in which these themes could be grouped. Finally, the researcher described the phenomenon. By incorporating all descriptions of students' academic experiences, a rich, thick, and comprehensive description of the phenomenon was provided. In addition to including all formulated meanings, themes, and theme clusters, the description also comprised the meanings derived from the theoretical framework. In describing the essence or fundamental structure of the phenomenon, the researcher reduced the extensive description of the phenomenon by eliminating redundant statements, meanings, themes, and theme clusters. Doing so allowed the researcher to portray the essence of the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

To minimize validity threats or the ways in which the researcher may have been wrong in the interpretation of the findings, several trustworthiness strategies were implemented. First, clarifying researcher bias at the very beginning of any qualitative research is essential for providing the reader with an understanding of the researcher's stance toward the study, as well as any underlying assumptions that may guide the research (Creswell, 2013). It is important to disclose that the author of this study is an international faculty member at a U.S. university. As such, the researcher's norms, values, and beliefs provided the lens through which this phenomenon was viewed and researched. Bracketing the researcher's own assumptions about the phenomenon allowed the influences that originated from personal experience to be minimized (Moustakas, 1994).

The second strategy was being attentive to the emergence of any negative, extreme, or discrepant cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This strategy allowed for the inclusion of data that provided alternative descriptions or explanations of the phenomenon. Namely, the researcher remained open to both recognizing the patterns of the theoretical framework and to any evidence that deviated from or disconfirmed the main constructs identified in the framework. By being open to the possibility that not all emerging evidence would fit the pattern of pre-determined codes and themes, the researcher provided an objective investigation and representation of the studied phenomenon.

After transcribing the interview responses, all transcripts were sent to participants to view for accuracy and intent. This approach provided all participants with an opportunity to review their interview transcripts, examine their recorded responses, and provide feedback about the accuracy of these accounts. Reviewing transcripts of their interviews allowed the participants to add any additional insights which might have been omitted during the interview process and, more importantly, to remove any parts of their narratives that they no longer were comfortable sharing.

Findings

After examining students' responses to these questions, four themes emerged in connection to participants' experiences: (a) understanding the academic system of their new environment, (b)

overcoming educational, instructional and pedagogical differences, (c) building social relationships with domestic students, and (d) and receiving the support necessary from the appropriate institutional services. Table 2 illustrates the common themes from all 10 participants regarding the academic transition they experienced during the first year of college.

Table 2. Thematic Results for the Research Question

Theme	Participant									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Understanding the academic system	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓
2. Overcoming differences		✓	✓		✓		✓		✓	✓
3. Building social relationships	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
4. Lack of support		✓				✓		✓		

Theme 1: Understanding the Academic System

Of the 10 participants interviewed for this study, seven shared that it was hard for them to understand the educational system in the U.S., thus making this theme one of the most common challenges they experienced during the first year of college. Three participants shared that their first year of college was characterized by difficulties in not only understanding the academic requirements of a particular major but also navigating the process of major exploration.

For example, Participant Five explained that she would have benefited greatly during her first year if someone had explained what her major entailed. She added that reading the major description online was only somewhat useful as she did not know whom to ask for further clarification. Additionally, not having any major classes during the first year further elevated her concerns about the choice she made. Learning what different majors consist of in terms of coursework and expectations would have alleviated her anxiety and given her much needed peace of mind.

For Participant Ten, coming to the U.S. with a clearly defined choice of major did not reduce his feelings of distress as he did not fully understand what his major entailed or what his academic path would look like over the next four years:

So, the thing that we should learn in the first semester is the whole route in the university and how it will be from the very beginning to the very end, but also right after the university. Because many of us don't know. For an international student, it is important to talk about these things in their first semester to make the way.

For two participants, understanding the requirements of general education, or the concept of general education itself was particularly challenging during their first year. Participant Two and Participant Three both ascribed this challenge to the fact that in their respective home countries', Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates, general education is a foreign concept.

For instance, Participant 2 was stunned to learn that American students can enter college having already met many of the general education requirements.

American curriculum was completely new to me. High schools in America are really high level, so I heard that a lot of people already took their general education classes in their high schools. But I didn't even know what that is.

For Participant Six and Participant Ten, one of the most challenging aspects of their first year was learning about campus resources and opportunities, as well as identifying the opportunities in which they, as international students, could participate. As Participant Six explained:

We don't know how the university works here. The community, the university, the facilities we have. We don't know about any of that. Someone should teach us the ways how to research things. I asked the professor about experiential learning and internships for international students, but I felt that he didn't even understand it either. It would be great if someone actually explained this information; not only where to go but to give us some follow-up about what we could or couldn't do as international students.

It is interesting to note that Participant Ten reiterated a similar experience by explaining that upon entering college, he was informed that he should participate in an internship; that the university offers plenty of opportunities of that kind; and that having an internship would be very important for his success during and beyond college. What remained missing from these recommendations, however, was more precise guidance on how such opportunities could be pursued: "No one even told us how we should get it, where should we go. Right now, I'm searching for that information on my own."

Theme 2: Overcoming Differences

The third theme that emerged from participant's narratives about their academic transition related to overcoming the differences between U.S. higher education and the educational systems of their home countries. From the sample of 10 students, six participants identified academic differences as a factor that impeded their successful transition to the new educational setting.

Of the participants who shared that they were challenged by unforeseen academic differences, five students defined these experiences as difficulties in understanding course terminology. As many of them clarified, these difficulties did not stem from studying in another language, as they consider themselves fluent in English. From their perspectives, this challenge was the outcome of different academic structures and terminologies that were foreign to the education in their home countries. Some examples that participants shared included U.S measurement systems, grading scales, and GPA calculation system.

For some participants, such as Participant Ten, unforeseen differences had a substantial negative impact on their academic self-efficacy and made them doubt their ability to successfully perform in a particular class. For example, before coming to the U.S., Participant Ten passed his mathematics placement test with an exemplary score. Consequently, he was placed in an advanced mathematics class instead of an intermediate one. However, Participant Ten did not perceive this as an accomplishment. Instead, he was overwhelmed with fear, anxiety, and self-doubt:

I was very scared of American math. I came to my advisor and I said—No, I will not take this math. I cannot do it. But after talking to her, I said OK. And I had an A for that class. But I was really scared at first. I was scared that it's going to be different. Because American math is way more different than in Russia. It's completely different. For example, the names of the formulas, some definitions, and the way how they write it.

For other students, this theme was extrapolated from their narratives about their difficulties in demonstrating content mastery through written assignments. As two students explained, these

difficulties were not the outcome of language barriers, but the result of either cultural differences or the lack of prior academic experiences of that kind.

For Participant Seven, writing papers constituted the greatest challenge during his first year of college. As he explained, despite fully mastering the course content, the actual writing process was particularly difficult due to his deeply rooted Chinese values, customs, and habits:

The biggest challenge for me would be writing because I cannot think in a Western culture way, to write something in a Western style. My thinking style, my process of thought, is mainly in Chinese. The values are different, so I have to adjust my way and learn how to write here.

Theme 3: Building Social Relationships

Equally common as the challenge of understanding the U.S. education was the challenge of building social relationships with domestic students. Seven of the 10 study participants expressed that their first year of college was marked by their inability to make domestic friends. Some participants immediately reported this factor as the dominant transitional challenge. For others, however, this theme emerged as they spoke about their social support system and disappointedly revealed that it consisted only of other international students.

As a former psychology major, Participant Seven spent considerable time discussing the importance of having a strong social support system in college. His success, Participant Seven believes, greatly depended on his ability to nurture relationships with others:

Your life success does not depend only on academics. Academics are important, but so is building friendships with others or maybe looking for some interest outside the academics or thinking about any other ways you can build your career in your future.

Unlike their peers who struggled even to establish contact with American students, the challenges of Participant Two and Participant Six were somewhat different. For them, this phenomenon was reflected in their inability to maintain contact with American peers with whom they successfully interacted. After encountering this challenge repeatedly during his first year, Participant Two developed a coping mechanism of not giving too much consideration to it and passively accepting the situation: “I try to hang out with people here, but after they spend some time with me, they kind of quietly stay away. I don’t know why. I guess I’m just not really fun to hang out with.”

Participant Six, on the other hand, was determined not to resort to passive forbearance. She was adamant in her intention to understand why her contacts with domestic students never grew into something more. As a psychology major, Participant Six has a strong passion for truly understanding this phenomenon:

My main goal before coming here was to adapt to the society and make friends with Americans. But when I came, I realized that I am too far from understanding how their mind works. Americans, they can share, but they are not completely eager to ... I mean, communication and sharing is ok for them, but keeping in touch, keeping in close touch, becoming friends [emphasizes “becoming”]... And not even being friends, but becoming [emphasizes “becoming”] ... I just cannot understand what’s the algorithm for that is (Participant Six).

Theme 4: Lack of Support

The final theme was developed from students' accounts of either limited institutional understanding of their academic challenges or promoting the institutional opportunities in which they, as international students, could not participate. For some participants in this study, the most prominent challenge in their first year was perceiving university personnel as either not willing or not able to understand the academic challenges they were experiencing. For example, Participant Eight explained that she was one of the very few international students who intended to major in arts and humanities. As a result, many of her questions regarding the academic requirements of that major remained unanswered:

They [international student advisors] had no clue how to help me or no clue what I had to do. So, they took a lot of time to figure out how they could help me. I think they should be a bit more prepared knowing that this is a campus that offers literally every career, including that one. And knowing that there's people from all over the world who are going to want to come and study different things. So, they should be a bit more prepared in that way.

For two participants, the experiences related to this theme were manifested in them becoming discouraged from investing their full efforts into academic tasks, due to knowing that many opportunities available to their domestic peers would not be available to them. For Participant Two, this challenge was directly related to the lack of financial aid opportunities for international students:

I was thinking that if I get straight As I will get some kind of support from the university. But that's apparently not the case. The university is completely ignoring international students. In their eyes, every international student is getting financial aid from their government. But we don't. And it's not even about the money. For us, there is no difference between someone who gets As or Cs. So, what's the point of studying if there is no difference?

When asked if his academic motivation could perhaps stem from internal rewards such as personal development or future career prospects, Participant Two just shrugged his shoulders and said:

If there is no value to trying – why even, try? If an Olympic runner got banned from participating in the Olympics, why would he run like he used to before? He would just run casually. That's the case with me now.

In contrast, for Participant 6, this theme was not manifested through any barrier she encountered, but through the fact that international students, through classes and advising, appear to be encouraged to engage in the programs in which they are not eligible to participate:

It would be good to tell us more about what we could do as international students. Something especially for us. Because it was, for example, weird for us to learn about the Federal Aid and Merit Aid in our first-year seminar class. Because many students were getting excited about those, but then they learned that these opportunities are for domestic students only.

Findings: Relationship to Theoretical Framework

Each of the four themes that emerged from the participants’ responses was aligned with the corresponding elements of Schlossberg’s (1984) 4S framework: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies (Table 3).

Table 3. Relationship of Findings and the Theoretical Framework

Theme	4S Influencing Factor
1. Understanding the academic system	Situation: Previous experience with a similar transition
2. Overcoming differences	Situation: Previous experience with a similar transition Self: Personal and demographic characteristics (Culture)
3. Building social relationships	Support: Type (Friends)
4. Lack of support	Support: Type (Institution)

Situating Theme 1 within the framework of 4S transition theory reflected its clear relationship with the factor of Situation. As Schlossberg (1984) postulated, individuals who have successfully undergone a particular type of transition in the past will be more likely to successfully navigate another transition of a similar nature. Participants’ responses corroborated this premise by providing evidence that, due to their lack of familiarity with the American educational system, their first year of college was characterized by difficulties in navigating such a system and achieving a smooth academic transition.

The alignment of Theme 2 with the elements of the 4S transition model demonstrates that participants’ inability to establish relationships with their domestic peers most closely corresponds to the factor of Support. Within this factor, four different types of support should be distinguished: intimate relationships, family, friends, and institutions or communities (Schlossberg, 1984). From these four types of support, the findings demonstrate that the participants in this study were most challenged with establishing a network of friends, in particular, American friends.

The comparison of Theme 3 and 4S transition model revealed the embodiment of two factors simultaneously: Situation and Self. As previously discussed, the majority of academic challenges reported by participants were attributed to their lack of experience with a similar situation (i.e., transition). At the same time, however, the presented evidence demonstrates that the Self factor had an equally powerful impact on students’ attempts to reconcile the academic differences they encountered. As Schlossberg (1984) stated, the Self factor encompasses all personal and demographic characteristics of an individual in transition, (e.g., socioeconomic status, gender, age, health, ethnicity), as well as any psychological resources these individuals rely on during the transition. However, students’ responses did not reveal clear evidence for any of the personal and demographic characteristics identified by the 4S transition model. As students shared that, in many cases, reconciling academic differences was particularly hard due to the strong influence of their home cultures, the researcher established a separate sub-category of the Self factor—Culture.

Lastly, analyzing Theme 4 through the framework of the 4S transition model provides evidence for the alignment of this theme with the factor of Support. As Schlossberg (1984) emphasized, the need for institutional agencies from which a person in transition can seek support has become widely recognized. Regarding the type of support, Theme 4 revealed that participants in this study

were specifically seeking two kinds of support: institutional understanding and the provision of concrete services and opportunities.

Discussion and Theoretical Implications

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the essence of participants' shared experience can be described as challenging, particularly in terms of understanding the U.S. academic system, overcoming academic differences, building social relationships, and receiving the necessary institutional support. Even though the students' experience with a phenomenon of academic transition was essentially difficult, the comprehensive picture of their shared experience also conveyed important strategies and coping mechanisms that these students resort to alleviate the encountered challenges. These findings provide novel additions to existing theories on both international students' academic transition and acculturation.

The challenges of international students transitioning to a new educational and cultural setting have been explored from varied standpoints in contemporary literature. At the same time, the scholarly efforts to specifically focus on students' academic experiences have not been commensurate with the research contributions that explored their social, cultural or linguistic adjustment. In that regard, the findings of this study, which focused solely on the academic transition, represent a much-needed contribution to the field and can serve as a theoretical and practical framework for advancing the scholarship in this domain.

The evidence presented in this study simultaneously corroborated and advanced the conclusions of prior studies in several important ways. First, Andrade (2005), identified unfamiliarity with the American educational system as one of the main factors that characterized international students' first year of college. Chen (2018) documented that unfamiliarity with educational practices had a particular impact in this domain, while Curtis (2019) recognized unfamiliarity with assignment types as an important sub-element of this factor. However, all these challenges remained broadly defined as the lack of knowledge of American culture and students' English proficiency. In contrast, the present study provided a much narrower focus on the specific aspects of international students' difficulties in understanding U.S. education, such as exploring academic majors or navigating through general education requirements. Such distinctive focus was identified as much needed by the scholars who repeatedly emphasized that international student adjustment experiences must not be generalized (Heng, 2019; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Wu et al., 2015). Scholars can apply the subtle nuances portrayed in this study to advance the existing or develop future theoretical models describing the structures and mechanisms of international student academic adjustment.

Additionally, several scholars reiterated that international students often express greater dissatisfaction than American students regarding the support received from campus services, mainly academic advising (Kim et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2015). The evidence presented in this study generated much-needed knowledge regarding the possible reasons for such dissatisfaction. As the participants in this study revealed, their limited use of institutional services was directly related to the limited understanding of the resources available, lack of guidance on how such resources should be utilized, or the difficulties in identifying the opportunities in which they, as international students, can participate. By understanding the *why* behind the students' academic dissatisfaction, scholars and practitioners can potentially propose the appropriate pathway models

for strengthening their utilization of campus services and, consequently, their academic satisfaction.

Further, the theme of navigating academic differences between the U.S. education and that of international students' home countries has also obtained considerable attention in the literature. For example, several researchers have already postulated that international students' academic transitions were dependent on successfully navigating the pedagogical differences in teaching methods (Kim et al., 2015, 2017; Leong, 2015). Similarly, the students who shared their narratives in this study also revealed that their adjustment was characterized by difficulties in understanding the variety of teaching modalities employed in their new educational setting. At the same time, the presented evidence demonstrated such challenges extended beyond teaching methods and included the differences in content/course terminology and differences in demonstrating content mastery. Understanding these fine distinctions can assist scholars, faculty, and faculty developers to design inclusive and culturally relevant pedagogical models and practices conducive to international student learning.

Although the literature in this area usually associated international students' challenges in understanding content terminology with language barriers (Andrade, 2005; Leong, 2015), the participants of this study provided an alternative interpretation. Namely, for the students in this research, these difficulties did not emerge due to the language barriers. Rather, they were a result of either cultural differences or the lack of prior academic experiences of a similar kind. Of particular importance is the finding that, for some participants, the inability to successfully navigate these types of academic differences harmed their academic self-efficacy. All these findings not only extend the research on international students' college adjustment behind the realms of socio-linguistic literature but may also serve as the bridge between the two research areas.

Lastly, the theme of difficulties in establishing relationships with their domestic peers represents a recurring concept in the literature on international students. This study substantiated the existing knowledge on international students' social concerns, particularly in connection with their lack of interpersonal skills (Kim et al., 2017), low levels of social satisfaction (Horne et al., 2018), and frequently adopted the pattern of resorting to voluntary or involuntary separation (Krsmanovic, 2020). Moreover, the results corroborated the arguments of scholars who already advocated for an integrated system of academic and sociocultural support for international students (Garcia et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2019). The findings of this research broadened the understanding of this phenomenon in one critical aspect. Even though several participants confirmed the recurring literature pattern by disclosing their inability to establish contact with domestic peers, other students revealed that upon contacting domestic students, they were not successful in maintaining these relationships over time. Knowing that the establishment of cross-cultural campus relationships is not a guarantee of their successful continuation represents a valuable addition to the existing theoretical models of acculturation, many of which have been used to understand or predict international student social engagement.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings in this study are characterized by several limitations which, even though not under the control of the researcher, may affect the applicability of the results. First, this research was

conducted at one large public university in the southeast. Therefore, its findings may be unique to this institution and not comparable to colleges and universities of different types and sizes. Before applying these results to other institutional settings, higher education professionals must examine the context and circumstances of this study and the extent to which these circumstances are comparable to those of other institutions.

The second limitation common to all qualitative and phenomenological studies is that the findings in such research cannot be generalized from a sample to the population (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Accordingly, the results of this study cannot be generalized to all international first-year students enrolled in the institution.

The third limitation is that all students volunteered to participate which created an opportunity for self-selection bias. Even though the impacts of self-selection bias have mainly been documented in quantitative research, qualitative studies can also bear its effects. As Olsen (2008) argued, participant self-selection can often lead to biased findings meaning that the respondents who volunteered to participate would not be representative of the entire population. This claim is particularly attributable to the instances when participants choose to partake in the study based on behaviors or attributes that the researcher investigated. For instance, even though other international students at the institution may have experienced academic challenges during their first year, only those international students who felt comfortable sharing these challenges volunteered to participate in this study. Other international students may have experienced different or more severe adjustment challenges but did not feel comfortable to share them and, as a result, choose not to participate in the study.

Lastly, this study only focused on the participants' academic experiences and, consequently, did not examine the phenomenon of their college transition from a cultural perspective. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that culture constitutes a valuable framework in understanding the experiences of international students who are not only transitioning to a new learning environment but a culture as well. Therefore, future research should investigate how the U.S. culture and expectations of international students to assimilate in this culture may be influencing their academic experiences.

Practical Implications

Despite these limitations, there are several ways in which the findings in this study can assist student affairs practitioners, faculty, and academic support offices working with the international student population. The presented results can serve as an analytical model for approaching the complex practice of supporting international students who arrive on campuses with diverse backgrounds and varied academic experiences.

For instance, academic affairs offices can apply participants' narratives to dedicate more attention to orienting international first-year students to U.S. higher education, especially with respect to providing them with a detailed overview of general education requirements, career exploration process, and academic support services available. In that regard, advisors and faculty working with international students need to actively promote campus services and resources and to identify the opportunities that pertain to this student group.

Similarly, faculty development centers can apply these findings to develop the relevant programming for the faculty teaching first-year courses that would introduce them to the most prevalent academic and transitional challenges encountered by international students. The overall recommendation in this regard reflects a critical need for training first-year faculty in a way that would advance their cultural competence and ensure culturally responsive teaching practices. At the time of this study, the faculty development center at the institution did not offer any professional development programs or pedagogical training for faculty working with international students.

Additionally, this study particularly emphasized the necessity for all academic affairs staff to develop a better understanding of their international students, accommodate their needs, and facilitate their transition. For this goal to be achieved, all parties working with incoming international students need to strengthen their multicultural competence and awareness of campus opportunities and resources available to this group of learners.

Several recommendations can also be generated for student affairs offices providing services to international students. Namely, the participants in this study displayed a strong conscience about the importance of integrating into their educational community and building social connections with other students, mainly those from the U.S. At the same time, however, the majority encountered a range of barriers that prevented them from doing so. Therefore, both FYE programs and International Student Services (ISS) need to work jointly on establishing appropriate initiatives and programs that support incoming international students on this path. The first step in this direction should be introducing new or redesigning the existing programs in a way that would promote cross-cultural relationships and connections between domestic and international students. Assisting international students in establishing a strong social support system requires ISS practitioners to be aware of the resources that can facilitate international students' contact with domestic students who are actively seeking to learn more about different cultures and establish cross-cultural relationships.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study portrayed the experiences of international undergraduate students transitioning to a large research university in U.S. The obtained findings described the academic challenges that students encountered during their first year of college, while the resulting implications proposed theoretical and practical models for supporting this student group.

It is important to acknowledge that the extent to which the recommended practices can be implemented by higher education institutions will depend on many factors, mainly the resources of their international student services, first-year programs, or academic support units. As a result, not every college or university will have the opportunity to incorporate all the recommendations. Thus, it is critical to conclude that the recommendations that cannot be addressed by a particular campus unit (e.g., ISS) should remain the responsibility of another unit (e.g., FYE). The overall conclusion of this study is that all campus units need to work in partnership to ensure that all critical aspects of international students' academic transition are addressed. The overall recommendation that can be inferred is the necessity for establishing open communication among all campus units involved in the international student academic transition. Just as FYE programs and ISS need to work together and combine efforts and resources for supporting international

students, other relevant campus units need to be included as well. Therefore, what emerges as a joint recommendation for all higher education institutions is the need for engaging the university community as a whole to contribute to the academic transition of its international students.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Background and Demographic Data:

1. Country of origin and/or prior places of residence
2. Degree program
3. Age and current academic level
4. Previous visits to the United States
5. Reasons for pursuing higher education in the United States
6. Reasons for choosing this institution and academic program

Interview Questions

1. Would you please describe your academic experience prior to coming to the university in the U.S.?
2. Would you please describe your first year at the university in the U.S.?
3. Was it hard for you to adjust to American education and campus? Would you please explain?
4. What was your academic experience like during your first year of college in the U.S.?
5. Did you encounter any academic challenges during this time? Would you please explain?
6. How did you cope with these challenges?
7. What types of support, if any, helped you overcome these academic challenges?
8. Were there any types of support you wished you had during your first year, but you didn't?
9. What recommendations do you have for better supporting first-year international students in their academic transition?