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Uneven Experiences: The Impact of Student-Faculty Interactions on International Students' Sense of Belonging

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Abstract

This study examines student-faculty interactions in which U.S. professors signal social inclusion or exclusion, facilitating—or inhibiting—international students' academic goal pursuits. It compares narratives of 40 international students from four purposefully sampled subgroups – academic preparedness (low, high) and financial resources (low, high). Overall, international students' interactions with professors were marked by joy, trust, anticipation, and surprise. Nonetheless, the narratives exhibit two significant sources of variation: narratives from the low financial resources, high academic preparedness subgroup reflected widely-varied experiences interacting with professors, and narratives from the low financial, low academic preparedness subgroup lacked any descriptions of positive student-faculty interactions.

Keywords: international students; belonging; professors; faculty-student interactions; student success

Academic goals are among the most prominent motivational factors shaping international students' desire to study abroad (Choudaha & Chang, 2012; Institute of International Education [IIE], 2011). Professors are likely among the most influential persons shaping an international student's academic trajectory, and student-faculty relationships have been found to significantly affect students' learning and motivation (Cole, 2010; O'Meara, Knudsen, & Jones, 2013). The effects of academic goals on interpersonal relationship formation and development – like all goal pursuits – is well-established in empirical research (Reis & Sprecher, 2009). The presence of friends, colleagues, romantic partners, and family members elicit strong and influential motivations – shaping a person's goal achievement, as well as which goals the person pursues (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Reis & Sprecher, 2009).

Research on international students' academic and social adjustment has primarily focused on international students' relationships with co-national, international, and host country peers (Kashima & Loh, 2006); less is known about the motivational dynamics by which professors facilitate—or inhibit—international students' academic goal pursuits. Two recent major reviews of research on international students' psychosocial adjustment to life in the U.S. included no studies examining student-faculty relational processes (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). In this study, we examine the motivational dynamics of interactions between professors and international students that facilitate an international student's academic goal pursuits. We take an in-depth, qualitative approach to illuminate the process by which international students make meaning of personal dispositions, attitudes, and behaviors of professors. Specifically, we explore interactions that international students perceive as having an educational and developmental impact on their sense of belonging.

Our study aims to extend a growing body of research that uses resilience-based models of acculturation to explore the lives of international students for whom academic success and positive cross-cultural interaction have been documented (Glass & Westmont-Campbell, 2014; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Pan, Wong, & Chan, 2007, Pan, Wong, Chan, & Joubert, 2008). Resilience-based models place particular emphasis on identifying factors that support international students' resilience (Pan, 2011), including a student's sense of belonging (Glass & Westmont-Campbell, 2014). Resilience is invariably affected by the social contexts (e.g., interactions with professors) and ecological contexts (e.g., classroom environments), which create opportunities for interpersonal relationship formation. Thus, resilience is not only an individual process, but also a dyadic process, context-bound, and mediated by student identities.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, we use sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), as a theoretical framework to understand the motivational dynamics of interpersonal relationships between professors and international students. In their extensive analysis of empirical research in evolutionary psychology, social psychology, and cognitive psychology, Baumeister and Leary (1995) advance belonging as a fundamental human motivation. They define belongingness as “a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497).

Belonging entails more than a need for social contact; frequent contact with non-supportive or indifferent others does little to satisfy a person's need to belong. Social interactions that fulfill a person's need to belong are marked by stable and enduring expressions of affective concern for each other's welfare (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). Professors, in our conceptualization, are among those significant persons that have the potential to fulfill or thwart this fundamental human need. Due to the evolutionary roots of humans' need to belong, studies across cultures indicate how social exclusion thwarts the need to belong, decreasing emotional well-being and academic performance, and increasing susceptibility to self-defeating behavioral patterns and social avoidance (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002; Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007). A meta-analysis of research across twenty-one countries ($N=3,665$) highlights considerable evidence that belonging mediates other self-processes in predicting subjective well-being (Sheldon, 2012; Sheldon, Cheng, & Hilpert, 2011). Mental health, in other words, arises from psychological need satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2011).

A sense of belonging influences a person's emotional and cognitive patterns (Baumeister & Leary 1995; Osterman, 2000). Many emotions result from "real, anticipated, imagined, or recollected outcomes of social relationships" (Kemper, 1978, p. 32). Consequently, an actual or possible change in a person's relationship status evokes powerful emotions, with social inclusion linked to positive affect (e.g., calm, anticipation, joy, and trust) and social exclusion linked to negative affect (e.g., grief, sadness, anger, and anxiety; see Plutchik, 2011 for a review).

Belonging, as a theoretical framework, has been employed in studies of diverse student populations, including first generation, Latino students, and LGBT students (Strayhorn, 2012). Mixed method studies of first year persistence identified five factors related to belonging: empathetic faculty, perceived peer support, perceived isolation, perceived faculty support and comfort, and perceived classroom comfort (Hoffman Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2003). Hurtado and Carter (1997) applied structural equation modeling (SEM) in a longitudinal study of Latino college students' academic and social adjustment to college. Results indicate that belonging exerted the largest effect on students' persistence. Large, multi-institution SEM studies (n=2,520) suggest that stable and enduring student-faculty relationships have sizable effects on a student's grade point average (Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall, & Abel, 2013). Qualitative studies comparing first-year students enrolled in a learning community with those not enrolled also identified the development of interpersonal ties with faculty members as an important factor in fostering students' sense of belonging and intention to persist (Hoffman et al., 2003).

Belonging has only recently been extended to studies of international student psychosocial adjustment. Notably, a recent SEM analysis of the effects of belonging on international students' academic success and cross-cultural interactions demonstrates large positive effects of belonging in mediating academic and social outcomes (Glass & Westmont-Campbell, 2014). A sense of belonging increased cross-cultural interaction between international and host country students, and it substantially enhanced international students' academic performance (Glass, Gómez, & Urzua, 2014). A sense of belonging, therefore, has practical benefits for international students: belonging is one of the most frequently cited factors for college students' academic success (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Osterman, 2000), and belonging creates a secure base to explore cross-cultural relationships (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). Qualitative research on international students identifies the importance of student-faculty interactions. Trice (2003) conducted interviews with 23 faculty members in four academic departments to examine faculty attitudes towards international graduate students. Faculty recognized the academic and personal challenges, and the how language issues impact academic performance. Nonetheless, relatively few qualitative studies provide rich, thick descriptions of the motivational dynamics of international students' interactions with professors.

The majority of international students studying in the U.S. are only somewhat satisfied or not satisfied with the quality of their friendships (Williams & Johnson, 2011), and students from East Asia have few or no American friends (Gareis, 2012). Students from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa report less social contact and more difficulties bridging cultural divides (Glass, Buus, & Braskamp, 2013; Glass, Gómez, & Urzua, 2014; Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012; Trice, 2004). Numerous studies examining international students' satisfaction with their social networks stress that the qualitative aspects of their relationships are more determinative of their well-being and academic performance than the size or makeup of their social network (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2007).

Research Method

We employed in-depth constructivist interviews in order to understand the motivational dynamics of international students' interactions with professors that have an educational and developmental impact on their academic goal pursuits. Specifically, we wanted to explore instances of inclusion and exclusion that affected international students' sense of belonging. Our primary data-gathering technique was semi-structured interviews. To maintain the confidentiality of study participants and institutions, participants and institutions are identified by pseudonyms.

Site and Participant Selection

The study occurred at a two major research universities: Tortuga State University (very high research activity) in the Midwestern region of the U.S. and Central City Metropolitan University (high research activity) in the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. Both institutions were selected due to large, diverse populations of international students, and procedures associated with the study were reviewed and approved by both universities' Institutional Review Boards.

To identify study participants who would yield data related to the study's purpose and major questions (Patton, 1999), we asked the Director of International Student Services for a list of international students who met the criteria for four subgroups based on a typology developed by Choudaha, Orosz, & Chang (2012). Due to the increasing variation in international students' academic preparedness and financial resources, we purposefully selected students from four subgroups to yield a sample that allowed for a wide range of student voices and experiences to inform the analyses (Group 1: high academic preparedness, high financial resources; Group 2: high academic preparedness, low financial resources; Group 3: low academic preparedness, high financial resources; and Group 4: low academic preparedness, low financial resources). We also asked nominators to select students with varying levels of academic and social engagement to ensure we did not only interview highly engaged students. Based on nominations, we narrowed a list of 71 potential participants. Within this list, we made efforts to ensure representativeness of gender, major, and country of origin. We provided invitations to all eligible participants by email; the invitation provided a short description of the study and promised anonymity.

Data Collection

The data are composed of 40 in-depth interviews (60-90 minutes) with international students. The final sample included 20 females, 20 males; 17 undergraduates, 23 graduate students; and equal numbers of students in each of the four subgroups. Although this study was part of a larger project, interview questions pertinent to focus explored a student's academic and professional goals, student-faculty relationships, and academic experiences at U.S. universities.

The richness of the data gained from constructivist interviews lends itself to the type of in-depth analysis necessary to explore the motivational dynamics of student-faculty interactions (Kvale, 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 2011). We used a four-part semi-structured interview protocol, asking open-ended questions that asked participants to share about their social and academic experiences. We asked similar sets of questions to each participant but allowed a natural dialogue to emerge between the participants and ourselves. The first segment invited students to share academic and professional goals related to the selection of their university. The second part invited students to share about meaningful academic experiences. The third part invited students

to discuss significant relationships with friends, family members, and significant others. The final part invited students to reflect back on their whole experience as an international student in the U.S. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

We organized our analytical process into three basic steps, using QDA Miner 4.0 to code and analyze the data. In the first step, we reviewed each transcript line-by-line. We assigned categorical codes and emotion codes whenever we found a meaningful segment of text, including keywords, phrases, and issues (Saldaña, 2012). We used categorical coding to identify segments of texts that involved interactions with a professor. We also coded segments of text where a student described a developmentally significant experience (King, Baxter Magolda, Barber, Brown, & Lindsay, 2009). We relied on students' articulations of developmental impact in coding interviews, coding both the experience (e.g., "visiting a professor's office hours") and the results of such experiences (e.g., "reconsidering career interests"). Emotion coding was grounded in taxonomy of basic emotions developed by Plutchik (2011), using a list of 915 affective processes developed by Tausczik and Pennebaker (2009) to identify segments of text where students used affect-laden language. Emotional coding has been found to be an ideal method to uncover interpersonal experiences and actions (Saldaña, 2012).

In the second step, we began focused coding for larger segments of the data. In focused coding, we paid particular attention to identify differences and similarities between each student's experiences interacting with professors. We paid close attention when individual cases did not "fit" within the patterns identified to capture variation as well as central themes of the data (Sturges & Klingner, 2005).

The final step involved reviewing interview transcripts and concept maps to examine the networks of relationships that had emerged from our data analysis. Major subgroup clusters were confirmed through correspondence analysis, a quantitative procedure in QDA Miner 4.0 that graphically represents the relationship between codes and participants in a two-dimensional map (Lebart, Salem, & Berry, 2010). Correspondence analysis statistics allowed us to validate relationships constructed through qualitative analysis using quantitative methods to examine visually complex relationships among codes, among participants, and between coding patterns and subgroups of participants. We strengthened the internal validity of the analysis by engaging in peer debriefing sessions with a senior administrator of International Student Services at a major public research university. Debriefing included detailed notes on how data were collected, how we derived thematic categories from coding and analysis (Sturges & Klingner, 2005).

Results

This study examined the motivational dynamics of interactions between professors and international students that facilitate an international student's academic goal pursuits. We identified three dynamics that international students perceived as having an educational and developmental impact on their sense of belonging: participation and inclusion, personal ways of knowing, and possible selves. We elaborate major findings by theme then conclude by discussing variation among the four purposefully selected subgroups. All participants are identified by pseudonyms.

Student-Faculty Interactions That Impacted International Students' Sense of Belonging

Participation and inclusion. The vast majority of international students that we interviewed described how professors found culturally sensitive ways to foster inclusion through expressions of appreciation, emphasis on the importance of a student's contributions during class, and special attention given in one-on-one conversations before and after class. Several students recounted experiences where a professor's personal, one-on-one expressions of affective concern led them to become more active and involved in class discussions. Jibrán Abdul-Ghani Bitar, a female graduate student from Nepal studying business administration shared an example of one professor's demonstration of cultural sensitivity in creating an inclusive classroom context:

I had one professor, he was American, but I just loved his class because he knew that I was afraid to talk, and he said, "If you have something and you are not able to say in class, come and talk to me, and maybe we can raise that in the next class, so that if I start the topic, then you might be able to contribute a lot." That kind of stayed in my mind. In his class, I can speak. I can say what I see because he is okay with it. Little things like that even just giving a little bit of care.

Like Jibrán, several students discussed the importance of care in creating a sense of belonging. Muslih Suhail Salib, a male undergraduate from Senegal studying business administration, for example, connected the moral and practical significance of his sense of a professor's care with his academic success:

They seemed really concerned that...they were making the extra effort for us to succeed. Back home you don't have this relationship between students and professors. The professor is on top of the map and then you're the bottom and they just throw orders and instructions. They don't really care that much. Yeah, he's there. He shows you that I care about your success. I want you to succeed so I'm going to help you all the way. I'm going to do everything I can to make sure that you're going to succeed, but you have to do your part.

The physical organization of student interaction in the classroom also communicated inclusion. Keira Frater, a female undergraduate from Hungary, shared about her concern the first day of class when the professor said students would "sit at different places every class", thinking to herself: "No, I don't want to do that! That's going to suck." By the end of the semester, the student had developed significant interpersonal relationship with students from other cultures, sharing "we really formed a cohesive group because of that. I love that. It makes me, again, a lot more open." Several other students mentioned the social benefits, outside-of-class, of how professors organized class participation, even describing class as a social experience: "That is where I get the exposure, I socialize with people. I'm basically an introvert at the beginning; I don't speak with people very freely. After the first and second meet, if I see them anywhere, we start having a long conversation" (Arif Abdul-Warith Boulos, a male graduate student from India studying engineering).

Although most participants recounted student-faculty interactions that created a sense of inclusion, negative experiences left lasting impressions. In contrast to the other narrative

accounts, Brahim Nahors, a male graduate student from Central Africa studying public administration, spoke extensively about one professor who refused to let him present in class and refused to give feedback on his writing assignments, even though the professor had provided feedback to other students. His interpretation of the professor's behavior reinforced Brahim's fears and communicated a painful message: "I was shocked. It was insulting for me. In other words, to say, 'This is not your place. You don't deserve to be here.'"

Personal ways of knowing. A variety of student-faculty interactions prompted students to develop more personal ways of knowing, in part because students observed professors as models and gained awareness of their own active role in constructing knowledge for themselves. About two-thirds of the students described developmentally meaningful experiences that involved a greater appreciation for the application of their personal experiences to real-world situations. Significant, meaningful relationships with professors promoted other positive outcomes, such as students' confidence in their capacity to construct knowledge for themselves. Sana Yumna Gaber, a female undergraduate from Bangladesh studying business administration related how one professor fostered the development of her capacity to "build up" her own ideas:

I would say this about the professor from my [class] and my other professor they actually give me confidence that I can actually do it... I am taking a class with her and when she was giving me this project, I was looking at her and she was like, 'You know this, you can do it!'So, if you want to ask her a question, she will answer it, but she will first say, 'Tell me what you think.' And she will actually organize your ideas as you are talking, and she actually does this in the class and she will suddenly ask a student a question, and she will like build that inside her class, she will be like yeah - so where is this and why is this and she will build up your ideas.

Personal ways of knowing expressed in classroom discussion often included first-hand experiences with international or global issues that were mere academic abstractions to many of these student's U.S. peers. Consequently, international students had to simultaneously negotiate multiple dimensions of their own social identities as they dealt with practical issues of language proficiency and variation in the culture of learning in the U.S. Although students discussed the challenges associated with negotiating these identities – and many mentioned racially insensitive comments of their U.S. peers – the narratives they shared discussed how these difficulties contributed to more complex understandings of the world, of themselves, and of their relationships with others. Pia Siciliani, a female undergraduate from Italy in international studies, for example, shared about her experience as a European, being taught by a African professor, in a class that involved discussion among her U.S. peers:

I mean when I was talking about open your mind and see things in a different way. There was a specific situation when I took African culture last semester. The professor was amazing.... I was very different back then. I knew very little about African history. We were talking about the Dutch and Italians colonizing and destroying the country, and it was very deep inside me, and it wasn't just you 'read the book,' it was a lot of discussion and there was a lot of like, you know - how, bitterness that would come out from his class which was understandable and

reasonable - it was nothing against me, you know - but how I as a person and like European, I don't know I felt a little like - uh, I have never had, or never felt like this during classes and that was very important for me in a good way - sad, but it was in a good way. Yeah, it was a different way to learn, umm, first person, more deeply engaged.

Muslih Attah shared a similar experience from his sophomore year and his struggles with negotiating a class discussion of female genital mutilation in West Africa. For his U.S. peers, the discussion involved an abstract ethical issue; however, for Muslih, the discussion required him to negotiate his own ethical disagreement with the practice alongside his understanding of the cultural context and meaning of the practice for many West Africans:

I was sophomore I believe, and they were talking about excision, the practice in some countries in West Africa. I'm not saying that I agree with that practice but I didn't agree with the way that they were judging it. They sat there and said all these people are so stupid; this is criminal. I do not agree with excision, let me just be clear of it but then I don't agree with people just judging mindlessly like that just based on your own standards. I wasn't defending it but I was telling them that everybody does what they do for a good reason. You might do things here that people over there are going to find horrifying but for you it's perfectly fine. It's perfectly normal at the same time you're doing the same thing to them.

We anticipated that his encounter with U.S. peers who failed to understand his experience would exert a deleterious effect on his well-being. To the contrary, although he characterized his U.S. peers perspective as "judging mindlessly," a lack of curiosity, and simplistic understanding, he surprisingly shared how this mystifying experience affected him, contributing to his own ethical commitment to open-mindedness:

I have a whole different perspective, and I feel like I could live anywhere if you send me there...I have a much more open mind of other things. I'm not as quick as I used to be. I try not anymore to judge people because it's very easy to sit there and say this is not good; you should do it this way.

Possible selves. A smaller but significant number of students described student-faculty interactions that affected their long-term career goals. Admired professors served as powerful role models who strongly motivated the student's behavior. The distinguishing feature of students who mentioned possible selves, as opposed to merely personal ways of knowing, is that they projected how personal ways of knowing would affect their future and discussed their own sense of self. These students had wrestled with difficult and complex questions of whether they belonged at their institution, if they had remained authentic to their cultural heritage, and how their experience abroad had affected their goals and the possibilities they could now envision for themselves. Their narratives were more complex and open-ended, with self-reflections that involved a view of themselves as unfolding, multifaceted, and the capacity to guide their own development in shaping their life narrative. Keira Frater described how sharing her ideas with her professor and classmates influenced her career aspirations:

It's not only knowledge; it's just the people that I meet. They affect me a lot, and like I said it before, it just gives me a sort of direction, it shows me what I would like to pursue in my life by meeting with people. I would not be that way if my professor hasn't influenced me. It's because, as I've mentioned it before; I was really affected by my social inequality class. It pretty much defines who I am right now because that's my main topic of conversation with some of my friends because we want to do something about it—we want to improve society. We would not be that way if our professor hadn't influenced us. The people that I've met here really affected my personality and what I would like to do with my life.

Exploring possible selves, particularly for the graduate students in our study, resulted in the student identifying with a professor as mentor and modeling their anticipated professional practice. Viktor Ivanchuk, a male graduate student from Eastern Europe in international studies, described how the professors in his program were “never arrogant about knowledge” and welcomed his ideas and perspectives. He described how his identification with his professors formed his approach to teaching:

Based on the experience I have right now, that's how I form my approach to teaching. If I had a professor that was always accessible, that was always there to help me that was never arrogant about knowledge. I think that's how I want myself to be, towards my students. It's just teaching is an important factor here. They teach not only their knowledge but also their approach towards students.

Viktor came to the U.S. with the goal of becoming a faculty member in his home country; however, his active involvement in respectful, collegial relationships with professors reconstructed the image he had of a professor's relationship with students. Although many students identified specific faculty members as role models, Viktor described how interactions with a variety of professors motivated his desire to become a professor back home: “I think they are all very important to... they add something to the bigger picture.”

Meaningful Variation by Demographics and Subgroups

This study focused on the educational experiences that international students identify as making a positive contribution towards their learning and development. Despite this broad focus – and our use of open-ended questions – student-faculty interactions, specifically, were the most frequently cited educational experiences co-coded with an international students' shift in perspective. Student-faculty relationships were more often mentioned in response to our open-ended questions than other meaningful, high-impact experiences. Student-faculty interactions surpassed other often-cited experiences, including cross-cultural co-curricular activities, leadership programs, and informal peer discussions. Moreover, professors were more frequently mentioned as sources of practical support than U.S. peers (e.g., sources of information to assist with practical matters related to navigating university procedures, providing advice on local services, sharing information that is useful for daily living, etc.); and they were mentioned just as frequently as same-culture international peers. All four subgroups expressed predominantly positive descriptions of student-faculty interactions. The most commonly used emotion codes co-coded with student-faculty interactions joy, trust, anticipation, and surprise. International

students used phrases such as “really amazing because give you the opportunity to participate, to express your opinion,” “they were making the extra effort for us to succeed,” and “some professors were really helpful – they were really good.”

Although these findings appear to provide, on the whole, an encouraging view of international student-faculty interactions, we were surprised to find meaningful variations between the four subgroups in our purposeful sample of international students. Two sources of variation stood out: student narratives from the low financial resources, high academic preparedness subgroup reflected widely-varied experiences interacting with professors and student narratives from the low financial, low academic preparedness subgroup lacked any descriptions of positive student-faculty interactions.

First, student narratives from the low financial resources, high academic preparedness subgroup reflected widely varied experiences interacting with professors. International students in the low financial subgroup more frequently mentioned student-faculty interactions, both positive and negative, than students in the high financial subgroup. Participants in the low financial resource subgroups more frequently expressed anxiety, surprise, and joy in their interactions with professors than students in the high financial resource subgroups. As the previous section illustrates, the range of emotions expressed does not equate to “good” and “bad” experiences; in fact, the greater range of experiences reflect more meaningful, personally impactful experiences.

Second, student narratives from the low financial, low academic preparedness subgroup lacked any descriptions of positive student-faculty interactions, and predominately described interactions centered around trust, using phrases such as feeling “different” needing “help” much more frequently than students in the other three subgroups. Trust was the most frequently coded emotion in student-faculty interactions, emphasizing the importance of the student-faculty relationship for this subgroup in particular.

I did feel like they are going to deport me, I had this feeling that, o my god, if I get these bad grades, they are going to send me back home and I was really, really disappointing... so when I got like a D, you know I was like - oh, my life is over ... so kind of like that, so it was a bad time. (Sana)

Belonging, when applied to the narratives of the low financial, low academic preparedness subgroup, emphasizes an essential feature from their narratives: international students in this subgroup had to resolve that they indeed belonged at their institution before their could adequately engage in the rigorous and demanding academic workload required to attain a bachelor’s or master’s degree.

Discussion and Implications

This study extends a growing body research that focuses on factors that support international students’ resilience, including their sense of belonging (Glass & Westmont-Campbell, 2014; Pan, 2011). We examined the motivational dynamics by which professors signal social inclusion or exclusion, thus facilitating—or inhibiting—international students’ academic goal pursuits (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Moreover, given the increasingly varied academic backgrounds and financial circumstances of international students studying in the U.S. (Choudaha et al., 2012), we considered how interactions with professors varied for students by academic preparedness and

financial resources. Although it might be heartening that, in general, the number of accounts marked by positive emotional valence (e.g., joy, trust, and anticipation) outnumbered ones marked by negative emotional valence (e.g., sadness, anger, etc.), the findings exhibit a demonstrably significant inequality among students with varying financial resources.

First, the importance of social ties with other internationals, co-nationals, and host students in predicting persistence and a stronger sense of connection is well-established (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Sawir et al., 2007); this study suggests that positive interactions with professors, characterized by affective concern, also matter in creating a inclusive campus climate for international students. The participants' focus on relationships with professors in response to otherwise open-ended questions about their academic and social experiences highlights importance of professors and advisors as role models and gatekeepers to academic cultures (Trice, 2003; Trice & Yoo, 2007). Social and emotional cues from professors send strong signals of inclusion or exclusion (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Reis & Sprecher, 2009), and professors strongly influence an international student's academic trajectory. Many international students mentioned professors as their primary point of contact for academic and practical support, more frequently than U.S. peers. Courses were more than academic settings for mastering academic subject-matter; they were evocative social contexts and sources of significant intercultural relationships (Glass & Westmont-Campbell, 2014). International students interpreted simple, even otherwise unremarkable, acts of care and concern as strong signals of inclusion (Strayhorn, 2012). At pivotal moments, particularly in an international student's transition to the university or when a student struggled, professors who responded with care and concern had transformative effects, both in terms of the students' academic success but also in a long-term trajectory of their personal ways of knowing and sense of possible selves.

Second, the findings affirm that inclusive classroom practices and professors' intercultural competence play a critical role in creating a positive campus climate for international students. Although social adjustment is often framed in terms of adjusting to student cultures of U.S. peers, this study highlights that international students may be more likely to embrace, and more influenced by, their perceptions of adjusting to the academic and disciplinary cultures in which they are socialized by professors. Professors who structured equitable classroom dialogue widened this sense of inclusion and fostered a sense of connection among students from diverse backgrounds (Glass, 2012). This study underscores research that demonstrates the importance of belonging in fostering cross-cultural interaction and enhancing academic performance (Glass & Westmont-Campbell, 2014).

Third, despite the positive contribution of professors to international students academic and social adjustment in general, a more complex and uneven image of international students' experiences emerged when we examined each subgroup independently (cf. Lee, 2010). Negative encounters, while shared less frequently, were more concentrated among students with less financial resources; negative encounters were more vividly described, intense, and exerted long-lasting consequences. Moreover, the findings provide evidence that race, ethnicity, and gender have a pronounced impact on the interpretation of encounters with professors (Lee & Rice, 2007; Marginson, 2013; Rienties et al., 2012), as the contrasting narratives of Pia Siciliani and Muslih Attah illustrate. This underscores research that indicates international students from Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia rate the quality of their interactions with professors significantly lower than their peers from the North American and Southern Asia (Glass et al., 2013; Glass et al., 2014). The findings also illustrate distributing accounts of neo-racist attitudes by professors

that reflect larger geopolitical dynamics, and structural effects of racism shape these everyday relations (Lee & Rice, 2007; Lee, 2010).

Finally, this study extends previous research on student-faculty interactions (Trice, 2003) by illuminating the process by which international students make meaning of personal dispositions, attitudes, and behaviors of professors. Meaning making is always context bound and embedded in the complex dynamics of an international student's ongoing identity formation (Marginson, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2011). Accounts, both positive and negative, demonstrate the salience of personal and social identities in interpreting experiences and relationships. Lack of engagement may be interpreted by one student as the freedom to express oneself, as in the case of Sana Gaber, or as purposeful slight, as in the case of Brahim Nahors. Universities that expand international student enrollments by recruiting students from more varied financial circumstances risk significant consequences to the mental health of students. Universities have an ethical obligation to construct policies and practices that empower students to report inappropriate faculty behavior.

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