

From Cultural Resources to Public Diplomats: Middle Eastern International Students' Perspectives on Internationalization

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, nearly all major US universities have initiated processes of internationalization in an effort to respond to the growing influence of globalization and to remain leaders in the vastly competitive space of higher education. As part of this competitive race, many universities have turned to recruiting and admitting a growing number of international students, particularly from “developing” regions of the world, such as the Middle East (Glass, Wongtrirat, and Buus 2015; IIE 2015). For these global universities, the motivation for increasing the enrollment of international students is not just economical, but also signifies progress towards the goal of educating the next generation of global-citizens – equally as prepared to compete in the global marketplace as to play a role in shaping a more peaceful and understanding world (Altbach and Knight 2007; Rhoads 2005).

As the number of international students in the US has increased, so too have the expectations for them to be public diplomats: individuals who play a role in facilitating and improving international understanding by educating others about their country or society through informal interactions (Mathews-Aydinli 2016). Yet, these expectations are rarely communicated directly to international students (Urban and Palmer 2014). As a result, the individuality and agency of these students has been overshadowed and replaced by a conceptualization of international students as cultural resources, whose presence alone indicates successful internationalization (Pandit 2013; Larsen 2016). This conceptualization overlooks the complexity and hinders

the potential of international student contributions to US campuses by ignoring the importance of recognizing these students as “active subjects and interpreters of their own mobility, rather than viewing them as objects of study” (Larsen 2016). This approach is reflected in research on international students, the majority of which explores the experiences of these students *within* their campus environments, rather than their role and contributions as part of larger internationalization efforts (Vasilopoulos 2016).

Research Questions and Methodology

Under the belief that international students *are* active contributors to internationalization, my study seeks to illuminate the ways in which these students' own identities and perceptions of themselves as public diplomats influence the relative success of these programs. Thus, my research questions are as follows:

- 1) In the context of internationalization, how do Middle Eastern international students understand and make meaning of their presence on US campuses?
- 2) How does the way in which students understand their own identity influence their campus interactions and engagement?

Given the lasting influence of 9/11 and the continued rise of Islamophobic sentiments and policies in the US, I have chosen to focus specifically on Middle Eastern international students due to the uniquely significant opportunity they represent for public diplomacy.

Therefore, to answer these research questions, I will pursue a qualitative study consisting of focus group and individual interviews with a total of 24-39 Middle

Eastern international, undergraduate students studying at a public, west-coast university. Since the very definition of the Middle East is contested, I define the Middle East in broad terms, and will recruit participants from Muslim-majority countries across the MENA region, including Pakistan, Turkey, and Iran. Upon recruiting my participants, I will utilize focus groups interviews to allow for a greater number of students to share their perspectives while subsequently conducting individual interviews to facilitate a deeper investigation into the experiences and perspectives of the participants.

Theoretical Framework

To analyze the relationship between international students and public diplomacy, my theoretical framework is based upon three foundational contributions. First, I use citizen diplomacy to illustrate the role that individuals play in international relations. As many scholars have pointed out, international education programs can and do improve intercultural understanding among participations (Lima 2007; Mathews-Aydinli 2016), which can in-turn make a useful contribution “at the level of foreign policy implementation, [where] better understanding creates an enabling environment as cross-cultural friction is reduced” (Scott-Smith 2008). However, scholarship on citizen diplomacy has failed to address how the underlying identities and perceptions of international students may influence their behavior, and thus their contributions to internationalization.

Given this shortcoming of citizen diplomacy, I use a social identity approach (SIA) to demonstrate the ways in which international students’ identities are socially constructed and influenced by their university environment, as well as how their identity ultimately informs their attitudes, behaviors, and interactions with others at the university (Platow, Mavor and Bizumic 2017). SIA provides a critical link, one that is often missing in the literature on international education, that explains the significance that students’ own identities and perceptions have on the outcomes of international student programs.

Lastly, I integrate the notion of Otherness, to illuminate the collective experiences of Middle Eastern students studying in the West (Said 1978). Said’s perspective on power and positionality underscores the critical nature of this research and acknowledges the historic and current presence of inequalities and stereotypes, held within US culture, that informs and frames the experiences of Middle Eastern students.

Significance

As Mathews-Aydinli (2016) points out, at a time when student mobility “is at its highest and there is a growing acknowledgement of the potential for such exchanges to contribute to intercultural understanding, and, thus, public diplomacy, research on the topic is limited.” This reality is perhaps most significant for Middle Eastern students, whose presence on US campuses is of particular consequence given the historic and current geo-political and public opinion tensions that define the US-Middle East relationship. In such an environment, it is not enough for universities to be content with bringing students together and assuming that positive outcomes will result. In order to improve the outcomes of international student programs, and realize their full potential, international students’ perspectives must begin to be included in the design of internationalization initiatives. As such, this research not only advances knowledge on international students, and Middle Eastern students in particular, but provides guidance to administrators and policy makers on program design and development. Ultimately, I advocate for an approach that will improve international student programs by appreciating international students as active, rather than passive, contributors to internationalization.

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