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Unfamiliar Culture: The Role of Planning in Integration Among International Students

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ABSTRACT

International migration is a global phenomenon, and planning is a coping tool that migrants use to adapt to new environments. The study explores the role of planning as a mechanism of cultural integration. The participants were 16 international university students who recently arrived in the United States. Data were collected using two semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Grounded Theory. Results revealed two main domains in participants' plans, namely plan timing and plan content. The plans were mapped across different time frames, from the interview date to more than ten years out. Plan content included plans for daily tasks, study, work, internship, leisure, and social and family activities. Although plan timing and content differed across participants, the plan structure appeared similar in both interviews. Results revealed that plans became less detailed and less frequent, becoming more abstract over time, suggesting that planning is a strategic, goal-directed tool that reduces uncertainty and fosters successful cultural integration.

Keywords: culture, grounded theory, integration, international students, migration, qualitative, planning

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary societies have become increasingly mobile. Every year, millions of individuals migrate from their home countries to different parts of the world for study, work, or relationships. In 2023, more than one million international students migrated to the United States for study, representing about 6% of its total college enrollment. By 2024, the number had increased to 7% (Institute of International Education, 2025). These students often face initial challenges stemming from language or communication barriers, limited social support networks, and unfamiliar cultural norms (Akram et al., 2026; Gebregergis & Csukonyi, 2025). The term "culture shock" has been used to describe the difficulties experienced in the early stages of entering new environments, such as adjustment difficulties and feelings of isolation (Furnham & Bochner, 1986), which contribute to students' academic stress and underachievement (Bayati et al., 2025; Sharma, 2026).

The integration of individuals into new environments basically occurs through acculturation (Berry 1997; Ward & Szabó, 2023). Acculturation involves the psychological and socio-cultural changes that individuals make when experiencing sustained contact with another culture (Gao & Wesley, 2024; Sam & Berry, 2006). The greater the similarity between the previous and new environment, the easier acculturation and integration. Nevertheless, integration is difficult because the new environment often differs from the former, and previously learned behaviors may no longer be relevant or require relearning (Callahan, 2011).

Individuals cope with the challenges of acculturation in different ways and planning is recognized as a cognitive coping strategy (Carver et al.,1989; Sanyaolu et al., 2026). Defined as the formulation of actions aimed at achieving goals, it enhances the organization of thoughts, anticipation of outcomes, optimization of strategies, and regulation of behavior (Hayes-Roth & Hayes-Roth, 1979; Huys et al., 2015). It is a crucial aspect of the executive functioning that empowers individuals to identify problems and utilize the most efficient way to manage stress and overcome complex circumstances (Friedman et al., 1987). Consequently, it reduces uncertainties and guides goal-directed behaviors which makes it an essential strategy for individuals arriving in new environments. Moreso, it has been positively correlated with adaptive functioning and lower perceived stress among international students and migrants (Cross, 1995; Kuo, 2013; Setti et al., 2022).

Relatedly, planning is influenced by several factors that contribute to its complexity and effectiveness. These include contextual and task-related factors that impact its timeline, scope, and goals, such as details, depth, and width (Miller et. al., 1960; Strohschneider & Güss, 1998). Plan detail refers to the specific actions, steps, or subgoals of a plan and their consequences. Plan depth refers to the time perspective of plans, which may be immediate, short, or long-term. For example, a plan may be for the next hour, upcoming week, or for the future. Plan width refers to possible alternatives or options of a plan. One plan might entail buying a car and focus on one car only while another plan could be more flexible, considering three car options.

Basically, planning is future-oriented because it involves organizing present actions toward desired future outcomes. When future goals are unpredictable or uncertain, effective planning may become more complex requiring monitoring circumstances, evaluating progress, and modifying plan strategies as new information becomes available.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Time Perspective Theory

Time is not merely a chronological sequence but one through which individuals perceive, interpret, and evaluate experiences. Postulated by Zimbardo and Boyd (1999), time perspective theory provides a framework for understanding planning. The theory states that individuals have different time

orientations indicating how they understand the past, relate to the present, and anticipate the future and that they psychologically organize their current behavior in relation to anticipated future goals. Individuals who perceive future outcomes as more proximal and meaningful are more motivated to engage in present activities that contribute to future outcomes.

The theory identifies 5 dimensions of time perspective namely past-positive, past-negative, present-hedonistic, present-fatalistic, and future orientation. Past-positive is the tendency for individuals to focus on favorable and positive aspects of the past while past-negative refers to the likelihood of paying attention to the aversive experiences of the past. Present-hedonistic refers to the immediate pleasure and sensual gratification of current desires while present-fatalistic entails one's perception that the present cannot be controlled. Lastly, future orientation involves aiming for and pursuing future goals by taking current actions while considering their future consequences.

Therefore, planning is directly related to the future time dimension. The more future-oriented individuals are, the more likely they will engage in planning (Das, 1987). For example, while a distant goal like graduating from college may seem abstract, a future-oriented student is more likely to develop a concrete plan specifying when and how to complete coursework which transforms the future goal into a sequence of manageable present actions. Also, the relationship between time future perspective theory and planning is consistent with previous research. Future orientation has been positively associated with a range of psychological and behavioral outcomes such as students' achievement, psychological well-being, health behavior, and retirement planning (Baird et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2014). Similarly, future time perspective has been positively associated with goal setting, goal monitoring, goal operating, and self-regulatory ability (Gellert et al., 2012; Kooij et al., 2018). These studies suggest that future-oriented individuals are more likely to set goals and engage in planning to achieve desired future outcomes.

Acculturation Theory

Berry's (1997) acculturation theory represents one of the most widely used frameworks for understanding the process of acculturation. The theory postulates that adaptation to a new cultural environment is a function of how individuals maintain their own culture and/or adopt the culture of the host community. Individuals do not necessarily relinquish their culture but can maintain important aspects of their heritage culture while simultaneously learning and participating in the new culture. The theory proposes four possible orientations that can emerge from intercultural interaction, namely: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization.

Integration involves maintaining one's heritage culture while also participating in the host culture. Assimilation occurs when individuals abandon their culture and adopt that of the new environment. Separation involves maintaining one's culture while limiting involvement with the host culture while marginalization refers to limited involvement with one's culture and that of the new environment.

Although the theory alludes to the psychological and sociocultural influences on acculturation, it opines that integration is positively associated with adaptation. Specifically, integration was more positively associated with lower stress, than assimilation, separation, or marginalization (Berry, 2005; Grigoryev et al., 2023).

Given that previous studies have mostly focused on adaptation outcomes (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Kawamoto et al., 2023) and that real-life situational studies on planning are relatively scarce (e.g., Güss, 2004; Tanon, 1994), the current study explored the role of planning as a cognitive mechanism through which international students integrate into unfamiliar cultures. Specifically, it sought to answer questions about the characteristics of planning. For example, what are the plans international students make when arriving and adjusting to a new cultural environment? In which domains do students develop the most and the fewest plans? How do the content and structure of their plans change over time?

RESEARCH METHOD

Methodological Framework

Grounded theory has been widely used in qualitative research to generate theories inductively from data (see also Corbin & Strauss, 1990, 2015). Postulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967), it is a methodological approach in which participants' responses are coded and analyzed to identify emerging categories and compare them with previously identified categories. First, the interview transcripts are examined line-by-line for differences and similarities to identify meaningful codes and categories. Next, the generated categories are compared in the two interviews. Common themes identified from the categories were used to develop an emerging theoretical model based directly on participants' experiences and responses. This was all an iterative process, always involving comparisons and revisions until data could no longer generate new codes and categories, leading to the emergence of a theory that best fits with the data.

Although the method allows for researchers' interaction with the participants and the data alluding to its subjectivity, it focuses on the construction of meaning between participants and researchers. This approach allows relevant themes to emerge, ensuring both depth and richness of data which is useful in contexts where existing theories are limited or insufficient to explain complex social processes (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

Participants

Using a qualitative research design and structured interview methodology, data was collected from participants comprising sixteen foreign students from Belgium, Belize, France, India, Madagascar, Poland, Uruguay, and Taiwan attending a southeastern university in the United States. The participants consisted of ten females and six males aged 20 to 31 years (M = 24.13, SD = 3.58). Five of them were graduate students, and eleven were undergraduate students. Only students who had recently arrived in the United States and had taken the TOEFL English-language competency test were included in the study. Participants were recruited through flyers distributed at several events on campus and subsequently by snowballing.

Researcher's Backgrounds, Experiences, and Biases

The first author is an international graduate student from England, and the other authors are Psychology professors who supervised the study and assisted with the analysis. One of the professors is a German American with an interest in culture and cognition research; the second is a Filipino American whose work partly focuses on cultural adaptations and qualitative methodology; and the third is a Nigerian with emphasis on applied cognition and development. All the authors have rich intercultural experiences ranging from study, work, to travel. They acknowledged that although adjusting to an unfamiliar culture may be initially difficult, it can also be enriching and rewarding over time (Kirchner & Patiño, 2011).

Research Procedure and Analysis

The research commenced with an extensive literature review of cross-cultural adaptations, coping strategies, and planning studies. Using informal conversations with foreign students and her personal experiences, the first author established preliminary categories of interest to develop some interview questions which were administered to an international undergraduate student as a pilot test. The feedback was used to revise the questions. Interview questions referred to international students' journey to the United States and then to their upcoming plans. Follow-up questions included specifics of students' plans. As concepts started to emerge, the interviewing process became more structured.

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, participants signed the consent form. Next, the participants underwent two semi-structured open-ended interviews lasting about 90 minutes each where they described their plans for current and future goals, and reviewed plans for different areas of life and for the future. The first interview occurred few days into the semester, after participants arrived in the country. The questions focused on pre-arrival situations, anticipated plans and goals, and first impressions of the United States. The second interview was conducted about 8 - 10 weeks later. For coding purposes, a plan was defined as a proposed action intended to reach a future goal.

Data Analysis

The guiding research questions for the interviews were, "What role does planning play for international students in adjusting to the new cultural environment in the United States? What characteristics of plans emerged in the process?

Only 13 of the initial 16 participants returned for the second interview. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcriptions ranged from 8 to 30 single-spaced typewritten pages. Each transcript was coded line by line (Akkaya, 2023; Glaser & Holton, 2004), and Word and Excel software was used to manage the data-analysis process. The main categories were continuously modified based on subsequent responses. Two main domains, the time and content of plans, were identified.

Here are four examples of direct quotes from the interviews; the first two examples refer to plans for today, the third and fourth examples refer to plans for this week:

Participant 2, interview 1, page 9: "I got a class at 6 that I need to prepare some materials for - this class, and I also plan to talk to my ex-boyfriend." This example shows plans' content to prepare for class (coded as 1 plan for class) and to talk to the ex-boyfriend (coded as 1 plan for social aspects). The plan's time frame refers to today.

Participant 8, interview 1, page 27: "Oh yeah, um, I'm reading a book, on family therapy, I'm planning on finishing that today, because I'm almost done. And do my essay, type my essay, and then, I will, when I go home, I have to go downstairs to the office and pay for my rent …" The plan's content refers to leisure (coded as 1 plan for leisure), school (coded as 1 plan for school), and life maintenance (coded as 1 plan for life maintenance); the plan's time frame is for today.

Participant 4, interview 1, page 18: "Nothing (firmly), no plans for the weekend." No plan was mentioned for the time frame of this week.

Participant 5, interview 1, page 9: "Well, I have a paper due next Thursday, so maybe I will be working on that, ah, on Friday I'm working, and we make plans with my friends to go out on Saturday." The plan's content refers to school and leisure (coded as one plan for school and one plan for leisure); the plan's time frame is for this week. (The goal to work on Friday was not coded as a plan, as this has been planned before.)

Separate files were created for each time category, for example, planning for the day and for the week. Within each time frame, the categories were split into content sub-categories, for example, school plans, social plans, etc. Each block of transcript was identified by participant, interview, and page number. Participants honestly talked about their life experiences, and we can assume their reports to be credible. The coded plans directly refer to participants' experiences. Whenever new categories or subcategories were identified, previously reviewed transcripts were modified to fit into the new category. All the authors reviewed the domains, categories, and coding process. This was an iterative process of fitting and refitting the categories. We gathered data and conducted interviews with the participants until we realized that adding new participants did not add new plan dimensions or subcategories or novel theoretical insights. Saturation probably happened already with participant 14. Inter-rater reliability was conducted via the second author independently reviewing half of the transcriptions and codes. In team meetings with the first three authors, the transcriptions and coding

were further analyzed – assuring rigorous data analysis, an essential pillar of grounded theory (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

Each participant's plans were mapped across timeline beginning with plans for the day and week and ending with plans for the next ten years and beyond. Plans were evaluated for content, expected occurrence, and details. Each time frame was considered for stated plans, alternate plans, contingencies, or vagueness.

RESULTS

General Overview of Planning Frequency

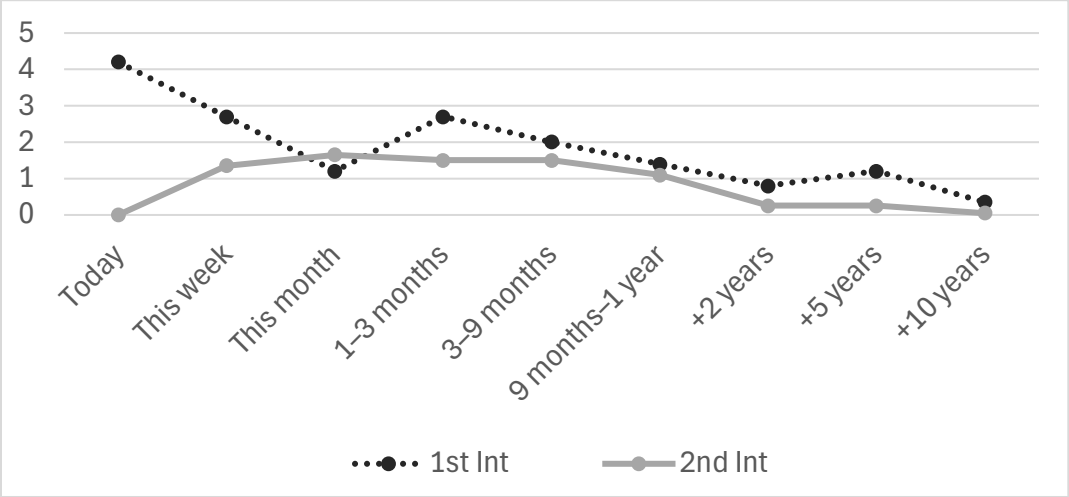
Both Table 1 and Figure 1 show the average number of plans per student for each time categories in the two interviews. Planning frequency was highest for *the day* in comparison to *this week* or *this month* in the first interview. Also, planning frequency increased during the first few months followed by a decline, demonstrating planning reduction with time. The highest planning frequency in the initial 3 months occurred when students were finishing the semester.

Table A1

Percentage of Planned Actions Categorized by Content over Time

1st Interview	Today	This week	This mth	1-3 mths	3-9 mths	9mths - + 1 year	+2 years	+5 years	+ 10 years
School	52	28	8	11	43	45	18	6	20
Life Maintenance	24	9	8	3	-	-	-	-	-
Social	15	22	17	3	-	-	-	-	-
Leisure	9	22	8	12	3	-	-	-	-
Work	-	13	16	8	29	25	45	24	40
Travel	-	6	42	40	14	15	18	-	-
Internship	-	-	-	17	11	5	-	-	-
Home	-	-	-	3	-	-	18	24	40
Family	-	-	-	3	-	10	-	47	-
2nd Interview	**Today**	**This week**	**This mth**	**1-3 mths**	**3-9 mths**	**9mths - + 1 year**	**+2 years**	**+5 years**	**+ 10 years**
School	-	31	17	19	52	47	25	-	-
Life Maintenance	-	11	4	-	5	-	-	-	-
Social	-	11		4	5	-	-	-	-
Leisure	-	11	17	10	-	-	-	-	-
Work	-			24	14	13	25	25	-
Travel	-	36	45	10	5	20	50	25	-
Internship	-	-	17	33	19	13	-	-	-
Home	-	-	-	-	-	7	-	25	100
Family	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	25	-

Figure 1
Average Number of Planned Actions Over Time in First and Second Interviews.



Planning frequencies observed in the second interview were relatively lower. One plausible explanation for this might be that participants had become familiar with their new environment, thus making planning less important. Figure 1 shows that the planning for *this day, this week, and this month categorie*s of the second interview coincided with the 3-month time of the first interview. This timeframe shows a similar pattern of increment when students were finishing the semester, followed by a gradual decline and later by an increase in planning frequency for the 5-year period.

Planning Content Categories

The content categories of planning obtained from the participants' responses were quoted verbatim.

School work: Plans related to academic work.

- *I have a group meeting at 3 pm; we are going to work on a project.*
- *I am going to take 12 credits next fall… I want to graduate earlier.*

Life maintenance planning. Plans for daily living activities, for example, housing, paying bills, eating, transportation, etc.

- *I will take the bus and go home.*
- *I'll go to a Weight Watchers meeting.*

Social Plans. Plans revolving around activities involving other people.

- *I plan a dinner Friday night with a girl from an association. The first day we arrived, a fraternity drove us to Wal-Mart and in order to thank her we organized a French dinner with another French girl, so we will cook for her.*
- *I am invited to a house to make barbecue and see the match (Super Bowl) on TV... so I will live like a typical American, the Bud, popcorn and pizza.*

Leisure Plans. These are plans for pleasurable solitary activities during one's spare time.

- *I am going to go to the beach and watch the lunar eclipse.*
- *…learn to surf, learn Japanese... and sell things on the internet.*

Work Plan: Work-related plans, e.g. part- and long-term jobs and career plans.

- *I am really think [sic] about finding a job here… if I find an interesting company or an interesting job, I'd like to work here... I think it is possible.*

- *If I go back to India, I might get into the public health sector and get into making policy decisions. I want to gain experience in the private sector because government jobs are really politically connected, so if you have a degree backing you and experience backing you in the India health system, then you can definitely pull up the strings at the higher level and then get into public health.*

Travel Plans: Plans are for activities that involve some form of itinerary.

- *I organize a trip to Miami because I will meet my boyfriend there on 10th of February and we plan a weekend in New York together, also a lot of trips. You know, I want to be busy all my four months.*
- *I'm going back to England for a quick New Year and then I'll be back to Poland.*

Internship Plan: Plans related to short-term work required for graduation.

- *I would like to find an internship, perhaps in New York because my major is in finance, and finance really takes place in United States and in Wall Street. I would like to find an internship, but it is really difficult to find it and I think I will have to work for a French bank in New York and if I can't find here.*
- *I am going to spend two months in France for internship and then another three months of internship in Madagascar.*

Home Plan: Plans involve returning to one's home country to settle.

- *I will move back to Taiwan or maybe Singapore.*
- *Probably I'll come back to France because I love my country, my culture, my food.*

Family Plans: Plans centered around marriage, such as starting a family and having children.

- *it's immediate, I'll start my family.*
- *I will marry… have two kids.*

Planning Frequency by Time Category

Participants' plan frequency by time category - plans for *this day*, *this week*, *this month*, *next 3 months*, *5 - 9 months*, *9 months - 1 year*, *2 - 5 years*, *5 -10 years*, and *beyond 10 years* are reported here. Table 1 shows the proportion of plans in each content and time category. Table 2 shows the general patterns of planning in each content and time category

Table A2

General Patterns of Planning Overtime

Time Period	Today	This week	This mth	1-3 mths	3 - 9 mths	9 mths to 1 year	2 - 5 years	5 - 10 years	10 + years
Level of Detail	High	Some	Few	Few	Few	Few	Few	Few	Few
Concreteness	Concrete	Concrete	Vague	Vague	Desires	Enthusiastic ideas, goals	Considering values	Considering time parameters	Desire/ Dreams
Alternative Plans (Width)	None	None	None	Several	Several	Several	Few	None	Few
Time accounted for (Depth)	Large	Medium	Small	Small	Little	Blocks	No specific time frame	No specific time frame	No specific time frame

Planning for Today

Participants mentioned an average of about 4 planned items for *this day.* The contents were on schoolwork, life maintenance, social, and leisure. Plans in this time category were expressed with great certainty of occurrence, and included details of the exact timing, location, and people involved. Only the social and leisure plans had some level of uncertainties associated with them because participants needed others' input.

- *I have an appointment at 2 o'clock with my professor and he is going to help me with one paper. I have classes from 4:30 – 9 pm and now from 12 – 2 pm. I have time for 2 hours. I'll do something on my quiz, 2 - 3 professor time, 3 - 4 study, after 9 pm just go home, eat and study again.*
- *At 12-3 (has class) and after I have to work because I have an exam in accounting on Thursday so I think I will work the rest of the day, but tonight perhaps I will see a movie on my computer... I don't know if perhaps there will be a party…*

Plans for This Week

Students reported an average of about 3 items for this period. Plans covered mostly schoolwork, social, leisure, and life maintenance. Work, travel, and religious commitments were new categories identified by participants. There were fewer plans for *this week* in comparison to *this day*. The same pattern was observed for life maintenance plans. Social, leisure, travel and religious plans were more frequent and were expressed with some level of certainty. However, they had fewer details and accounted for shorter periods, except the travel plans. Although several participants expressed desire for more active social life, their busy schedules and financial limitations made this impossible. Also, most of the plans were dependent on others, leading to some degree of uncertainty.

- *I know that I am going to work a lot as I have a lot of things for next week and I have things I would like to do but it doesn't depend on me…I would like to go to the beach and I would like to organize a party... I try to arrange but I am really influenced by others – if they propose me to go downtown, I try to think, oh tomorrow I have this to do, so I will get up two hours early because I want to do everything because if I leave I am going to have regrets.*
- *Saturday is open, I don't have plans for Saturday. But definitely Sunday I'll go to church and it's my turn to cook. R and I take a Sunday each and cook a lot of food and when we are finished eating we split the food for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.*

Plans for This Month

Participants stated fewer plans for this period, with an average of one item. Plans were mostly for travel and social activities, with schoolwork, life maintenance, work, and job-hunting accounting for a small percentage. Travel plans were expressed with great certainty and details on timing, location, purpose, and travel partners. Other plans were vague, with fewer details and for shorter periods. Participants reported making routine plans for unaccounted time but expressed uncertainty because of their financial limitations.

- *Next weekend, it will be the Super Bowl, and in two weeks we are going to Orlando because we didn't manage a theme park (last time), and then after that, we will go for Spring Break in March. We have decided to rent a house in Miami and stay there with a couple of friends from different areas who are studying in the States or in France or in Canada or in Mexico.*
- *I don't have anything planned because we don't celebrate Thanksgiving in Belize, so I think I'll just go with the flow. By then, I should be finished with all my essays, so I should be open*

for anything. A friend of mine who lives in Virginia… He said you could come up, hang out for the weekend but I don't have that money, so....

Three-Month Plans

Plan frequency within this period increased to an average of three items per student, with time coinciding with students finishing the semester. Plans were detailed and focused such as traveling to start a job or internship, or relocation. Leisure plans were for activities like going on vacation or visiting home country. Activities within participants' control, such as travel plans, were stated confidently, although the exact timing was undecided. Those beyond participants' control, such as prospective internships, or jobs were expressed with less confidence and vagueness causing participants to make alternative plans.

- *My mom is coming on Dec 16th, and we want to travel; we want to go to Miami, first see Key West, and then we want… but Christmas is down there, my mum wants us to go for a cruise, maybe Christmas on a cruise. Then we might go to New Orleans for New Year, and then my mom has a friend in Atlanta … Then we are coming back. We will go to New York, because my flight is from New York. We are going back the 7th of January.*
- *I have two opportunities one in India and one here, but I would like to stay here… but India is good too. I would really like to stay here. Now I am with someone and I like the city …and India is far….and after I have to find a job because I will be broke after the internship and I want to find a job in the USA. So, I think it is better to have an internship in the USA – it depends on the visa.*

Three to Nine-Months Plans

These plans averaged about two items per student and included resuming schoolwork or internship, starting a new semester, or getting a new job. They were mostly driven by the participants' institution and were mostly fixed.

- *School starts again in the middle of February, so I am going to start working on my Master's thesis.*

Plans for social and leisure activities were largely absent, except for occasional trips associated with work or internship. The plans for which participants were solely responsible were characterized by uncertainty. Participants frequently expressed plans to achieve future goals, for example, repayment of loans or improving language fluency. All plans articulated participants' underlying values and beliefs.

- *After I left, I would like to have 8 months training (internship). I have to do minimum 3 months, but I would like to have 8 months to have a really good professional experience… international experience... Try to meet a lot of foreign people because I think… when you meet different people, that you have to share your point of view. After this training… maybe I have a loan … so I have to give money back, so maybe I should go to have money... but I would like to make a Master's and after….*

Nine Months to One-Year Plans

Participants had about an average of one plan that was mostly focused on continuing academic study and work. Others were travel, family, or internship-related while a few others were driven by professional development such as commencing advanced degree. Specifically, participants were making plans toward achieving future desired goals. Although most of the plans had few details, they were expressed with great enthusiasm and acknowledgement of associated challenges.

- *I would like to do my post graduate studies next year (in England). I would like to do it in finance. I have already looked at the universities where I would like to go but I am not sure.*

They are kind of top universities… I don't know if it would be so easy for me to get into these kind of programs.

Two to Five-Year Plans

Expected plans for this period averaged less than one item per student. The period represented a time when participants would be completing their academic program and thinking about future career paths. Although the plans for this period were few, they were mostly about students returning to their home countries.

- *After two years they will give me one year to be hunting a job. I might be here for 5 years, but it all depends... How it shapes up and how I do here and… I am coming here and seeing the scenario and … I am liking it pretty much. I want to become a doctor here… to give my United States medical licensing examination and try to settle here … but again there are lots of ifs and buts… visa… where are you going to get money… so its all a blurred figure in front of me and as I take steps ahead I will decide.*

Five-Year to Ten-Year Plans

The average number of plans that participants had for this period was one. Foremost were work and travel plan at the end of participants' study, followed by family plans. This is understandably given that participants would have completed their academic and professional pursuit. Also, the plans were generally vague and expressed with few details, with no alternative plans because the goals were not fixed nor were the means to achieve them readily available.

- *For the 10 first years of my professional life (will be traveling) and then maybe I get bored of this always changing always moving life and I will want to come back in France and be with my family and former friends.*

Plans for Ten Years or More

Only few participants had plans for this period, and the average was about 0.4 plans per person. The plans were mostly on career development, marital settlement, or educational advancement. Others were based on individual's underlying values, goals, and personal beliefs such as returning to home country to participate in governance for national development. These plans had no alternatives and although they were expressed with some likelihood of occurrence, they lacked clarity on how or when they would be achieved.

- *My thing is I am not going to live in the States. I'm going to go back home because I think my country needs me. We need to develop... So if I get a job here and into the doctoral program and my husband comes... then we'll be here for like five more years... and then definitely I'll go back home. I love Belize to be honest. I don't see myself living here. It's not my cup of tea. And if we had this opportunity, I would be home… I would be home … I go back home and implement programs because we are so behind in terms of the counseling thing... I would like to have my own school or my own counseling center. That's one of my dreams.*

Planning Frequency by Content Category

The findings on which content categories had most and least planning revealed that although planning decreased over time (Figure 1), there was considerable variation in the planning across the different content categories (Table 1).

School plans had highest frequency in the initial time frame. However, there was a slight decrease in plans within the 1–3-month time, a period when students were finishing the semester. Afterwards, planning increased in the 3–9-month period when schools were resuming, and remained high throughout the year as students were either finishing the semester or embarking on advanced studies. Beyond the two-year period, only a few participants had any school plans.

Work and internship plans were relatively low in the first 3-month period, as only a few students had part-time jobs. However, towards the end of the semester, several participants had plans to complete internships as part of the college's requirement. Internship plans were replaced by work plans by the third month as participants considered career development. Among long-term time categories, work had the highest frequency except for the five-year period, when participants were preoccupied with family plans.

Life maintenance, social, and leisure plans were mostly concentrated in the initial period and rarely occurred beyond the next few months. *Life maintenance plans* such as eating and transportation were only expressed by students living off campus. Participants were not focused on daily life routines in the distant future. *Social and leisure plans* were mainly for the weekend and the next few weeks and laden with uncertainty because students were unsure about others' availability and willingness. *Travel plans* dominated *this month* and the *1-3-month* period as participants became more interested in exploring their new environment.

Planning patterns observed in the first interview were similar to those of the second interview, except for travel plans. Overall, the travel patterns were almost similar in both interviews; however, the *2–5-year* period had an increase in planning frequency for the second interview compared to the first.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The study explored the plan content and categories employed by international students to enhance their cultural integration from here and now to a period of 10 plus years through two structured interviews. The findings revealed that planning decreased in frequency, level of detail, and concreteness over time. The more uncertain and unpredictable future goals were, the more difficult planning was. Consequently, long-term plans were less concrete, more abstract, and were guided by underlying values rather than strictly defined goals. These findings add to and further clarify Time Perspective Theory by Zimbardo and Boyd (1999).

Two categories of plan content, school and life maintenance, were the most frequent plans occurring in the first days and weeks, particularly among students living off-campus and without meal plans. However, as students became more familiar with their daily routines, the need for those plans decreased. By the third month, plans had slightly shifted towards travel, internship, and career, especially when they were predictable. Plans extending beyond 9 months were mostly centered on travel, internship, and career and were expressed with more detail and certainty. Thus, the plan content reflects the pressing problems international students face at various stages of their arrival (Berry, 2005).

Obviously, these plan categories reflect the plight of international students adjusting to a new cultural environment (Berry, 2005). Life maintenance plans were highest when students arrived and they were followed by school, work, social, and travel plans. This is understandable given that students new to an unfamiliar environment would need to plan for their immediate and short-term needs, for example, transportation and feeding. Similarly, they would need schoolwork plans to meet their academic goals, such as attending lectures and completing assignments. In contrast, work, internship, and travel plans had the least frequency because the associated goals were in the distant future and not yet pressing. However, the plans changed as the timeline also changed. For example, within the 1-3 month period when the semester was ending, school plans decreased while internship, work, and travel plans increased. One plausible explanation is that there was limited schoolwork, and students might be seeking internships, part-time jobs, leisure, or travel opportunities.

Furthermore, the concreteness and predictability of goals influenced planning. Daily activities are generally more concrete and predictable, allowing students to formulate specific plans based on information readily available to them. However, distant plans were more abstract and beyond students' control, leading students to engage in more planning towards immediate and short-term goals and less for long-term future goals.

Also, different patterns of planning were observed across various life domains. During the *one-to-three-month* period, there was a peak in planning frequency for travel related to internship, work, or vacation. Similarly, school resumption, examinations, and internship requirements were fixed and predictable, contributing to increased planning during this period. Another small increment in planning occurred during the *5-year* period when students were completing their academic goals and commencing personal and career development goals, such as starting a job or traveling home to start a family.

The patterns of planning were similar for the two interviews; however, the frequency for the second interview was lower, suggesting that students had become familiar with the new environment and developed routines to deal with the challenges of daily living. In contrast, there was a remarkable difference between the planning contents of the two interviews. While first planning was focused on initial adjustment and preparation for the semester, the second was based on participants' previous semester experiences suggesting that planning decreased because there were fewer new goals.

The current study explored how international students use planning to navigate their real-life experiences in the United States. The findings highlight the dynamic nature of planning and suggest how factors like time horizon, plan predictability, and certainty may not shape only whether and how individuals plan, but the specificity, frequency, and complexity of their plans.

Like most research, this study is not without limitations. The sample size was relatively small and comprising a small group of international students attending the same university, which may limit its generalization. Also, the short interval between two interviews may limit the extent to which longer-term changes in planning could be examined. Future studies should use a larger sample across multiple institutions and examine planning over longer period. Nevertheless, the study provides a detailed account of the content and structure of plans that international students use as they navigate an unfamiliar culture. Also, it provides a nuanced perspective that broadens our understanding of planning and adds depth and richness to the existing literature.

IMPLICATIONS

Generally, the findings suggest several implications for institutional practice. First, the one-time orientation programs commonly provided to international students upon arrival may be insufficient to fully support their academic success and cultural integration (see also Krsmanovic, 2022). Incorporating planning skills and strategies into those programs may provide students with additional resources to meet their initial daily maintenance and schoolwork challenges. Second, academic advisors should provide international students with planning prompts at specific periods within the semester, especially towards examination and internship periods. Such support could initially target international students' immediate adjustment and daily maintenance needs upon arrival and gradually transition into planning for short- and long-term academic and career goals that include examinations, internship, and work (see also Baker et al., 2014). Third, international student centers should hold periodic sessions to assist students with planning challenges to translate future goals into more specific, achievable, and manageable actions. Fourth, institutional units such as career, advising, and counseling should coordinate efforts and resources to provide comprehensive and continuous planning support for international students to help them navigate the challenges of acculturation and for successful integration.

As mentioned before, plans for the distant future were vague. As one student said:

> *For the 10 first years of my professional life (will be traveling) and then maybe I get bored of this always changing always moving life and I will want to come back in France and be with my family and former friends.*

The distant future is often less predictable than the present and involves outcomes that depend on others. These characteristics increase the complexity of planning for future goals and may reduce motivation to develop elaborate plans. Individual differences, environmental uncertainties, and the unique characteristics of the planners can further influence planning. The interplay of these factors – an interesting topic for future research - makes planning a dynamic and subjective process that may hinder or promote the development of detailed and effective plans.

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