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A Leap of Academic Faith and Resilience: Nontraditional International Students Pursuing Higher Education in the United States

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ABSTRACT

International students pursuing higher education in the United States are faced with a multiplicity of challenges such as relocating to a new country, navigating an unfamiliar educational system, overcoming negative stereotypes associated with being an international student, and, in some instances, learning a foreign language. Despite such challenges, international students remain motivated to pursue higher education in the United States. This qualitative study, utilizing Schlossberg's adult transition model as a theoretical framework, explores the lived experiences of 16 international students pursuing higher education in the United States. Emphasis is placed on their transitional experiences in relation to their learning. The major theme that emerged is "major adjustment." Subthemes that emerged regarding these students' adjustments includes (a) diversity and cultural differences in the learning environment, (b) comparative differences in the learning environment, (c) language barriers, and (d) combatting stereotypes. Implications for theory and practice are also discussed.

Keywords: adult learners, higher education, international students, non-traditional students

A leap of academic faith and resilience are terms that describe the relocation endeavor of a nontraditional adult learner moving to a foreign country to pursue higher education. Many underlying factors motivate international adult learners

to seek higher education in the United States, including, but not limited to, pursuing academic and professional growth; garnering experience in intercultural contexts; improving future career opportunities; obtaining enhanced social status, economic benefits, and greater political freedom or stability; and bridging the gap between educational supply and demand of the country of origin (Chiswick & Miller, 2010; Kahanec & Králiková, 2011; Khadria, 2011; Kim et al., 2011; Li & Bray, 2007; Valdez, 2015; Zhou, 2015). Despite differing reasons for obtaining higher education in the United States, a common thread of resilience tightly links international adult learners. Conversely, another common stereotype linking international adult learners portrays them as beneficiaries of U.S. higher education. Specifically, the view that only international students receive this benefit is pervasive. However, the benefits extend to the faculty, the overall student population, the institution of higher education, the local community, and the U.S. economy (Hunter-Johnson, 2016).

The migration of international students to the United States for the purpose of receiving higher education contributes greatly to the U.S. economy and has a positive impact on academia. According to the *Open Doors* report (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2017a), more than 1 million international students are presently studying in the United States. As a result, $35.8 billion was contributed to the U.S. economy during the 2016–2017 academic year alone. As to academia, the inclusion of international students within the college or university community greatly enhances the learning experiences of all enrolled students, exposes domestic students to international perspectives in the learning environment and in research initiatives, and affords networking opportunities and the development of long-term business relationships. Moreover, such exposure and interaction prepare students to be global citizens. Additionally, the American Council on Education has emphasized the value of preparing graduates to "operate effectively in other cultures and settings" (as cited in Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement [CIGE], 2012, p. 3). From an educator's perspective, the inclusion of international students prompts educators to modify their teaching strategies to create a learning climate that benefits multiple and different groups, resulting in the promotion of learning environments that are more culturally aware and sensitive (Halx, 2010).

Despite the presence of academic faith and resilience in international adult learners, their experiences in higher education differ greatly from those of domestic adult learners. As a result, this study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of international adult learners and how their cultural transitions influence their experiences in the learning environment. Given the academic and economic impact of international students in higher education in the United States, this study offers valuable insights. It contributes to the academic literature by highlighting the perspective of international students regarding their experiences of cultural transition and how such experiences influence learning. Additionally, the study addressed a gap in the literature by providing recommendations for how adult educators can improve the learning experience of international students in higher education settings and proposes a foundational platform upon which to modify the U.S. system of higher education to instill

greater cultural competency. Further, it supplements the literature on international students from the non-traditional student perspective, a unique student population regarding international student literature.

GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given the impact of and on international students pursuing higher education in the United States, the guiding research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What are the lived experiences of international students as adult learners while pursuing higher education in the United States?

2. How do international students perceive the impact of their transitional experiences on their learning?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Schlossberg's (1981, 1984) adult transition model served as an underpinning that explains the transitional process of adults in higher education. According to Schlossberg et al. (1995), a transition is "any event, or nonevent, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 27). Specifically, Schlossberg's transition theory emphasizes individual perspectives on transitions, including anticipated and unanticipated transitions (Anderson et al., 2011). Individuals may adapt to a transition with different resources at various times (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981). According to Schlossberg et al. (1995), four factors influence adult transitions: (a) situation (e.g., the characteristics of the event or nonevent); (b) self (e.g., personal characteristics and psychological resources); (c) support (e.g., social support systems); and (d) strategy (e.g., coping responses).

Schlossberg's adult transition model was the most appropriate theoretical framework for this study because the nontraditional adult international student population experiences both academic and social transitions which are anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevents. Therefore, this theory mirrors the characteristics of the population and situation of international non-traditional students in higher education. In addition, nontraditional adult international students manage the transitions they undergo differently based on their abilities, backgrounds, experiences, personalities, resources, and the timing of their studying abroad. Regarding anticipated transitions, international students have more time to prepare psychologically and physically for the adjustment and, therefore, possess greater capacity to achieve success (Anderson et al., 2011). However, as to unanticipated transitions and nonevents, individuals may experience greater challenges due to a lack of preparation and the need, in some instances, to transition with their immediate family (i.e., spouses and children). Hence, they are forced to address these unanticipated events not only for themselves but also for the transitional challenges experienced by their family members entering and living in a foreign country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The International Adult Learner and Motivation

Following the desire to pursue higher education as a working adult, balancing work and family after years removed from being in any formalized learning environment is a complex decision. However, this decision can be persuaded and/or influenced by an individual's level of motivation (intrinsic or extrinsic). For an international adult learner, the factors to consider when deciding to pursue international education are much more in-depth, and the motivational factors often differ from those of the domestic adult learner.

No distinct definition of a nontraditional adult learner has become universally accepted, but there are distinguishing characteristics. For example, characteristics include age (Metzner & Bean, 1987); risk factors for dropping out (U.S. Department of Education [U.S. DE], 2002, 2005); and ethnicity, lower socio-economic status, first-generation college student status, and employment status (Rendon et al., 2000). However, the U.S. Department of Education (2002, 2005) classified nontraditional adult learners as students who possess one or more of the following characteristics: delayed enrollment, part-time student status, full-time employment, financial independence, responsibility for dependents, and enrollment after their 25th birthday.

Given the increasing focus on such learners, the literature regarding the motivation of nontraditional adult learners for pursuing higher education has blossomed (Chu et al., 2007; Hunter-Johnson, 2017; Jinkens, 2009) and expanded to include, to a lesser degree, nontraditional international learners. A review of the literature found the following themes emerge as motivational factors influencing the decisions of nontraditional international learners to pursue higher education in the United States: opportunity to improve English-language skills; financial assistance from the country of origin; pursuit of academic and professional growth; experience in intercultural contexts; enhancement of future career opportunities; and augmentation of social status, economic benefits, and political freedom or stability (Bista & Dagley, 2015; Chiswick and Miller, 2010; Kahanec & Králiková, 2011; Khadria, 2011; Kim et al., 2011; Li & Bray, 2007; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Summers & Volet, 2008; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007; Zhou, 2015). Such factors often serve as a foundational platform that assists international students with remaining focused while fueling their drive to pursue academic excellence. Compared with the domestic students, international student motivation would differ because their backgrounds, experiences (personal and professional), and quality of life vary depending upon their country of origin.

Challenges of the International Nontraditional Adult Learner

The international nontraditional adult learner, like any domestic nontraditional learner, encounters numerous challenges in the pursuit of higher education. However, there are added layers of challenge for the international

nontraditional adult learner that the domestic student does not encounter, such as acclimation to a new country, a different culture, an unfamiliar educational system, and the social isolation related to national origin. As a result, many studies have focused on the challenges international students encounter from a social or societal perspective. Some studies have specifically highlighted language issues and first-time awareness of having an accent, differences in classroom and instructional culture, and awareness of skin color (Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Mwaura, 2008); disconnection and confusion at encountering a different social value system, unusual food, gender-role adjustments, separation from family and friends, and loss of social status and power (Lacina, 2002); and identity issues due to reclassification as a minority and the associated stigmas that often impact employability (Constantine et al., 2005).

The international nontraditional adult learner is expected to function in a learning environment where (a) unfamiliar teaching and learning styles prevail; (b) a generational gap between the nontraditional student and traditional-age students exists; (c) the perception that others deem one to be inferior arises; and (d) a general sense that one does not fit in exists within and beyond the classroom (Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Kasworm, 2003). Additionally, international students are challenged with financial hardship due to the exorbitant costs associated with being an international student, including increased tuition and related institutional fees, visa expenses, continuously paying cash because of limited or no credit history in the host country, and having to reestablish themselves financially within a new country with minimal financial support. While these factors can impact the international nontraditional adult learner socially and emotionally, they also play a crucial role in whether the international nontraditional adult learner will complete his or her program of study.

In addition, overall stress also contributes significantly to the success or failure of international adult learners by impacting their performance ability and giving rise to feelings of incompetence and a fear of failure (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2000, 2005; Gonzalez, 2006; Lovitts, 2008; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Overall, international adult learners are burdened with heightened stress at all stages of their educational experience—from passing qualifying exams to obtaining relevant academic experiences, from identifying the right mentor to gaining entry to networking opportunities, and from transitioning into independent researchers to finding employment upon graduation (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2005; Gonzalez, 2006; Lovitts, 2008). The perils and stresses associated with these stages can threaten persistence and, ultimately, successful completion. Moreover, the pressure is magnified for international nontraditional adult learners due to the impending implications, such as employment upon graduation in a foreign country, job security, and the ability to apply the knowledge gained in their studies to their respective work environment. And, in the event the international student returns to their home country, the ability to reacclimatize to both their home country and to its different work environment create anxiety.

International Student Adjustments and Differences in the Learning Environment

A few contributions to the literature regarding international student adjustments to the United States while pursuing higher education. Yi et al. (2003) indicated that international students experience adjustments in five arenas: academic systems, financial situations, physical health, vocational environments, and personal/social issues. Gebhard (2012) identified three major areas in which international students might have trouble in adjusting: academic, social interactions, and emotional reaction to the new environment. Mesidor and Sly (2014) summarized four types of adjustments for international students: cultural adjustment, social adoption, academic adjustment, and psychological adjustments. According to Trifonovitch (1977), there are four stages of cultural adjustment: the honeymoon stage, the hostility stage, the humor stage, and the home stage. In their new academic environment, international students must adapt their learning style and adjust to different methods of evaluation (Mesidor & Sly, 2014). Studies have shown that international students experience homesickness, loneliness, depression, and anxiety during the adjustment process (Nilsson et al., 2004; Yakushko et al., 2008; Yi et al., 2003). This adjustment period escalates for nontraditional students compared with traditional international and domestic students because of the vast difference in their social roles, level of responsibility, common requirement to relocate with spouse and children, and, in most instances, the role of "bread winner" of their immediate family.

METHODS

Study Design and Data Collection

A qualitative phenomenological approach was selected for this study. According to Fischer (2009), this approach allows in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives on the same phenomenon while minimizing researcher prejudices and allowing the purity of participants' perspectives to emerge.

Participants

This study consisted of 16 participants ($n = 16$). The participants represented diversity in their discipline of study and country of origin. Both genders ($n = 11$ females, and $n = 5$ males) were included in the study, and there was also variation in age. Eight ($n = 8$) universities throughout the United States were represented. The inclusion criteria for this study were that the participant had to be (a) born in a country outside the United States, (b) studying in the United States for at least two years, planning to return to their country of origin within five years of degree completion, and over the age of 25 while receiving a higher education degree. The demographic profiles of the participants are in Table 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

Boeije (2010) described purposeful sampling as "intentionally selecting participants according to the needs of the study. These participants can teach us a lot about the issues that are of importance to the research" (p. 35). Additionally, this method was selected because it provides a platform for a diverse range of cases relevant to a particular phenomenon or event—in this instance, international nontraditional students who study abroad in the United States.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Profile

Variable	*N*	%
Gender		
Male	5	31
Female	11	69
Age Range		
21–30	3	19
31–40	9	56
41–50	4	25
Educational Program Level		
Masters	6	37.5
Doctorate	10	62
Program of Study		
Education	8	50
Business	4	25
Psychology	1	6
Science	3	19
Home Origin		
Africa	2	13
Asia	4	25
Caribbean	9	56
Middle East	1	6

Note: *n = 16.*

The purpose of this kind of sample design is to provide as much insight as possible into the event or phenomenon under examination. Study participants were solicited via emails and telephone calls utilizing a script provided by the Office of Sponsored Research. Once the potential participants indicated interest in joining the study, they were advised to contact the study's primary researcher. After contacting the primary researcher, the potential participants were given

detailed information about the overall study objective, study criteria, study procedures, and proposed benefits of the study. After agreeing to participate, subjects were scheduled for interviews. All participants and prospective participants were also given the option to "opt out" of future emails or telephone calls.

Semi-structured interviews were utilized for data collection. Questions were crafted to reflect the study's objective and guiding research question. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 mins and were audio recorded. Notes were also taken by the researchers during each session to ensure accuracy. Once each interview was completed, it was transcribed immediately. Member checking was conducted by sending a copy of the completed transcript to each participant to review for accuracy. As validity and reliability are of utmost importance, an independent peer reviewer, "someone who is familiar with the research or phenomenon explored" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 9), assisted by reading the transcripts to confirm themes and categories corresponding with the research question. Data were then analyzed using open coding, a method of qualitative analysis used to establish themes and main concepts (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Themes and subthemes linked to the research question were identified from the transcripts and contributed to a greater understanding and explanation of the issues being studied.

FINDINGS

This study explored the lived experiences of international nontraditional students pursuing higher education in the United States and how their transitional experiences influenced learning. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, administered to 16 participants representing five geographical regions. After careful analysis of interviewee responses, the major theme that emerged regarding the most influential factors impacting their experiences in the U.S. learning environment was "major adjustment." As defined by the participants, *adjustment* encompassed adaptation to the new learning environment. Subthemes that emerged regarding the adjustment of these students included (a) diversity and cultural differences in the learning environment, (b) comparative differences in the learning environment, (c) language barriers, and (d) combatting stereotypes. Despite the need for major adjustment, there was an overarching sense of positivity among the participants regarding their experiences while in the United States. Some key descriptive phrases representing the optimism of these participants about their experiences while studying in the United States were "enjoying my experience," "good experience," "relatively good," "new experience," "positive experience," and "exciting but overwhelming."

Diversity and Cultural Differences in the Learning Environment

From an American perspective, academic inclusion of study participants—and international nontraditional students, in general—contributes to a diversified learning environment. However, with such diversity and cultural differences come

added layers of emotional and psychological challenge that can manifest in the learning environment and impede the learning process. In addition, international non-traditional students are required to make major adjustments to assimilate to a new culture that often has an unfamiliar demographic profile. As a result of these major transitional adjustments, many international students question themselves at some point during their pursuit of higher education in the United States, asking "Am I doing it right?," "Am I saying it right?," "How do I sound in comparison with others?," "How am I being perceived by others in the learning environment?," "Is it okay that my religious beliefs are different?" A married female and mother of three who participated in the study indicated, "It was an eyeopener for me being in a classroom with a diverse student population and different cultures where we had to respect each other and learn about different cultures and religions. That was a new experience for me." She further explained, "Learning to have an open mind … was something I had to adjust to. This was kind of foreign to me coming from my culture." While some international nontraditional students acclimated rather quickly, challenges still existed and, in some instances, persist. A single male study participant stated, "I was trying to understand the atmosphere and understand how to get along with other individuals. My first classes were with more white students than students of color. It's just … I guess, communicating with them." This adjustment to the change in student demographics created an adjustment challenge. In addition, there was great concern about accents and language differences. A female from the Caribbean who was taught British English versus American English explained her linguistic challenges while in higher education. The issue she experienced revolved around the "enunciation of words that Americans may think is correct. I am constantly corrected [on how] I enunciate a word because I said it the British way, and [Americans] would say: 'No, that is not correct.'"

Comparative Differences in the Learning Environment

The participants in this study unanimously agreed (100%, $n = 16/16$) that there was a vast difference between the U.S. educational system and that of their home country. Such differences, as defined by the participants, extended to curriculum, instructional methods and techniques, learning processes, and overall educational expectations. A single male indicated that "it was a new experience for me. It was different from what I was used to regarding the standard of education, the curriculum, and the organization." While most participants echoed this sentiment, there were many students who eluded to the fact that the U.S. educational system, while different, is easier than the one in their home country (43%, $n = 7$). Further probing of what contributed to the U.S. educational system being perceived as easier revealed that the testing procedures and frequency of testing make it easier to focus on one aspect of learning at a time. A single male participant explained, "In the USA, you have a first, second, [and] third test, and then the final exam. This set up is very different [from my home country] and makes you more focused, and your learning ability is better." He further explained, "When you are writing your exam based on four weeks [of class

material], … you would not easily forget. But if you are studying … 16 weeks [of class material], you may forget in a year." The giving of a single exam at the end of the semester is a common practice in his country of origin. Another participant indicated that, in the U.S. educational system, there is more support provided by the faculty compared with his home country. However, despite the limited support systems in his country, the expectations of students are higher there. He explained that it is more difficult to matriculate through the education system in his country. He added that resources such as continuous internet service, textbooks, well-equipped libraries, and access to faculty are not as common in his country and are viewed as luxuries there, whereas they are commonplace in the United States.

The instructional methods and approaches utilized by the instructors in higher education pose adjustment challenges for international students as well. In U.S. higher education, guided by andragogy, instructor-facilitated discussion is a common practice. However, this common U.S. instructional method often presents a challenge for international students, who are more accustomed to the pedagogical approach often practiced in institutions of higher education in their countries of origin (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Jackson et al., 2013; Kim, 2012; Kuo, 2011; Sherry et al., 2010; Sue & Rawlings, 2013; Telbis et al., 2013; Young, 2011). A married mother of one stated, "Normally, [U.S. instructors] ask the students for discussion, and this is a tough time for me because, in my country, we don't have discussion between students and professor." This challenge was echoed by another participant, who stated,

> You just listen to the professor [in my home country]. Even for homework, we need to write an essay paper here in the USA. But, in my country, we don't have homework like this. Our homework is more focused on memorization.

Language Barriers

Study participants expressed concerns about language barriers and adjustments resulting from this barrier. Such concerns were not only identified by English-as-a-second-language (ESL) participants but also shared by native English speakers. All the ESL participants explained the challenges they encountered. Some ESL participants (25%, $n = 4$) indicated they had taken six or more months of English classes prior to beginning their graduate program. In some instances, this was not necessarily at the school where they pursued their graduate degree or even in the same state. A female mother of one indicated she had to take a year of English to prepare herself prior to beginning her graduate degree. A married male participant stated, "I went to Boston to attend a language school for nine months to improve my language and improve all my application material[s], … then I attended a summer program for two months at Harvard." Another participant, a married female, stated she had taken "eight months of language classes prior to beginning her graduate degree." A married male participant stated that although English is the only language he speaks, Americans perceive him to be speaking with an accent, which is a negative perception that

creates a language barrier. He explained that he was assigned as a graduate teaching assistant and was reported by one of the students who failed the course, complaining that she could not understand what he was saying as his accent was a barrier for her. On another occasion, a male graduate teaching assistant indicated that although he spoke only English, when he began to teach his class, two white males got up and left the classroom, stating that they could not learn from him as they could not understand his accent. Another single male participant echoed this theme regarding his accent. "When I first moved here, and even now, the [questions] come [in]to my head: … am I saying the right thing, and am I saying it clearly? The one thing associated with me is my accent." It was also noted by some of the native-English-speaking participants that there was a significant difference between American English and British English. This became evident during class discussions as some words are pronounced differently, and, in written assignments, it was necessary to maintain constant vigilance as to the differences between British and American spelling.

In addition, some participants (19%, $n = 3$) indicated that it takes them twice as long to complete assignments for class, twice as long to complete the assigned readings, and twice as long to comprehend the discussions that are taking place in the learning environment. One participant indicated that she must complete assignments in her native language first and then translate them into English. Upon completion, she also must go to the university's writing center to ensure that her assignments are written in proper English. Another participant expanded on this point, stating that she must process her thoughts, what is being said, and what she reads in her native language prior to speaking or comprehending in English. This makes it extremely difficult to participate in class discussion and to read materials in the classroom environment in a set timeframe.

Combatting Stereotypes

Numerous participants explained that, as international students, they were often perceived as being different—frequently in a negative, condescending manner—by American students and, in some instances, by instructors. A male participant described a constant need to demonstrate proof of excellence. He explained,

> The thing with … proof of excellence is I have done more work than traditional White students to show I am capable or have the capacity. The downside of that is that a single mistake will dash it. The view anyone would have of me would be being looked down upon.

He further explained that this includes both students and faculty. He added, "What is interesting is this is not something I found with White professors but something I have found with scholars of color." He justified this statement by saying,

> Just taking on the mainstream thought that a person of color has to work twice or three times as hard as the typical White person in this country,

> I feel they [view] a person of color making a mistake … poorly. I think, because [scholars of color] have to work really hard to get where they are, there is a mismatch when they see persons of color making a mistake.

Study participants also indicated they must confront and overcome many—often negative—stereotypes associated with being an international student. A single, male participant of color reported, "I had people make comments [like] 'what planet are you from.'" He explained this statement arose in reaction to an incident when he found himself well-versed on a topic the instructor was teaching and began answering questions posed by the instructor to the class, while the other "predominately White" students did not know the answers. In this situation, what should have been an opportunity to shine academically became a negative experience due to the condescension from his domestic classmates. This participant indicated that students would seek assistance from him in private regarding course material; however, in the classroom environment, these same students refused to acknowledge him. He said, "They would wait until all the students leave [class] so they would not be seen with me in the class for other students to know we communicate."

> Another male participant echoed the sentiments of negative stereotypes. He stated,

> When you come from a third-world country, people do not take you serious[ly,] or [they] think you are dumb or don't know what you are about. [But, when] you do better than everyone else, and it is hard for them to meet your standards, they … respect you.

Such stereotypes go beyond the classroom and extend to prevalent U.S. stereotypes against people of color. A male participant explained that although he is in a graduate program, he is afraid of being shot by the police because of negative stereotypes associated with "Black males." He stated that he was pulled over by the police on one or two occasions, and, in those instances, he was genuinely concerned about being shot by the police. Hence, the psychological and emotional transitions stem from the community itself and pose a ripple effect for some international students that carries over to learning.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This research contributes to the field of adult education and adult learning in many ways. Specifically, the study illuminates the adult education literature regarding challenges in pursuing higher education as a nontraditional learner from an international learner's perspective (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Campbell, 2015; Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Hunter-Johnson, 2016; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Zhao et al., 2005). Additionally, this study highlights the defining the roles of adult educators and institutions of higher education in promoting globally friendly learning environments. The findings from this study revealed that international nontraditional students pursuing higher

education in the United States experience tremendous transitional adjustments in both the educational and social arenas. Some challenges associated with the adjustment process include (a) diversity and cultural differences in the learning environment, (b) comparative differences in the learning environments, (c) language barriers, and (d) combatting stereotypes.

Although the findings related to the experiences of international adult learners while pursing higher education were neither new nor surprising, specifically regarding transitioning to the United States from a societal perspective (Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Kasworm, 2003; Lacina, 2002; Mwaura, 2008); adjustments to the learning environment (Mesidor & Sly, 2014); and adjustments regarding loneliness, anxiety, and depression during adjustment (Nilsson et al., 2004; Yakushko et al., 2008; Yi et al., 2003), the study's findings augmented the current literature by including transitional experiences in relation to the learning environment. Additionally, the study provides recommendations and considerations for adult educators and institutions of higher education, as well as for current and potential international learners pursuing higher education in the United States.

The findings regarding diversity and cultural differences in the learning environment can have a major impact on the international student emotionally and societally and can present as learning barriers. The resulting impacts could negatively impact retention and success rates for international students. Therefore, institutions of higher education should promote an institutional culture that welcomes and supports international students, especially nontraditional students with unique needs. Specifically, the implementation of an international student mentoring program to assist with acclimatization to methods of instruction and learning environments that are likely unfamiliar to such students are recommended. These programs can include domestic and international students. International students can be paired with two peer mentors—one a domestic student and the other an international student, preferably from the same country— who has already experienced the transitional adjustments. The domestic student would assist with social and cultural transitions and associated barriers such as familiarization with local transportation options and the general locality, identification of local supermarkets and similar resources, exposure to social events and entertainment, and orientation to the American educational system. The experienced international student peer mentor would aid the new international student with adjusting from a cultural perspective. Together, these peer mentors would create an automatic support system for the arriving international student and help ease the transitions. To be effective, peer mentors must be able to relate to and empathize with the new international nontraditional student and be vested in the mentoring process. In addition, training would be required for the student peer mentors, including instruction in the areas of cultural competency, diversity and inclusion, and effective mentoring techniques. Such peer-mentoring programs could become a key part of the greater set of resources for international students provided by institutions of higher education.

Regarding academic challenges faced by international nontraditional students such as writing assignments, classroom dynamics, or classroom discussions,

institutions of higher education should offer an international student learning support program as an extension of the university's international student office or in conjunction with library services. Such programs should include foci on writing assignments, linguistic challenges, classroom dynamics, and the educational culture in American universities. These offerings differ from student support programs designed for the general student body. Like the recommended peer mentoring program, this international student support program could be staffed by trained international and domestic student volunteers, nontraditional students who can empathize and sympathize with being a nontraditional adult learner. Program offerings could include one-on-one instruction, workshops, seminars, online training, and conferences. At the beginning of the semester, an orientation specifically for international students could be hosted to assist with the academic transitions.

To the adjustment challenges within the classroom environment, it is paramount that institutions of higher learning institute training opportunities for adult educators that enable them to better serve the international nontraditional student population. Such training could mimic cultural sensitivity training and could provide best practices for ensuring that the classroom environment is one that is sensitive to the cultural experiences of international learners and respects cultural differences. Furthermore, where relevant, adult educators must actively include the experiences of international students to enhance the learning experience for international and domestic students alike by valuing global perspectives. Such efforts and modeling establish a foundation for networking opportunities between and among students and faculty that can extend beyond the educational environment and the duration of the academic program.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The primary limitation of this study is that it relied on the experiences and perspectives of a small number of international students ($n = 16$), which cannot accurately or fully capture the experiences of all international students pursuing higher education in the United States. As a result, the countries of origin and backgrounds of this small number of participants limit the ability to extrapolate the findings to unrepresented international student populations.

RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As noted in the findings, there are often significant differences between the learning environments of international students' home countries and U.S. learning environments. International nontraditional students are required to adjust socially, psychologically, emotionally, linguistically, academically, and physically while they undertake higher education pursuits. While much of the literature regarding international students echo such adjustments (Mesidor & Sly, 2014; Nilsson et al., 2004; Yakashko et al., 2008; Yi et al., 2003), there is limited emphasis on adjustment strategies for international nontraditional adult learners pursuing higher education in the United States. Further research is needed on the role of

academic institutions in the acclimation process of international students in higher education and on the institutional support systems needed to promote the retention and success rate of international students. Such research would establish best practices in this arena.

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