Empowered to Serve? Higher Education International Center Directors and Their Roles on Campus Internationalization

Hugo A. García
Jon McNaughtan
Xinyang Li
Mi Chelle Leong
Andrew S. Herridge
Texas Tech University, USA

ABSTRACT

Some institutions have sought to centralize the supports they give students by developing a center or office dedicated to international students, led by a director or manager overseeing international student support. However, these directors are also not given the resources needed to fully support international students. Our study focuses on the role and empowerment of these international center leaders. A multi-institution case study approach, guided by the empowerment framework, was utilized. The first research question asked what perceptions international center directors have of the resources and support structures provided by their institutions for the growing international student population. The second research question examined how international center directors perceive their empowerment, and which dimensions of empowerment they experience, or lack. Findings include international center directors reporting their sense of empowerment is founded in their desire to serve, sense of autonomy, and the sense of meaning they find engaging in the work.

Keywords: case study, empowerment, international students, midlevel staff

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has a profound impact on the recruiting and retaining of international students in higher education institutions (Cantwell, 2015). According to 'Open Doors' (Institute of International Education [IEE], 2017), there are 1,078,822 international students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities alone. Cantwell (2015) noted in his study that as universities have become more enterprising to replace declining federal and state support, international students have been an attractive source of revenue.

In connection with the growth of international enrollments, previous studies have found that additional support services for these students have been developed to serve this growing population (Andrade, 2005; Lau et al., 2018; Sherry et al., 2010; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). These services were designed to support international students who face what Sherry and colleagues call significant obstacles, such as a language barrier, adaption to a new culture, and insufficient financial support. Recent studies (Banjong, 2015; Lau et al., 2018) note that international students could benefit from engaging campus resources (e.g., an international student support center, writing tutoring, career advising, and counseling) to deal with these obstacles, but many are unable to navigate the institution to utilize them. Chen and Bartlett (2017) also argue that universities have targeted the needs of international students and sought to centralize resources that were essential to their success, which included immigration, orientation, language training, academic assistance, and cross-cultural programs. There is a growing body of literature focused on the needs of international students (Ammigan & Jones, 2018), as well as the service offered to them (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012). However, there is scant research on the leaders of the staff who support this group of students from a managemental perspective (Herridge et al., 2019; Roberts, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to provide insight into how the staff of international centers perceive the institutional support for their work, and their level of empowerment to engage with their growing population. Utilizing the empowerment framework (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997; Spreitzer, 1995) to guide our work, this study focuses on interviews with 18 advanced leaders of designated international centers. It was found that these leaders are constrained by their institutions in several ways, yet their definition and sense of empowerment are founded in their desire to serve, sense of autonomy, and the meaning they find underlying their work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the growing trend of internationalization in higher education in the United States, these managerial professionals within international centers deserve more attention from researchers. International centers act as a bridge between the institutions and international students. As the leaders of these organizations embedded within hierarchical and complex organizations, these managerial professionals shoulder several unique responsibilities and roles within and outside

their centers. Thus, it is necessary to acquire a clearer understanding of the characteristics of advanced leaders of international centers. Despite the general lack of empirical research that focuses on them within higher education, these leaders play pivotal roles for both institutions and international students.

International Students' Experiences on U.S. Campuses

Prior research has shown that international students experience challenges and stressors when they transition to the United States. Herridge et al. (2019) and Oba and Pope (2013) mentioned cultural differences, discrimination, language barriers, and academic and financial problems being the most common stressors among international students. Academically, international students have to adapt to a new learning environment as the education system in the United States could be different and less structured than their home country (Herridge et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2015). In the Western education system, educators tend to emphasize autonomy, critical thinking, and engagement in the learning process whereas in non-Western cultures, students are taught to learn information from their professors who are viewed as experts in the field (Scheyvens et al., 2003).

The changes in living environment, especially social support, tend to impact international students profoundly such that they often experience a sense of loss when they have to leave their family and friends behind (Lau et al., 2018). At times, the language barrier and cultural differences exacerbate this challenge even when they put in the effort to build a new social circle (Mori, 2000). Therefore, studies support the notion that institutions of higher education need to develop and provide additional support and accommodations to ease the international students' transition to the United States as well as to enhance their college experience as a whole (Lau et al., 2018; Reynolds & Constantine, 2017). Pal et al. (2020) found that international center staff reported the need for international centers to provide additional support for international students other than just focusing on immigration paperwork. Additionally, Bodine Al-Sharif et al. (2020) and Castiello-Gutiérrez et al. (2020) found that international center staff had a desire to make meaning and utilize an educational approach rather than simply focusing on paperwork.

International Centers

Given the scarce research on international centers, the understanding of the function of these centers and their staff are limited. According to Rajapaksa and Dundes (2002), most international students will experience the challenge of adjusting to new circumstances at varying levels due to their unique acculturation process to the host culture (Berry, 1974, 1997). In short, international students will have differing levels of comfort with the academic expectations, the language of the host country, and other cultural norms (Cho & Yu, 2015). Indeed, prior research has found that international students in the United States require more tailored support to achieve positive outcomes when compared to their domestic

U.S. peers (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Li & Gasser, 2005).

Staff within international centers must fulfill various responsibilities within their role (McNaughtan et al., 2019). The primary focus of international center staff tends to be to provide support for international students and their related programs (Deschamps & Lee, 2015). Specifically, these responsibilities often include advising, mentoring (McNaughtan et al., 2019; Pal et al., 2020), providing support on immigration matters, program development (Bodine Al-Sharif et al., 2020; Deschamps & Lee, 2015; McNaughtan et al., 2019), academic and social support (Bodine Al-Sharif et al., 2020), and student orientation for international students (Deschamps & Lee, 2015). While the workload of staff within international centers has increased, the number of available resources has not (Pal et al., 2020).

Despite the growing population of international students, scholars find that institutional support for international students is insufficient (García & Villarreal, 2014), given the complexity of their needs (Lau et al., 2018). In an effort to combat the lack of support, many institutions have adopted a more centralized model for supporting international students that can provide services for immigration, academic challenges, and an opportunity to socialize (McNaughtan et al., 2019). International centers are increasingly important in that they provide both an international and cross-cultural perspective for students and aid in developing curriculum from an international perspective (Altbach & Knight, 2007). These international centers and the staff who operate them have become increasingly popular yet are understudied given their significance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by the empowerment framework developed by Thomas and Velthouse (1990), and later validated by Spreitzer (1995). From psychological construct, empowerment in a work setting could be defined as the process for delegating tasks to employees in a way that maximizes their potential to complete their task. As previous research has noted, empowerment was closely tied to the level of creativity, motivation, productivity, responsibility, turnover rate, and a sense of purpose among employees (Albrecht & Andreetta, 2011; Bodine Al-Sharif et al., 2020; McNaughtan et al., 2019; Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997; Whetten & Cameron, 2015; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). The empowerment framework has been utilized for over 20 years by practitioners and scholars alike to measure the relationship between the constructs of empowerment and desirable outcomes in settings from health care (Laschinger & Finegan, 2005) to manufacturing (Psoinos & Smithson, 2002).

Spreitzer's (1995) original model only included four dimensions, but later Whetten and Cameron (2015) argued that there are five core dimensions of empowerment, which include: (1) self-efficacy, (2) trust, (3) meaning, (4) personal consequence, and (5) self-determination. Each dimension is a unique construct that contributes to an individual's overarching feeling of empowerment, and to be fully empowered, all five must be present (Whetten & Cameron, 2015).

Self-efficacy is the first dimension of empowerment, which refers to the internal belief that an individual can complete their assigned tasks. The measurement for this element of empowerment is based on how well the person being empowered understands what is being asked of them, and how confident they are in their abilities and skills to complete the task. The second dimension of empowerment is trust, which refers to the relationship between the person being asked to complete a task and the leader(s) asking. Specifically, trust is the level of mutual respect between the two parties that allows them to take risks and to have a desire to complete the work asked. One aspect of the concept of trust is an open line of communication that allows the person attempting a new task to receive support from their leaders. In higher education, this could occur at multiple levels including departments, programs, and colleges, and at the university level. The third dimension of empowerment is meaning, which refers to the individual's perceptions of the value of their task. Meaning can come from many different sources or even aspects of the work, but true empowerment requires that the person being empowered has an internal motivation for completing the task well. The fourth dimension of empowerment is personal consequence, which refers to the feeling of investment and impact the person being empowered feels while working on their assigned task. This dimension is not only connected to the impact of the project but more specifically focuses on how an individual's role in the completion of the project will impact others on the team or the project in general. The fifth dimension of empowerment is self-determination which is the amount of choice and direction the person is allowed to offer during the project. Self-determination is most frequently tied to the number of decisions, and the influence of those decisions, on a given project.

The purpose of this study was to understand the role of international center directors, in the context of their complex work and growing role on campus. In addition, we applied the empowerment framework to better understand the level of empowerment of these critical employees and sought to know which dimensions of empowerment are most salient, and which are lacking for these managerial professionals. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What perceptions do international center directors have of the resources and support structures provided by their institutions for the growing international student population?

2. How do international center directors perceive their empowerment, and which dimensions of empowerment do they experience, or lack?

METHODS

Spreitzer's (1995) empowerment theory was used in guiding this qualitative study. Specifically, the researchers utilized a multicase study approach to attain deeper insight and perspectives rather than a single case (Yin, 2014). First, the researchers analyzed the data inductively and then deductively to generate the

preliminary codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Utilizing a priori coding, the researchers developed codes based on the theory of empowerment prior to reviewing the data. However, axial coding for themes that emerged in the data that were determined to be of importance was also captured in the coding. The primary focus of the coding adjustment was meant for reaching a saturation point for any emergent themes that were aligned to the a priori theory codes and to consider other themes that were believed to align with the theory. Oversaw by two professors, two teams of coders each coded 33% of the data independently and had equal say in the coding discussion over the preliminary codes to achieve intercoder reliability (Morse, 1997). Then based on the preliminary codes, two teams of coders continued to code 50% of the data independently. To achieve saturation, the communications on adjusting and refining codes continued throughout the process until no new codes emerged (Strauss & Corbin, 1998); thus, the researchers achieved the agreement on the final codebook. Based on the finalized codebook, two researchers proceeded to code all the remaining transcriptions, which were cross-checked by the other two researchers for the sake of validity. At last, the researchers utilized selective coding to finalize the emerging themes.

Data Collection

This study utilized purposeful sampling procedures such that the researcher carefully selects the universities, interviewees, and documents that helped confirm the accuracy of data analysis. First, it was decided to recruit participants among all the Title IV-funded postsecondary educational institutions across the United States. The postsecondary institutions selected for this study consist of directors responsible for leading the international centers embedded within various two- and four-year college campuses in the United States.

The researchers collected the contact information of the leader of the designated international student service organization through the publicly available institutional websites. Then a questionnaire was sent out to our potential participants, which included a part asking their voluntary participation in an hour-long phone interview. The interview protocol was provided to the participants prior to the arranged interview. The interview protocol developed revolved around the empowerment theoretical framework. It consisted of four sections: (a) work experience and structure, (b) organizational condition, (c) empowerment, and (d) mental health support. Not only the empowerment section but also other sections included subquestions that were designed to allude to different dimensions of sense of empowerment. The meaningful and in-depth information could be collected when probing into, for instance, the resources that the participant received, the communication and relationship with the supervisor, or the experience regarding collaboration. All interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed.

This study followed the dissemination of a survey to all institutions within the sample. The researchers identified 423 institutions with over 5% international students based on IPEDS data. However, only 406 of the 423 institutions also provided international center/program support. As such, a total of 406 surveys

were sent out. The survey had 105 responses, resulting in a response rate of 26%. Of those who filled out the survey, they were asked to volunteer if they wanted to participate in a follow-up interview. Of the 105 survey respondents, 26 indicated they were willing to participate in the qualitative interviews but only 18 participated. A total of 18 participants ($n = 18$) were involved in the interview, yielding a participation rate of 17%. Saturation was reached at 10 participants, but interviews were continued to 18 participants to ensure no new additional themes emerged. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for all 18 participants which include the characteristics of directors of international center and the characteristics of the corresponding institutions. For each of the participants, a one-hour phone interview was conducted with a member of the research team, and a research assistant was also present in the interview for note-taking. The length of the interview ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, depending on the number of the spontaneously emerged follow-up questions. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym that was reflective of their background and geographical location of the participant's locality.

Table 1: Participant Descriptives

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Race	Education	Carnegie basic institutional classification	Carnegie-assigned region	Institutional type
Anne	Female	Black	Doctorate	M1	Far Western	Private
Barry	Male	White	Masters	M1	Plains	Public
Carrie	Female	White	Doctorate	Baccalaureate College: Diverse Fields	Plains	Public
Dana	Female	White	Masters	R1	Great Lakes	Public
Elaine	Female	White	Masters	R3	New England	Private
Frank	Male	White	Masters	Baccalaureate College: Arts & Sciences Focus	Plains	Public
Gayle	Female	White	Masters	R1	Southwestern	Public
Hannah	Female	White	Bachelors	R2	Great Lakes	Public
Ima	Female	White	Masters	R1	Great Lakes	Public
Jack	Male	White	Masters	R2	Great Lakes	Public
Kelly	N/A	White	Masters	M1	Far Western	Private
Larry	Male	White	Masters	R1	Plains	Public
Matt	Male	White	Masters	Baccalaureate College: Arts & Sciences Focus	Far Western	Private
Nalia	Female	White	Masters	R2	New England	Private
Ophilia	Female	White	Masters	M1	Southeastern	Private
Pam	Female	White	Masters	M2	Plains	Public
Quinn	Female	White	Masters	Baccalaureate College: Arts & Sciences Focus	Great Lakes	Private
Roger	Male	White	Masters	R1	Great Lakes	Public

Of the 18 participants, there were 12 females and 6 males. Among all the participants, 17 of them were identified as White. As for the highest degree that been earned by our participants, 15 of our participants hold a master's degree; while one had a bachelor's degree and two of them had a PhD or equivalent degree. As for the years of working experience, the years of working in the field of higher education ranged from 5 to 15 years, with a mean of 15 years. The years of working in the institution ranged from 6 to 25 years, with a mean of 14 years. At last, the years of working in current position ranged from 1 to 20 years, with a mean of 9 years.

As for the institutional characteristics, there were 12 public institutions and 6 private institutions. Among these institutions, the total student enrollment ranged from 801 to 39,084 with a mean of 12,962, and international student enrollment ranged from 93 to 5,845 with a mean of 1,517.1. The international student rate ranged from 6% to 26%.

FINDINGS

What perceptions do international center directors have of the resources and support structures provided by their institutions for the growing international student population?

Sense of Empowerment

Overall, most of the international center directors (15 out of 18) felt competent and comfortable to carry out their responsibility. They clarified that the support from the institution, or more specifically, the superior to whom they reported, made them feel empowered. For example, Clair felt she "is able to do what needs to get done" and she is "satisfied with the work" she is doing due to the support of her superior. The supports were not limited to having an understanding superior, Jennifer, for instance, felt empowered that she has the freedom to "move budget and change it on a daily basis" if she wanted to, which granted her the power to build up workshops, programs, and so on.

When asked about empowerment, there were also international center directors pointing out that they do not feel empowerment due to the organizational structure. For instance, Julia stated, "We had some poor leadership that just was kind of… the cabinet made the decisions for the college and didn't really listen to people on the ground as much." Interestingly, Julia defined empowerment differently from the commonly used term of having the "ability," "autonomy," or "decision-making." Instead, she said "Being empowered is having the voice that you can express to the administration what you feel the students' needs are that you're hearing directly from the students and that they act on…that knowing that information is correct." Tied to the cabinet decision-making, the international center director, as Julia's case, is not as supported or empowered as other institutions.

Some international center directors shared their view regarding their sense of empowerment. For instance, Brown felt he was empowered "as an office," and he does have the autonomy to carry out the international related affairs, "We have a lot of autonomy in our work, which is really important, and other units might not have that same autonomy." However, when Brown found there were a lot of challenges to overcome when working with an academic program for their four-credit class to be recognized, he said that "part of that challenge might be that we don't have the support of an academic unit to give credence to the class and learning outcomes and everything else." When asked if he is empowered or not, Jack stated that he felt empowered in terms of leadership within the office and the "great reciprocity collegiality with the counterparts in domestic admissions and enrollment management." However, as for the support from the institution, he stated that the institution "had perfected the higher education bureaucracy," which might not be as supportive as he expected.

How do international center directors perceive their empowerment, and which dimensions of empowerment do they experience, or lack?

To answer the second research question, the researchers examined each dimension of the empowerment theory. This examination provided insight into the participants' reasons to feel empowered as the managerial professionals of the international center, as well as revealed the areas that the participants did not credit as a source of empowerment. In this section, the trust, the meaning, and the self-efficacy stood out as the main sources of the sense of the empowerment. However, when asked if they feel empowered in their work, the participants rarely referred to self-determination and personal consequence as the sources of empowerment despite the related questions being asked during the interview.

Trust

Trust between the international center directors and the senior administration could impede or facilitate the sense of empowerment such that it helps to promote connectedness. While discussing empowerment, all of the participants (18 out of 18) mentioned at least one of the subthemes that fall into the trust dimension of empowerment. The emerged subthemes in this dimension included support (94.4%), autonomy (77.8%), and input (33.3%).

Support

Support was the most mentioned subtheme, which referred to either resource or emotional supports. Brown stated he felt supported through the regional conference meetings with his peers from other institutions:

> (We) have the benefit of having an assistant provost who really supports our unit and really pushes for us to have the resources we need, especially at a time now when the university budget, as well as our own budget, has kind of taken a hit right now.

Many center leaders recognized and acknowledged the support they received from their institution. For example, Rick felt he received "a high level of support" from his institution and upper administration. Marry said they obtained "a lot of support institutionally" due to the reputation she "built up over a number of years and with a variety of different administrative leaders." Kate credited the institution members for offering a "system-wide effort" that helped her program. Finally, Branden stated, "The provost is one of our biggest fans. I rely on her for political support." It was found that when a director was granted the power to provide input to their supervisors, it was often the case that our participants expressed a sense of autonomy and freedom within their role. Thus, support was a critical condition needed to increase trust.

Autonomy

Autonomy also emerged as a subtheme of trust, which denoted the participants feeling or expressing a sense of autonomy or freedom when initiating programs, carry out the daily duty, or other moves at their best judgment. More specifically, as Jade pointed out, the autonomy is closely tied to her sense of empowerment, when her superior administration is "confident that the directors…are doing what they are supposed to be doing and not (having) second guess or question on (their action)."

When asked about the autonomy with their role, many directors pointed out that it is an essential element to form a beneficial working environment for them. For instance, Clair mentioned her supervisor granted her the freedom to initiate her ideas and projects, which helped her to develop her position:

> I've been really lucky to be mentored under a director (who) lets me have a lot of leeway with ideas and project. I'm much more likely to hear "yes" than "no" about something and he really allowed me to grow and create my role, each one of us we were hired, we created the role in a sense because no one was in our role before us and so you know allowing me to make my role into what it is and really run with it.

Richard felt autonomy because his supervisor trusted him with the decision on hiring, as he said: "The final decision of hiring she always leaves to me, so I appreciate that she trusts that I know who will be the right fit for the positions that come up in my office." Similarly, Tina mentioned that her supervisor allowed her autonomy when hiring staff. Also, as Jade pointed out, the autonomy allowed her "to do what (she) need to do to make her office runs smoothly."

According to our findings, bureaucracy was the main obstacle that hindered autonomy among our participants. One of the situations was the conflict between the fast-growing satellite campus and the main campus in a system. When asked about whether they have a sense of autonomy, Samantha brought up the issue:

> Where the main campus is trying to consolidate across campuses, a lot of the core functions. And they kind of frame it as a means of support for

the offices across campus, but really what it's done is taken away our independence to do things as we see fit, and it's taken away efficiency...

As a result, Samantha does not feel empowered given the bureaucracy that was embedded within the main campus, or the university system. Interestingly, the director from the main campus shared the same feeling from Samantha, when asked about the sense of autonomy. Jack said even he does not "care to be micromanaged" yet wishes to have a healthy balance between being supported and being autonomous. However, he stated: "I would say our institution has perfected the higher education bureaucracy…that is quite an achievement." There was a clear confliction when it comes to the perception of empowerment for the directors' form different campus within a university system. Sadly, in the case of Samantha and Jack, neither party felt enough trust when dealing with the bureaucracy.

Similar to the micromanagement mentioned by Jack, another situation that our participants lacked a sense of autonomy occurred when the supervisor sought to be over involved or required additional reporting. As Vanessa stated:

> There have been times when I've worked directly with our new VP's on different kinds of initiatives and then, my supervisor came to me and was like, "I see you working with the VP on these international things and I need to be a part of these conversations and I need you to loop me in and I need you to copy me on these emails and I need to … [I] and you need to work together on this and then present it to the VP. You shouldn't be going to her directly."

In such a case, Vanessa's sense of autonomy, as well as the sense of empowerment was diminished.

Input

It was found that directors' sense of empowerment was influenced by the relationship with their upper administration. An openly, two-way communication between the higher administrative and midlevel managerial professionals is one of the essential components of the relationship. For instance, Julia did not feel empowered by senior leadership initially, yet Julia discussed how a new president was shifting her experience:

> I can send the [new] president an email or walk into her office almost any day of the week and if she has a question about the international population or hears things on the ground she directly comes to me.

Despite the importance of having healthy two-way communication and the input from midlevel managerial professionals, it was noticed that there was a discrepancy between the eligibility of having input and the actual decision-making process. Sandra stated that for the cabinet members, "it's very hard to get

them out of those bubbles." Kate shared a similar experience where she tried to provide input to her supervisor in hopes that her suggestions would be considered. However, she states that decisions are made regardless of her opinion, "It's just little things like our move here into our space here was not something that was negotiable. We had no input into it, and we did not have any input into when the timing of it happened." Vanessa also experienced disempowerment when interacting with her supervisor, and she said, "I mean, I don't know if she means it. I think she thought it was ... Whatever her intentions were, were not to direct it towards empowering me. That was not her goal in that I don't think."

Meaning

The second most reported dimension by the participants is meaning, which refers to the perceived internal or external value of the task. Among the participants, 17 out of 18 found meaning in their job. They confided that their sense of accomplishment and satisfaction of working with international students, as well as their personality carried a lot of weight when defining meaning. It is noteworthy that meaning was the only dimension that all participants agreed on, and that the institutional structures could not diminish.

Participants noted that passion for the work, satisfaction with their job, social connection, and accomplishment were essential to defining the meaning that they found. When Brown was asked if he found meaning in his job, he stated:

> I think almost every day and I'm not shy about this. There are very few people in my life with whom I would willingly trade jobs. I love what I do and the older I get … I find the meaning in what I'm doing and as I see how the earlier students I worked with are developing and what kinds of things they're doing in their lives and in our communities.

And the sense of accomplishment could also derive from their organizational role as a midlevel manager. For example, Kenny felt accomplishment because of how he connected departments and he said that he "brought to campus a much more holistic view of international education." Sandra mentioned that working with students kept her spirit high:

> Those kinds of things keep me going as well as the teaching that I do, staying in touch with students. When I can't do those things, I just get downright depressed and start thinking more and more of leaving and opening up a yarn shop.

Beyond the feelings of passion and satisfaction, some directors also attribute the meaning to their prior personal experience as international students. For instance, Jennifer's experience as an international student herself allowed her to affirm the meaning of her job, as she viewed international education as part of her identity, she said:

> I studied abroad myself four different times and having international students come here, they bring so much to our campus and…I'm just a

huge advocate for international education and I've been doing this particular job here for 21 years…and I just love it and its part of who I am so for me this is a great fit.

Nonetheless, Jade found that helping had rooted deeply in her heart, as she stated:

I have students that will leave me and transfer to other schools and because they don't get the help there, they'll come back and call me and say can you help me? And it's like sure, come on in I'll help you, you know. I just…you know they need help, so I am there for them.

So even though former students are no longer at their institution, Jade still provides support to them. This further illustrates the meaning found by participants in their work.

Self-Efficacy

Our findings also highlight the impact of self-efficacy, the level of one's empowerment for this population. Overall, 13 out of 18 international center directors reported feeling empowered due to the belief that they understood their tasks as well as having the competency to do so. More specifically, within the dimension of self-efficacy, the confidence in getting resources (50%) and training (38.9%) stood out as the subthemes that allude to their sense of self-efficacy.

Resources

The self-efficacy centered on having the appropriate resources (e.g., physical space, funding, support staff) was the most mentioned subtheme. It was common for our participants to identify that they were content regarding the location of the center, space they could utilize, and staffing. Most participants made it clear that their international centers were accessible, well located, and spacious. For instance, Jack mentioned that even though the campus is spread out, the location of the international center is very accessible, "We are on one of the ends of campus where there is student housing and we are near also a lot of the student apartments which is umm helpful for especially the international students." Emily mentioned that the international student services office has much better space compared to the study abroad office. Both Emily and Julia stated that there is plenty of public space for international students to hang out at their office.

Many of our participants indicated that their centers were adequately staffed. Emily stated that "I got permission to add staff when we restructured to bring everything together. I felt like I had a lot of the resources I needed available to me." And Jennifer commented that "(We are) always busy but there are times when it is busier, but I would say our staffing for what we have going right now is perfect, perfect staffing."

Despite the shared confidence in location, space, and staffing, most directors expressed their concern on funding due to the decline of international student enrollment as well as budget cuts from the state for public institutions. Kenny talked about the dropping of enrollment when asked about the funding:

> Unfortunately, we're at a point right now where I think a lot of places are facing challenges with international enrollment, and we've dropped probably about 30% in the last two years. A lot of (students from) Saudi Arabia, and a lot of (from) India… But we have a 10% more or less budget cut from the state.

As the international fee was the main source of funding for most international centers, some institutions had to increase the fee to maintain a healthy budget. Jade states:

> In the end, we don't really have a lot of money so as far as the support it's as far as it's the fund it's not there. I mean we really don't, we just had, we just had an increase in fee form $100 dollars to $125 dollars because my concern was with the numbers our admission you know our student enrollment is going down.

Training

As mentioned before, the confidence in the training that the staff received also emerged among our participants' responses. Brown stated that "each person in our office has a bit of specialization" and he went through the intercultural development inventory training. The variety of trainings and certifications were common according to our findings. For instance, in Jade's office, every staff member received Designated School Officials (DSO) and Principal Designated School Officials (PDSO) training. In Jack's office, staff members have the background of counseling, and Jennifer had staff members who have gone through National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) training.

DISCUSSION

This study provided insight into the perceptions of international center directors in relation to their sense of empowerment and how organizational structures support or inhibit their ability to serve students. As midlevel staff, international center directors described their experiences as both leading up and leading down (Kezar, 2012) which alludes to their middle management position. On the one hand, they serve the role of leaders within their respective units, where they are responsible for managing a staff that works directly with students doing frontline work. On the other hand, these leaders often share information with senior leaders that informs how institutions globalize, and support their international student base (McNaughtan et al., 2019). Wearing many hats, international center directors at times described taking a triage approach, in order to address the needs of their international students and serve as advisors, counselors, administrators, collaborators, and serve as members of university-wide committees. In addition

to leading up and leading down, the role and responsibilities of these individuals often require working horizontally. In other words, they collaborate with campus and community partners to better serve the needs of international students.

Given the complexity of this role, empowerment is critical to ensure efficient use of resources and high-quality student support. Our findings indicate that international center directors do perceive empowerment to be important to the effectiveness when empowerment is lacking; their work becomes increasingly difficult. This aligns with past research in this area (Albrecht & Andreetta, 2011; Whetten & Cameron, 2015). Our study provides insights for implications, practice, and illustrates directions for future inquiry.

Implications for Practice

It was found that trust, meaning, and self-efficacy were the three most referenced dimensions of empowerment of the participants in this study. Given these findings, three potential implications for practice were identified. First, senior administrators should focus on developing trust with their midlevel staff. In connection with the findings of McNaughtan et al. (2019), that empowerment was more associated with job satisfaction than work conditions, the development of trust for this group of employees should be of utmost importance. One way administrators can develop trust is to have consistent and open communication about job responsibilities. In addition, administrators should seek to follow-up on job responsibilities (Whetten & Cameron, 2015).

Second, international center directors need to maintain connection to their work as it provides significant meaning in their lives. This study highlighted that for international center staff, these students were more than "cash cows" (Cantwell, 2015) and that as staff connected with them, they felt a great deal of meaning. This could best be achieved by increasing the student contact beyond perfunctory tasks like immigration paperwork, which many respondents did not find meaning in. Lau et al. (2018) found that connections with faculty and staff increased sense of belonging of international students. Thus, not only is increasing interaction beneficial for international center staff, it is extremely beneficial for the international students as well. This mutually beneficial activity should be promoted on postsecondary campuses.

Finally, as 38.9% of our participants indicated that training was important to them, administrators should also provide and develop professional development opportunities for center directors. While most participants in this study felt qualified and capable to do their work, some expressed a desire to become more confident in their responsibilities. Self-efficacy as a dimension of empowerment is one of the few dimensions that are exclusively internal. That said, administrators can provide opportunities to influence their employees sense of self-efficacy, which could in turn strengthen the employee's ability to do their job, through professional development training.

Limitations

There are limitations in this study that should be taken into account. First, this study was conducted with participants located at U.S.-based institutions. The findings, discussion, and implications are presented within a U.S. context. Therefore, our findings may not be applicable to universities in other regions of the world. Second, all participants came from four-year institutions. Two-year colleges serve the unique needs of the communities they serve. Because no two-year institutions were represented, our finding may not be transferrable to two-year college campuses which serve a more local context. Finally, the demographic profile of the participants in this study must be taken into account. Of the 18 participants, 17 reported identifying as White and one participant identified as Black. Thus, the experiences of White participants who lead these complex offices may not reflect the experiences of non-White staff.

Directions for Future Inquiry

There is scant research focused on the support staff of international centers and there are many potential directions for scholars to pursue to support not only these managerial professionals, but also the large student population they support. Two directions for future inquiry are closely aligned with the work in this study.

First, a qualitative analysis of the experiences of international center staff on each dimension of empowerment could provide insight into where these staff are finding challenges from their senior-level administrators. Using trust as an example, the directors reported not feeling as confident in their ability to collaborate across departments and with other staff. However, when these leaders ask for help and request assistance and collaborations, the response from the campus community is often not reciprocal, leading to lower levels in their confidence regarding mutual respect and collaborations. This illustrates one way that trust may be hindered, but a more dedicated study on each dimension would be helpful.

Second, future research should tease apart other experiences of managerial professionals, such as autonomy. In this study, the researchers categorize autonomy as an aspect of self-determination and trust, but what leads to employee autonomy would be helpful to understand. Directors in this study reported high levels of autonomy, yet feelings of not being heard were present when senior administrators or collogues at other departments would make decisions without consulting with or talking to them. This is an issue of intergroup versus intragroup trust. To address the issue, additional research would be helpful.

CONCLUSION

Empowerment is crucial for international center directors in ensuring the effective operation of the unit, supporting international students, and fulfilling the institutional mission. This study delved into each of the dimensions of the empowerment theoretical framework and tried to broaden understanding of this

unique and growing group of campus leaders, international center directors. Despite the recent declines of international enrollment in the United States, the trend of globalization has been established and these international centers continue permeate the higher education landscape while growing in responsibility and influence. As such, efforts to understand international center directors will be increasingly critical.

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HUGO A. GARCÍA, PhD, is an assistant professor of Higher Education in the Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership at Texas Tech University. His research interests pertain to access and equity in higher education, community colleges, international higher education, and diversity in higher education. Email: hugo.garcia@ttu.edu

JON MCNAUGHTAN, PhD, is an assistant professor of Higher Education in the Educational Psychology and Leadership department in the College of Education at Texas Tech University. His research focuses on higher education leadership with an emphasis on communication, empowerment, and engagement. Email: Jon.mcnaughtan@ttu.edu

XINYANG LI, MEd, is a PhD candidate at Educational Psychology and Leadership at Texas Tech University. His major research interests revolve around psychological characteristics in online educational setting, internationalization in higher education, and Hierarchical Linear Modeling. Email: Xinyang.li@ttu.edu

MI CHELLE LEONG, MEd, is a licensed professional counselor associate in the state of Texas. She received an MEd in Clinical Mental Health Counseling from Texas Tech University and BSc in Psychology from Upper Iowa University. Her research interests revolve around international population, LGBTQ, and cultural diversity. She is currently expanding her research interest in assessment and cultural diversity at workplace. Email: michelleleongg@gmail.com

ANDREW S. HERRIDGE, PhD, is an instructor in Women's and Gender Studies at Texas Tech University. His research interests include access and equity in higher education, LGBTQIA students and resources, institutional leadership and policy, and international higher education. Email: andrew.herridge@ttu.edu