

Reimagining a Model for International Students’ College Readiness and Transition

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ABSTRACT

Existing literature reveals that international students' contextual awareness of social networks, academic culture, logistics, and the host country's culture influence college readiness and transitions. As international students' experience navigating U.S. colleges and universities differs from domestic students, college readiness models should reflect the differences between the two populations. This article explores the implications of Conley's (2007) facets of college readiness model and the contextual skills and awareness element related to international students' experience transitioning to U.S. institutions. Additionally, existing literature reveals a need for higher education institutions to take greater ownership in supporting international students' college readiness and transition. By reimagining a college readiness model inclusive of international students' experiences and the responsibility of higher education institutions, educators can improve understanding of international students' experiences, enhance support, and work toward more equitable practice, both in the United States and other contexts.

Keywords: college readiness, educational responsibility, foreign students, hidden curriculum, international education, student development

Recent data emphasize the growth of international students applying to higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States and other contexts. In 2020–2021, 1,075,496 international students enrolled in U.S. HEIs, nearly double from 547,867 in 2000–2001 (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2020). As international student enrollment has grown to comprise 5.5% of total U.S. college enrollment, educators increasingly

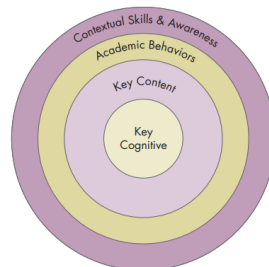
focus on students' transition to college, a critical milestone influencing degree attainment (IIE, 2020; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). While prior research has revealed important findings related to international students' college transitions, few frameworks exist to explain this phenomenon, except for Conley's (2007) facets of college readiness model focused on U.S. domestic students. Aligning with Conley's (2007) model, existing literature on college readiness additionally emphasizes the student's role in their transition, with minimal responsibility for HEIs to clarify the hidden curriculum within institutions (Wink, 2011). Using Conley's (2007) model as a starting point, this article explores elements important to a college readiness and transition model for international students. By reimagining a college readiness model inclusive of international students' experiences and the responsibility of HEIs, educators can develop a foundation to improve understanding of international students' experiences, enhance support, and work toward more equitable practice in U.S. higher education and beyond.

Conceptual Framework

College readiness models explain how students transition to new academic environments. Conley (2007) described college readiness as students' prior preparation impacting their potential to transition and succeed within a college or university. Within the facets of college readiness model depicted in Figure 1, Conley asserts that students need to have appropriate readiness levels across four areas or facets. Key cognitive strategies refer to students' ability to leverage cognitive strategies to navigate an academic environment within the model. Key content refers to students' specific subject matter knowledge necessary to succeed. Additionally, academic behaviors refer to students' non-cognitive strengths, including motivation, resilience, and time management. Finally, *contextual skills and awareness* include students' access to information and resources specific to navigating HEIs (Conley, 2007). This article will explore international students' college readiness related to contextual skills and awareness. Additionally, this article will address the role of institutions in supporting international students' transitions through demystifying the hidden curriculum found within HEIs.

Figure 1

Conley's (2007) Facets of College Readiness Model. Adopted from *Toward a more comprehensive conception of college readiness*, ©EPIC



LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on international students' college readiness and transition reveals that students' contextual skills and awareness impact their transition to U.S. HEIs. Additionally, international students' contextual skills and awareness impact their navigation of the institution's hidden curriculum, which includes information students need to succeed in their transition, but is not explicitly taught (Conley, 2007; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Wink, 2011). Within the literature, four themes related to international students' contextual awareness emerged, including knowledge of social networks, academic culture, logistics, and host country culture (Gautam et al., 2016; Luo et al., 2019; Mohamed, 2020; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Exploring these themes within Conley's (2007) model and the contextual skills and awareness facet further supports understanding international students' experiences transitioning to U.S. HEIs.

Social Networks

Conley's (2007) model emphasizes that students' success in navigating social relationships and communicating effectively with individuals of diverse backgrounds influences their transition to HEIs. Across the literature, international students cited that contextual awareness related to the availability of social networks impacted their transition to college. For example, Moores and Popadiuk (2011) conducted a qualitative study with seven international students from Asia, Europe, and Central America. The authors identified eight themes that positively impacted international students' transitions, including students' prior knowledge of social support networks, the presence of supportive peers, and strengths in relationship building (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011).

These findings align with Gautam et al.'s (2016) study on international student transitions in which the authors conducted qualitative interviews with six students following their transition to U.S. HEIs. The authors found that international students' experiences navigating a new social environment influenced their transition. Luo et al. (2019) additionally conducted a study with 216 international students in the United States on factors influencing their well-being. Similarly, the authors found that students' perception of domestic student social support influenced their well-being and transition (Luo et al., 2019). Ultimately, international students' contextual awareness of social support networks within the host institution impacts college readiness and experiences when transitioning to HEIs.

Academic Culture

Aligning with Conley's (2007) model, international students' contextual awareness of the institution's academic culture influences college readiness and transition. Moores and Popadiuk (2011) found that international students frequently engaged in research to support their knowledge of the host institution's academic culture, which positively impacted their transition. Moreover, students expressed that their personal development and confidence grew alongside increasing their knowledge of the academic culture, thus supporting their positive transition (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Similarly, Luo et al. (2019) found that students' prior contextual awareness of the academic culture impacted their transition. Consequently, international students' contextual awareness of the academic culture within the host institution and environment supports students' college readiness and transition to college.

Logistics

Logistical readiness expands Conley's (2007) college readiness framework to include an additional theme within contextual awareness that impacts international students' transitions. When transitioning to a U.S. HEI, international students frequently navigate logistics, including setting up a bank account, securing housing, and navigating transportation, often in a new cultural context (Gautam et al., 2016; Mohamed, 2020; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Consequently, international students may have different experiences than domestic students when navigating logistics while transitioning to college. In Mohamed (2020)'s study with 25 international students across 17 countries, students articulated that logistical considerations, such as food adjustment, influenced their transition. Furthermore, Gautam et al. (2016) found that international students cited navigating public transportation and the on-campus job application process as logistical knowledge impacting their transition. Consequently, international students' contextual awareness of logistics influences college readiness and transitions.

Host Country Culture

Conley's (2007) model does not reflect contextual awareness of the host country's culture. However, international students indicated that awareness of the host country's culture impacted their transition (Gautam et al., 2016; Mohamed, 2020). For example, in Mohamed's (2020) study on international students' perception of their transition, students' prior knowledge of the host country's culture improved their transition. Additionally, international students in Moores and Popadiuk's (2011) study cited that learning about the host culture through a guide or course

improved their transition. These studies emphasize the need for institutions to recognize the role of students' contextual awareness on their experience navigating the hidden curriculum and interacting within a new cultural environment. Additionally, these findings confirm the importance of a college readiness model inclusive of international students' experiences to explore the influence of contextual awareness of the host country's culture.

DISCUSSION

International students' contextual awareness of social networks, academic culture, logistics, and the host country's culture may influence their college readiness and transitions. Aligning with Conley's (2007) framework, literature on international students' college readiness identifies contextual awareness of social networks and academic culture as influencing student transitions. However, themes including contextual awareness of logistics and the host country's culture do not appear in the framework. Consequently, Conley's (2007) model and contextual awareness facet reflect some, but not all, of the elements that international students shared as important in their college transitions.

Across the four themes, contextual awareness of the host country's culture requires additional emphasis within a college readiness model reflecting the experience of international students. Awareness of a host country's culture is critical, as cultural knowledge may impact contextual awareness of other domains, including social networks, academic culture, and logistics (Gautam et al., 2016; Mohamed, 2020; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). However, although contextual awareness of the host country's culture emerged as a factor influencing college readiness and transitions in the literature, it is important to recognize that international students are not a monolithic group. International students' individual characteristics, cultural backgrounds, and prior experience may influence if and how important this element is in their transition. Thus, a college readiness framework for international students should balance emphasizing the potential impact of contextual awareness of the host country's culture with recognizing the role of individuals' unique experiences and backgrounds on their transition.

Regarding the model's structure itself, Conley's (2007) framework includes "contextual skills and awareness" as a facet impacting college readiness. However, upon reviewing the literature, nuances between contextual skills and contextual awareness appeared. For example, international students frequently cited that their existing skills influenced

their successful transition (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Additionally, international students described the role of contextual awareness related to the hidden curriculum separately from their skills (Gautam et al., 2016; Mohamed, 2020; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). As a result, a college readiness framework should emphasize the differences between contextual awareness and contextual skills.

Finally, a college readiness model reflective of international students' experiences should reflect the impact and responsibility of HEIs on students' transitions to college. Conley's (2007) framework places agency on the student, with no responsibility on HEIs. Given the hidden curriculum within colleges and universities that is challenging for both domestic and international students, institutions should take greater ownership of supporting students' transitions (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Wink, 2011). Although Conley (2007) called institutions to simplify students' admissions and financial aid processes to support college readiness, administrators need to do more to reveal the hidden curriculum and support international students' transition (Wink, 2011). In sum, a college readiness model for international students should reflect the role of HEIs in supporting students' contextual awareness across the four themes.

Implications for Practice and Research

Existing literature emphasizes that institutional policies, practices, and climate influence international students' transition to college (Gautam et al., 2016; Luo et al., 2019). Consequently, HEIs should consider further opportunities to improve policy and institutional structures to support international students' college readiness and transitions. For example, a more collaborative approach between campus partners who serve international students may improve the clarity and consistency of information shared with international students throughout their transition. Moreover, HEIs should proactively address challenges impacting campus climate and culture to support international students' inclusion and sense of belonging on campus, both before and after their arrival. On a smaller scale, college admissions offices within HEIs can further improve practice to support international students' transition to college. Opportunities to support students' contextual awareness of social networks, academic culture, logistics, and the host country's culture occur during all admissions cycle phases, including recruitment outreach, the application process, and predeparture support. For example, admissions offices can develop predeparture programming and conduct individualized outreach to understand international students' individual experiences and provide tailored support during their transition.

Future research should explore the role of international students' contextual awareness of social networks, academic culture, logistics, and host country culture on college readiness and transitions to college, both within U.S. HEIs and other countries around the world. Moreover, researchers may also consider if international students' college readiness and transitions differ based on country of origin and their selected host country. Additionally, future research may consider how institutional policies and practices create the hidden curriculum and influence international students' transitions to college. Together, these implications for practice and research can place more ownership on institutions at multiple levels and support theory and practice related to international students' college readiness and transitions.

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