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The Impact of College and High School Partnerships for International Student Experiences

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of international students engaged in partnership programs between their high school and a destination college. Specifically, this study focuses on the experiences and perceptions of a group of Brazilian international students who graduated from a dual diploma high school program prior to arriving at a four-year research university in the United States to complete their postsecondary education. The study is guided by a conceptual model based in the literature around challenges of international students, Tinto's (1975) academic and social integration theory, and the four primary types of social interactions (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). We utilize a case study method centered on six interviews which investigated students' college experiences during their social and academic integration processes. The findings provide insight into how participation in the dual diploma high school program benefited international students in their college integration.

Keywords: Brazilian, college experiences, dual diploma high school program, international students, social and academic integration

INTRODUCTION

The Open Doors report published by the Institute of International Education (IIE) provides data on international students in the United States (U.S.) and domestic students studying abroad. Over the last two decades, there has been a steady increase in the number of international students studying in the U.S., however, in

2016 the report signaled a slowing of growth highlighted by a 6.6% decline in new enrollments for the first time since 2007 (IIE, 2021). From 2016 to 2021 the number of new international students in the U.S. decreased while enrollment in competitor countries such as Canada and Australia have experienced considerable growth, which may illustrate that the political climate towards international students (Hacker & Bellmore, 2020) and racial tension in the U.S. may be contributing to the decline (Ritter & Roth, 2021). It is important to note that part of this drop (1,075,496 to 914,095 students) occurred between 2019 and 2021 as the global pandemic (COVID-19) impacted higher education worldwide (IIE, 2021; McNaughtan et al., 2023).

The necessity of international student enrollments for institutional financial stability (Cantwell, 2019) and promoting diversity (Altbach & Knight, 2007) is well documented. As institutions seek to recover international enrollments, they will need innovative approaches to recruit and retain international students. Given the significant barriers faced by international students including language challenges (Smith, 2016), difficulty with academic engagement (Cohen et al., 2014), and lack of social engagement (Smith, 2016), innovative programs should be robust and intentional. For example, institutions across the world engage in international high school partnerships as one way to prepare, recruit, and retain international students. International partnership programs facilitate students' English learning and cross-cultural understanding (Muslim et al., 2020), and provide high quality prospective students for universities.

The purpose of this study is to share insights from students who participated in an international high school partnership program where students received advising and high school credits from an independent school district in the U.S., prior to transferring to a four-year institution to conclude their postsecondary education. Versions of these programs have existed for well over a decade (Altbach & Knight, 2007) with some programs reflecting a transnational education approach where students remained in their country of origin while completing credits from a foreign institution (Stewart, 2019) and others serving as a recruitment tool for international students (Cantwell, 2019). Here we focus on the role of these programs in the preparation, recruitment, and retention of international students with a focus on how these programs may support their specific needs, such as language barriers, academic engagement, and social integration (Zhao, 2013). Utilizing a case study approach, interviews conducted in this study were coded using an international student persistence model derived from Tinto's student persistence model (1975) and Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood's (2013) model of social interactions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students in dual diploma high school programs could be considered transnational students, especially when their educational experience either takes place solely in their country of origin with international education partners, or when the students travel regularly between their country of origin and their international institution partner (Stewart, 2019). In this study we view these students as international

students for three reasons (1) after completing their high school diploma they move to the US and attend their four-year institution until completing their college degree, (2) students in the partnership program do not travel back and forth as part of their educational experience, and (3) our study focuses on the international aspect of their experience. Given that we see these students as international, we discuss the unique experience of transnational students and then focus on research that has been conducted on international students broadly as they transition and engage in colleges within the U.S. Our review highlights three main challenges including language barriers, academic participation difficulties, and social adjustment problems.

Transnational Student Experiences

Though transnational education literature is plentiful, few studies have investigated transnational students' experiences on the K-12 level, followed by their subsequent college experiences. The concept of transnational education has been operationalized by offshore international branches (Wilkins et al., 2012) and online partnership programs, which allow students to study international curriculum without physically moving to host countries. These students' experience can be different from other international students when they enter a U.S. college. As Rensimer (2016) pointed out, the broad label of "international" is problematic in research analysis. Because it ambiguates the differences between the similar but different student categories (Stewart, 2019).

Since the current literature is inconsistent in terms of typology and definition for international and transnational students (Stewart, 2019), we use the definition in Stewart's (2017) conceptual model for international students in this study. In Stewart's Model of Distance Students (2021), an international student is defined as "a national/citizen of Country A, attending university online in country B, while living in country A. They are designated as an international student by the university" (p. 50). Therefore, a Brazilian student taking high school courses online from the U.S. while living in Brazil, is considered an international student for the study institution.

Language Barriers

Faculty and service providers on campus report that international students often experience difficulties with language in daily communications (Smith, 2016). For faculty who do not speak English as their native language, English medium instruction requirement affects their attitude and methodology of teaching, which can present more challenges for international students (Dearden & Macaro, 2016). Insufficient language skills prevent international students from fully functioning during classroom discussion and daily interactions with professors and their classmates (Smith, 2016). Thus, language proficiency is often a challenge to international student adjustment and English ability can affect students' academic performances.

Most international students need to study English before attempting the traditional college curriculum (Cohen et al., 2014). Some international students choose community colleges because they have a wider variety of English as

Second Language (ESL) curriculum. However, these students face additional challenges in the initial enrollment process because the educational model is so different from that of their home country (McNaughtan et al., 2023).

Academic Participation Difficulties

The problem of academic participation is multifaceted. Kim (2012) explored Korean international students' identities and self-perceptions in American university classrooms. Students expressed a sense of inferiority compared to American students caused by their limited English language ability, which became a contributor of negative experiences in their academic journey (Kim, 2012). In another study Hsieh (2007) pointed out that language barriers are not the only issue that causes international students' silence. When international students feel that they are in a classroom setting that is dominated by American culture and norms, they are less encouraged to speak even though they have good language skills because they feel unwelcomed and discriminated against (Hsieh, 2007). Educators often attribute international students' silence to their cultural influences or personalities, but researcher argued that we "should not overlook the possible disempowering nature of higher educational settings" (Hsieh, 2007, p. 379). Valdez (2015) further stated that classroom activities with a heavy focus on the American culture lack the inclusion of other cultures. International students felt uncomfortable and awkward to participate because they lacked that cultural knowledge (Valdez, 2015).

Marti (2008) stated that student engagement is a broadly defined term that is "used to refer to the extent to which students are actively involved in meaningful educational experiences and activities" (p. 3). Despite the challenge to keep international students engaged in the classrooms, research findings indicated that student engagement is related to desired educational outcomes such as increased learning, persistence in college, and graduation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). According to Cohen et al. (2014), studies conducted since 1970 indicated that a relationship exists between students' level of engagement and the effects colleges had on them. All types of learning require the investment of students' work, and their development depends on the level of engagement with their institutions.

Social Adjustment Problems

Research has shown that there is a connection between social relationships and international students' ability to manage stress during their cultural adjustments, which in turn affects overall student satisfaction. According to Mamiseishvili (2012), a strong relationship with faculty and academic advisors was a positive predictor for international students' persistence, which provided administrators with a clue concerning how to promote international student success. Even casual acquaintance-type interactions have a positive impact on international students' abilities to adjust in their host country (Nishiok et al., 2019, 1993).

Despite international students' desire to integrate into the host country's culture and their campus' environment, the adaptation and adjustment process could be harrowing due to culture shock. The term "culture shock" was

introduced by Kalervo Oberg (1960) in the late 1950s. This term has been redefined repeatedly in the literature, Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) summarized that “culture shock resulted from the loss of well-known cultural signs and symbols, causing individuals living in a new cultural environment to experience anxiety, frustration, and helplessness” (p.168). Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) examined the experiences of 195 international students’ adjustment and integration difficulties from a culture shock perspective. Results showed that international students had a higher level of social difficulty in Canada compared to their countries of origin due to culture shock. Furthermore, higher levels of social difficulty cause international students to be uncomfortable interacting with members in the host country, and this further increases their degrees of culture shock (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004).

Acculturation is a critical part of the international students’ transition process from their original culture to the host country’s culture. Nishioka and Akol (2019) suggested that one coping strategy Brazilian international students use to reduce acculturative stress is called *jeitinho*, which is a strategy to solve problems by breaking norms using personal relations. It is compared to *guanxi* in China, *wasta* in Lebanon, and “pulling strings” in the United Kingdom (Smith et al., 2012). Given these findings, the following study investigates a group of Brazilian international students’ academic and social integration experiences in college after a dual diploma high school program.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Given the challenges international students face in academic and social integration, the conceptual model developed for this study will center on those concepts. Based in Tinto’s (1975) model of academic and social integration, there are three areas associated with persistence that include pre-college experiences (e.g., family background, school activities), academic achievement (e.g., grades, coursework), and social integration. Over the last few decades, Tinto’s model has evolved in three main ways. First, Tinto’s (1975) single institution model failed to address “multi-institutional perspectives on student attrition and persistence” (Kwai, 2010, p. 30) which led Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) to address perspectives in both four-year and two-year institutions. Second, Kwai (2010) claims that to benefit from the college environment students need to “disassociate from their own cultures”, and students “who failed to integrate into the social and academic system of the institution” would be at risk of departure (p. 28). Third, Tinto (1975) stated that “informal peer group associations, extracurricular activities, and interactions with faculty and administrators are mechanisms of social interaction” (Kwai, 2010, p. 28). This definition of social interaction is limited, especially for international students who frequently interact with communities outside of the traditional campus.

Given the lack of clear definition, we apply Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood’s (2013) expanded mechanisms of social interactions among international students and provided a more applicable model for the purpose of this study. They provided a conceptual framework that identified four primary

types of social interactions that shape international student experiences at U.S. institutions which are: self-segregation, exclusive global mixing, inclusive global mixing, and host interaction. Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) argued that traditionally it is assumed that international students should adapt to the social and academic culture of their host institutions in order to use the institutional resources and be successful in their integration. However, this is an institution-centered conception of social capital where it may be believed that educational institutions “hold a monopoly on legitimate forms of social capital”, but Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) argue that possible social capital “extends beyond the confines of the educational institution itself” (p. 413-414).

It is generally assumed that international students should adapt to American college life if they are to successfully integrate and take full advantage of the resources and opportunities offered by their host institutions (Mamiseishvili, 2012). Critics have long claimed that rather than blame international students for their inability to assimilate, HEIs should be viewed as contributors to the problem because they are unable to operate in a multicultural world (Tierney, 1992). Institutions should create inclusive environments that embrace different cultural identities and provide support for international students to form social integration.

Guided by past research and based on Tinto (1975) and Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood’s (2013) models, we developed Figure 1 to illustrate the conceptual framework of this study. The model included all academic and social integration variables from Tinto’s (1975) model while accounting for the social networks concept from Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood’s (2013).

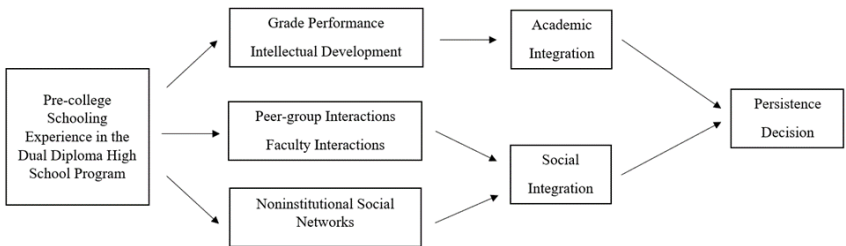


Figure 1. International Student Persistence Model

Through investigating the college experiences of Brazilian international students after graduating from a dual diploma high school program and transitioning to a large research university in the southwest U.S., we hope to compare the general challenges of international students discussed in the literature and the students in this unique program. Focusing on the stated purposes, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do international students participating in the dual diploma high school program perceive its impact on subsequent college experience and success?

2. What are the perceived challenges, and benefits to the persistence of international students who participated in the dual diploma high school program?

DATA AND METHODS

This study utilized a single institution case study design to investigate the experiences of international students at a large southwestern research university who had previously participated in a dual diploma high school partnership program. The single institution case study design methodological approach was selected to ensure consistency in the support structures offered to the high school students prior to postsecondary enrollment and to allow for an in-depth analysis of the responses of the participants in context of the institution (Creswell, 2014).

Interviews were conducted with six international students who graduated from the dual diploma program and then enrolled at the large southwestern research university. The researchers developed a set of questions as the foundation for the interview protocol which can be found in the appendix (Creswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researchers then employed semi-structured interviews to collect responses to the questions, explore participant perceptions, and attempt to construct the participant's reality of the situation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews were selected to ensure thick descriptions of the students experience and to ensure saturation in the data which was reached following the fifth interview (Geertz, 1973; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim within one week of completion, the average interview length was between 30 to 60 minutes.

The interviews were coded using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three-step approach to coding qualitative data: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Each interview was reviewed by one researcher for specific themes and then those themes were reviewed by the second researcher during the open coding phase. Memo writing was also employed during the open coding phase to ensure breadth of understanding in the development of primary codes (Glaser, 1978). Each theme was then discussed, and some themes were merged during the axial coding phase. The two researchers then reviewed the codes and all data was recoded cross-checked to increase validity. Selective coding was used to finalize the themes and craft the discussion of the results.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was utilized to identify the participants. All students were selected from a transnational education program (Stewart, 2019) referred to as the dual diploma high school program and then relocated to finish their college degree and referred to as international students on their campus. The study only recruited students from Brazil for two reasons. First, for this institution the dual diploma program with Brazilian high schools was well established and had been in place for over ten years. Second, by focusing on students from one country the researchers could explore participants' experiences in more depth because they

shared a similar sociocultural background. Table 1 includes participant profiles for the sample.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	Class	Major
Anna	Female	Senior	Economic & Math
Nick	Male	Senior	Information Technology & Management
Sam	Male	Junior	Architecture
Ariel	Female	Senior	Business Management
Charles	Male	Senior	Industrial Engineering
Peter	Male	Senior	Information Technology & Management

Trustworthiness

Due to the nature of qualitative research, four aspects including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are needed to ensure the trustworthiness of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study triangulated data collected from interviews, observations, and document analysis to establish comprehensive themes within the data to enhance credibility. The researchers also employed member checking during the interviewing processes as another strategy to enhance the internal validity of the study and ensure dependability. Thick description is a primary strategy to enhance transferability in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Findings of the data analysis were presented in thick descriptions to allow readers to be transported to the setting of the research. To guarantee dependability, the researchers recoded all data after two weeks. By adding a gestation period between the original and second coding the researchers can compare whether the results from the two codings are alike to promote confirmability (Chilisa & Preece, 2005). The coding results in agreement enhanced the dependability of this qualitative inquiry.

Context of the Institution

International student enrollment numbers did not follow the national trend of decline over the last five years, which may be due to the increased emphasis on international enrollment and the partnerships like the dual diploma program at the study institution. Students in the partnership high school program were required to complete 26 credits to earn an American high school diploma. The students enrolled in their local partner schools and the university's online dual diploma program concurrently, which allowed them to earn high school diplomas from both institutions in a transnational environment (Stewart, 2019). Focusing on Brazil specifically, over 2,500 Brazilian students pursued a U.S. high school diploma in fifty-four partner schools and 860 students graduated with a U.S. high school diploma since 2002.

FINDINGS

Findings in this section focused on the personal experiences of the Brazilian international students who elected to participate in this study. Their readiness for college integration and transitional challenges, motivations, and expectations are presented.

Perceptions of the Impact of the Dual Diploma High School Program

Research question one sought to understand impacts that the dual diploma high school program had on international students' subsequent college performance. The analyses of the data revealed three main themes related to these topics: 1) familiarity with the American classroom culture and structure; 2) social integration with others; and 3) academic integration experiences.

Familiarity with the American classroom culture and structure

A major theme that emerged in the analyses of the data is that international students who graduated from the dual diploma high school program felt more prepared for the American classroom environment. They reported familiarity with the classroom culture, expectations, and curricular requirements, which aligns with past research on transnational student experiences (Stewart, 2019). Ariel explained that although college would be a bit different, the experience in the dual diploma program helped her “see what the academic process will be, how professors teach their classes” and “know how tests are, how the professors teach here and all the basics.”

Anna supported Ariel's description on the program's impact on college preparedness, especially on expectations. She went on to explain, “I believe it helps because during the high school program we could experience a bit of how you normally do it here, homework, tests, and how you prepare for those, what you really pay attention to.” Charles emphasized the benefits of knowing the American classroom culture through the high school program. He thought that taking the high school classes helped him to succeed in college because it created a sense of responsibility and work ethics. Charles gave an example of learning presentation skills in the high school program, which made his experience in college easier. He explained, “We didn't have that many presentations, but our professor [in high school] was really good. He said if you go to an American college, this is what they expect from you when you are presenting.”

In addition to the benefits of knowing the American classroom culture and expectations, interviewed students focused on specific courses that they felt helped them in particular during their college study. The most frequently mentioned courses were American history, political sciences, public speaking, writing and English literature. Charles described writing classes as good foundation for his subsequent college study stating, “whenever it comes to courses, like history, English, political science, when we come to college we have a background on it because of the high school program we did.” He felt those classes served as a good foundation and helped him become more familiar with the course materials in college.

Similarly, students shared how they felt more confident and able to overcome language barriers due to training in the high school courses. Peter felt that all the classes they had helped with the language barrier. Sam pointed out that the fact of having an American teacher who is a native English speaker helped him be more prepared for coming to the U.S. for college study: “I think that it was really good having contact with someone who is from the U.S. It's good preparation for coming here for sure.” All students agreed that the high school program set a solid foundation and built familiarity with American classroom culture and expectations.

Social integration with others

The second theme that emerged from the data analyses is the dual diploma program's influences on international students when they try to establish relationships during their social integration in college. Peter and Nick both shared that the high school program helped with the language when he tried to participate in activities and dialogues to establish social relationships. According to Nick, “you know something about the United States, and you can start a conversation about that.”

Though some students felt they were more prepared to start social interactions, many felt like they were unable to develop those relationships. Ariel said that the program mostly helped with building relationships with professors, but not with students. In terms of social integration with American students, some will ask why she came to University X [study institution], why choose X. They wanted to know a bit more about the high school program, so she talked about the program but that never led them to become “friends or anything like that.” Anna supported Ariel's point and admitted that after knowing some people at the beginning of the semester, she then “got involved in other activities on campus and did not have much time to maintain the relationships with them.”

In contrast to the phenomenon that these international students did not have great social integration experiences with local American students, most of them shared great experiences meeting other international students who also participated in the dual diploma high school program. Charles described his experience sharing “we can discuss our own experiences, what you did for this class, what you learned, the grade you got, how was it, did you go to the TTU summer camp, did you have fun with classes you take, did you like Texas?”

The social integration happened naturally within the group of international students who took the same high school program. Sam did not give any examples of how he made social connections with American students but described the benefits in general. He said it's a “really good preparation for improving how you talk and using jargon and you get to know the real culture the American way.” In other words, by taking the courses they were learning the native language and the way Americans communicate, it helped them to produce meaningful conversations when they came here.

Academic integration experiences

A third theme on academic integration experiences emerged during the discussion about meeting academic expectations. Anna explained that due to a lack of guidance in high school, she did not think there is a big enough difference in the rigor of the content after participating in the dual diploma high school program. Peter thought that it depends on the class. Sam pointed out that the high school program made him more prepared to talk to instructors in a professional way:

I think whenever we talk to the professors or the mentors in our school, everything is in English. This high school program made me prepare myself to talk to people here who are having a high status, like with the dean and professors.

Nick also recalled the high school program being helpful for establishing a good relationship with college professors. He gave the example of his first history class: “I spent like thirty minutes talking to my professor after class about World War II and how the U.S. entered, and it was a good talk with him.”

In addition to making meaningful connections with faculty, the high school program helped them set realistic expectations and familiarize them with the academic requirements in college. Ariel explained that the high school program got her more prepared for the American college classes in terms of what to expect during class and exams, how to prepare material to study, and she believed it helped a lot on her academic performance.

In summary, students claimed that the high school program built a good foundation for college classes. For students who are from a country where the academic system is different from the U.S. the program is good preparation because it sets correct expectations on how to study and live on a U.S. college campus. Classes such as American history, English, political science, public speaking, and writing all prepared students for college study and equipped them with proficient English skills.

Transitional Challenges, Motivations, and Expectations for Services and Support

Research question two sought to understand international students’ perceived challenges during their transition to college, as well as benefits and obstacles to their college persistence after completing the dual diploma high school program. The analyses of the data produced three themes specific to the participants’ experiences: 1) challenges and difficulties encountered in college life; 2) motivations for continuing college study; 3) expectations for student services and support.

Challenges and difficulties encountered in college life

Since all participants are from a foreign country, everyone naturally mentioned things such as food, relationship with people, and culture that they were not adapted to at first. In addition, students shared the challenge of being independent on making decisions when living a new college life. Nick gave an example and said: “The biggest thing is that in college you have to be

autonomous...It's challenging for me, or people of my age, because in high school you have all your classes and are always told what to do. Here you have a lot of freedom, and you have to bear responsibilities."

Leaving family is a common challenge shared by different students. Sam explained: "Leaving Brazil, leaving my family and doing everything alone [was a challenge]. No one to do stuff for me, a lot of things to decide. That's the difference between high school and college life to me." Charles also mentioned the uncomfortable feeling of leaving family for the first time. He went on to explain, "First of all, I am not from the U.S. There was kind of a cultural shock when I came here. Dorm life, living on campus, first time away from parents, [I was] kind of homesick at first." But he also said that he was able to adjust quickly after one to two months. Other than being homesick, other students did not regard mental health as an issue for them.

Anna, Ariel, Sam and Peter all addressed the financial pressure caused by the currency problem in Brazil. Sam said, "[the finance] it's still a challenge because of the currency -- one Brazilian Real equals 0.25 US Dollar, so we need to switch all the time to see how much it's worth in Brazil, and always search for some scholarships here." Anna said that the inflation made it difficult to pay her tuition, and her scholarship helped a lot. Peter thought among all challenges the biggest one is financial challenge and even with his scholarship "everything is so expensive". Ariel added her feelings: "I am here because I have a dream but I am never sure if I will complete it because of this situation. I am always relying on scholarships or some work that can help me."

Turning to academic advising, two students had dissatisfying experiences. Anna recalled that only her major advisor was helpful. The general advisor did not provide much information on what majors she can choose from, and she never received any follow up emails. Ariel had a similar unpleasant experience with her first academic advisor and had to switch advisors. She recalled that in her first semester her advisor "didn't know what to do or how to help me, she kind of just showed some classes and then I realized I was not supposed to take those classes because they are not requirements for me." Things got better after she changed her advisor.

Many of these challenges are connected to an overarching theme of the language barrier. On the one hand, Ariel described it as something to "get used to" but not a big challenge because in high school they speak English so "the only thing different is the environment itself." However, Nick found the language barrier particularly hard as a challenge. When asked about challenges he experienced in college, he said, "For me it's the language barrier, not because I didn't know English but it's hard to speak at the classes and try to say aloud something that you are thinking about." Sam also observed the language barrier as an issue for some of his peers. He saw international students from other countries struggling to talk in class.

Five out of six students were not having difficulties participating academically. They described the professors as "really open and willing to help", and "they offer opportunities for international students". Anna said she "always sits in the first roll" and was actively engaged in the classroom. Only Ariel saw

academic participation different from Brazil as here requires more individualized work like tests compared to projects in Brazil.

Motivations for continuing college study

Students expressed a strong internal drive to study in the U.S. to become a better self. Common elements they talked about that strengthened their motivations are family support, interest for the subject, and pursuit for career success. Anna said, “My parents are very supportive of my education. They show me the value of education. And I continued here because I really like the topic I’m studying.” Ariel expanded on the reasons:

First of all, it was my dream. When I started high school, my idea was to come here. As my dream, I told myself I will never give up. I must continue here all the way to the end. My family also deserves this because they helped me, they supported me, and I have to finish strong.

Sam and Charles discussed the significance of obtaining career readiness, that is why it is crucial for them to continue their study here. They expected to start a successful career after getting a college degree and achieve financial stability through a good job. They were confident about the return of investment: “We know that in the long run it’s going to pay off, that is my encouragement -- professional success.” Sam supported Charles’ point and explained: “One of the reasons that I want to have a good education is that I can thrive in my career.” He continued: “I think coming here is a better opportunity for me than staying in Brazil, so that’s the main reason I continue studying here. If it wasn’t for that I would stay in Brazil for sure.” Whether it was for personal or professional pursuits, all interviewed students showed high levels of persistence and determination.

Expectations for student services and support

Participants talked about the need to have more scholarships for international students. Charles now has the dual diploma program scholarship and thought it is important to offer other competitive scholarships to more international students who did not graduate from the partnership program. Sam supported Charles’ point and expanded on this idea. He pointed out that few scholarships are open to international students, and he hoped that the university would have more merit-based scholarships for international students than need-based. He was disappointed that almost all competitive scholarships are only open to American students and he did not have the chance to apply for more merit-based scholarships even with strong academic performance.

Anna thought that international students would benefit from more AP classes. She said: “With more AP classes we can come here to take major classes to start with instead of basic ones, it’s like stuff we already know.” Nick also expressed the hope to be more prepared for college before his arrival. He suggested that international students can attend some workshops offered by the university in advance about how to get admitted, what documents one needs to send, what is the application process, how the American universities work, what is a GPA, how do you sign up for classes etc. He said, “These would be good things for us to

know in high school. I had to learn these from my friends, they were here already. It was kind of hard to understand all that because in Brazil it's completely different.”

Ariel offered one targeted suggestion for the organization of international events. She felt that international advisors only put all international students together but did not involve Americans. This is problematic, according to Ariel, “Because our everyday life here is mostly with Americans, but they don't include them in international [events]. I believe they should get more Americans together with international [students].” The integration needs to happen between international students and local people, not just between international people from different countries. Ariel pointed out that the current problem is: “They think about international [students] but they don't think about people here, the natives here.”

In summary, international students experienced a variety of challenges when they started their college life after the high school program, including language barriers, academic participation difficulties, social adjustments, loneliness, dissatisfying academic advising experiences, and financial pressure. Among those a financial pressure was experienced by each student interviewed. Despite the challenges, students' motivation to continue their college study remained strong, mainly because of their family support, interest for the study subject, and desire for career success.

DISCUSSION

The findings surrounding the two investigated research questions contribute to the existing international student college experience literature on pre-college school experience and its influences on their college recruitment and retention. Guided by the conceptual model presented in Figure 1, we find that completion of the dual diploma high school program made their transition into college easier and helped these students maintain good academic standing, which supported Tinto's (1975) integration theory. The participation in the dual diploma high school program as a pre-college schooling experience has been a positive factor affecting their college persistence decision.

Findings of this study also aligned with Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood's (2013) conceptual framework. It was observed that social interactions among the interviewed international students included host interaction and self-segregation. They discussed the interactions with local students and professors and shared how they enjoyed connecting with other international students from their home country and benefited through preparation from their past learning experiences. They were satisfied with their social integration on multiple levels with different groups.

In line with Stewart's (2019) concern that the broad term of international can make it difficult to parse the differences between different subcategories of international students, this study showed that this group of Brazilian international students who graduated from the dual diploma program shared some unique characteristics. Like all international students, this group experienced a variety

of challenges when they first started, but compared to challenges that general international students encounter, they reported having less challenges in language barrier, academic participation, and social integration because the program prepared them well for college study and improved their language skills. They are regarded as international students in the study institution, however compared to other international peers their transnational education background played a critical role in their college integration.

Findings also support previous research conducted by Zhou (2015), which demonstrated main motivations of international students include intrinsic interest in study subjects, high utility of the U.S. degree, and high emotional and social cost of quitting. The research suggested that high motivation resulted in persistence, but international students' persistence does not imply professional or personal satisfaction.

Implication of Practices for International Students

There are four implications based on the findings of this study. First, Brazilian international students emphasized the essentiality to have more merit-based scholarships available to international students. According to Choudaha (2014), three leading factors including jobs or internships, affordability, and availability of scholarships cause dissatisfaction for international students and affect their retention. All three factors are related to financial concerns. Students in this study were vulnerable to financial crises because they were all self-supported and their home country economy was unstable. Public institutions largely rely on international tuition revenue and this is one major reason for recruiting international students, however scholars argued that we should not treat international students as "cash cows", international student are not "products that just provide steady, reliable cash flows to fund universities' growth and the growth of the institution's other units" (Choudaha, 2017, p. 5). Providing financial support to international students may be challenging to universities especially for public institutions who charge high tuition to international students and rely on that revenue for its operations, however administrators need to be more creative in coming up with solutions.

The second implication is to encourage institutional collaboration between student affairs offices. In this case, the academic partnership office that initiated the dual diploma high school program needs to work with the international affairs office on campus to provide prospective students with more college application information. Online orientation, webinars, and virtual campus tours can be used to help international students learn more about the university majors, campus resources, and get them prepared for college life.

The third implication to improve service for international students is to organize social events that encourage cross-cultural communication. Students described their ideal international events, which should include more people from the local community. They felt that current events only let them meet with other international students, who may be struggling themselves. What would help their social integration is to meet more Americans including faculty, staff, students, and local families.

A final implication for higher education practice for international students is to improve the academic advising services for them and train advisors with a cultural competency mindset. Students in this study reported different levels of frustration with their academic and international advisors. Some advisors provided neither accurate information on major requirements nor immigration information regarding post-graduation employment. Both topics are pressing concerns for international students. HEIs shoulder the responsibility to train academic and international advisors with competencies to respect international students' cultural values and special needs.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest three directions for future research. First, future students should expand into other campuses and countries that have these dual diploma programs. This study was limited by the number of participants and all student participants were from the same country, thus information provided by this group of students may not represent the experiences for the larger group of all international students participating in this program. When there are more graduates enrolled at the study institution, a follow up study is recommended to include a larger sample to illustrate a broader perspective from participants in this dual diploma program and collect more qualitative data on their subsequent college experiences. In this way the level of consistency and dependability of the study can be demonstrated.

Second, a quantitative study should be conducted that examines factors that affect international students' academic and social integration. Using Tinto's (1975) conceptual framework, it is important to understand international students' unique characteristics and study whether this model is applicable to this population. Additionally, the existing research showed that international students obtain social capital within a broader reach than just the host institution during their social integration (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). The quantitative study should take this into consideration and add an external social interaction variable for students' social integration based on Tinto's (1975) model.

A final recommendation is to conduct a comparative study among international students who are from different cultural backgrounds. The international partnership program is currently operating in partner schools in Asia and Latin America. It would be interesting to compare students' college integration experiences when they are coming from different cultural backgrounds. Through the comparative analysis, the researchers will be able to identify whether cultural background is a variable that affects findings for international students' college integration experiences after this partnership high school program.

CONCLUSION

As posited in this paper, higher education institutions in the U.S. are striving to increase international enrollment likely resulting from the current political climate and the global pandemic COVID-19 (Hacker & Bellmore, 2020; IIE, 2021).

Developing stronger partnerships, particularly transnational educational programs like the dual diploma high school partnership presented here can potentially increase enrollment and combat some of the barriers that international students face when transitioning to universities in the U.S. (Stewart, 2019). In general, international students need to be served more effectively, and preparation programs like this can enhance the support for these students. Increased understanding of the international student experience, as well as their preparation programs, is needed to create more effective student support services.

Note

Appendices for this article can be found on the JIS website at <https://www.ojed.org/index.php/jis>

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