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Bahamians as International Adult Learners Determined for Academic Success: Challenges and Required Support System

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors that impact the experience of Caribbean nontraditional adult learners encounter while pursuing higher education in the United States and perceived support systems needed by Caribbean adult learners to be successful. On this premise, this qualitative study was conducted. A total of 15 Bahamian students participated. Data was collected via semi structured interviews and analyzed utilizing open coding. The major themes that emerged with regards to influential factors that impacted their experiences were: (a) financial constraints, (b) lack of support, and (c) cultural differences and adaptation. As it relates to support systems needed by Caribbean students, the major themes that emerged were: (a) family, (b) faculty/mentors, and (c) a network of friends.

Keywords: The Bahamas, challenges, international students, nontraditional learner, support systems, transition

INTRODUCTION

The term “international student” is a temporary identity to describe all mobile students over the world (Bista, 2016). However, the definition and criteria for international students may vary in different countries. An international student has been defined by different resources. For example, Shapiro, Farrelly, and Tomas

(2014) defined an international student as “a student who moves to another country (the host country) for the purpose of pursuing tertiary or higher education e.g., college or university” (p.2). The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (2015) provided a definition: “Anyone who is enrolled at an institution of higher education in the United States who is not a U.S. citizen, an immigrant (permanent resident) or a refugee” (para 2). Among all the definitions, the similarity is “study abroad” while the differences occur when defining the immigrant or visa status.

The ideology of exploring higher education in a foreign country is not unique to internationals traveling to the United States. However, the USA in comparison to other countries of the world is the country of choice for most international students. According to UNESCO (2017), in 2014, the top three destinations for international students were the USA with 907,251 international students, the United Kingdom with 430,687, and France with 239,409. Within colleges and universities throughout the United States, the international student population contributes vastly to the overall student population and hence influences not only the changing demographic landscape of students but also contributes to cultural diversity, which can present many benefits and challenges at both the individual and institutional level.

According to the Open Doors Report (Institute of International Education, [IIE], 2017b), there are over one million international students studying in the United States of America. As a result, \$35.8 billion dollars was contributed to the U.S. economy during the 2016–2017 academic year. The most prevalent countries represented were India, China, and South Korea. In 2017, China was the top country, sending 32.5% of all international students, with India representing 17% and Korea 5.4% (IIE, 2017b). It is also worth noting that a large percentage of international students also migrated from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Latin America, and the Caribbean (IIE, 2017b). With regards to Caribbean students traveling to the USA for higher education, the Bahamas is among the highest countries represented. During the 2014–2015 academic year, the total number of Bahamian students represented 1,835, which is 0.2% of total international students in the U.S., while the total number of Caribbean students was 10,478, which is 1.1% (IIE, 2015). Compared with the previous academic year, both the Bahamas and overall Caribbean students increased in the 2015–2016 academic year. The total number of Bahamian students in the 2015–2016 year is 2,027 (0.2%), while the total number of Caribbean students is 11,042 (18.4%, Table 1; IIE, 2016).

Subsequently, it was also notable that international graduate students compared with international undergraduate students showed a significant increase and accounted for the greater number of new students reversing a 2-year trend that reflected undergraduate students accounting for the greater new student population (IIE, 2015).

Table 1: Academic Level of Bahamian and Caribbean International Students in the USA, 2014–2016 (IIE, 2016)

	2014–2015			2015–2016		
	Bahamas	Caribbean	Bahamas to Caribbean	Bahamas	Caribbean	Bahamas to Caribbean
Undergraduate	1,395	6,915	20.2%	1,567	7,330	21.4%
Graduate	281	2,376	11.8%	276	2,395	11.5%
Nondegree	14	223	6.3%	7	268	2.6%
OPT	145	964	15.0%	1,049	177	16.9%
Total	1,835	10,478	17.5%	2,027	11,042	18.4%

Note. OPT = Optional Practical Training.

The underlying motivation of an international student to travel in pursuit of higher education varies. Such motivation includes but is not limited to the pursuit of academic and professional growth, experience of intercultural contexts, promoting future career opportunities, enhancing social status, economic benefits, greater political freedom or stability, and the gap between educational supply and demand of many countries of origin (Chiswick & Miller, 2010; Khadria, 2011; Kim, Bankart, & Isdell, 2011; Valdez, 2015; Zhou, 2015). Despite the motivation to pursue higher education in the USA, internationals are faced with expected and unexpected challenges that American students would not necessarily encounter and that require additional support systems. Utilizing this as an underpinning, this study was conducted to explore the factors that impact the experiences of Caribbean nontraditional adult learners and perceived support systems that would be needed for success.

This study is significant because there is an evident gap in the literature with regards to the experiences of Caribbean students as international students, in particular Bahamian students and their relevant support systems. Additionally it adds to the literature on international students from a nontraditional student perspective all of whom were graduate students. Hence, this study adds a diverse perspective in this regards. Additionally, there is a gap in the higher education literature of how to better accommodate adult learners, who are becoming the “new majority in higher education” (Jung & Cervero, 2002, p. 306). From an educator’s perspective, it is imperative to be aware of the diverse student population needs and hence be willing and aware of how to modify their teaching strategies and hence have a learning environment that would be beneficial to a diverse student population (Halx, 2010). The theoretical framework work that acts as a lens to illuminate this study is the Schlossberg’s adult transition model (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2011; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006; Schlossberg, 1981, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). The guiding research questions are:

1. What are the factors that impact the experience of international nontraditional adult learners pursuing higher education in the United States?
2. What support systems are needed by international nontraditional adult learners pursuing higher education in the United States?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by Schlossberg's adult transition model (Anderson et al., 2011; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981, 1984; Schlossberg et al., 1995). The Schlossberg's adult transition model is categorized as an adult development theory and "provides insights into factors related to the transition, the individual, and the environment that are likely to determine the degree of impact a given transition will have at a particular time" (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2009, pp. 212–213). Schlossberg (1984) identified a main goal of the theory is to promote an understanding of adults in transition and to help them find ways to cope with the "ordinary and extraordinary process of living" (p. vii). Schlossberg (1984) integrated and expanded the existing theory and research, including Levinson (1978), Neugarten (1979), and Lowenthal and Chiriboga (1975). Over time, Schlossberg's theory has continued to develop and refine with ideas from other researchers and the critiques of her own theory.

Schlossberg (1981) debuted a conceptual model to examine adults' experience in transition at different times and situations. Later, Schlossberg (1984) developed a theoretical model to understand adults in transition and help them to cope with the transition. Further, Schlossberg et al. (1995) introduced the 4 S's transition theory, which identifies four major factors that influence the adults' transition: situation (characteristics of event or nonevent), self (personal characteristics and psychological resources), support (social support systems), and strategies (coping responses). Schlossberg et al. (1995) defined a transition as "any event, or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 27). International students experience both expected and unexpected situations during the transition of studying abroad. Building on Schlossberg et al. (1995), Goodman et al. (2006) included the global perspectives of technological advancement to improve the adult transition model. Recently, Anderson et al. (2011) updated the model by considering diversity and multicultural issues.

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors that impact the experiences of Caribbean nontraditional adult learners pursuing higher education in the United States and the perceived support systems needed by Caribbean adult learners to be successful. Schlossberg's adult transition model provides a foundation to examine the purpose of this study. This theory works for the population of international students who are in transition of both academic and social life from their home country to the US. The Schlossberg et al. (1995) theory is applicable to a variety of international students who experience anticipated transitions, unanticipated transitions, nonevents transitions, or a combination of transitions in their academic study, career, and family at different times. While expected transitions often allow people to take time to prepare, the unexpected transitions may cause shock or challenges since people cannot prepare for the situation psychologically and physically (Anderson et al., 2011). The characteristics of international students, such as individuals' demographic characteristics, support systems, financial situations, and cultural environment, as well as context, also influence transitions experienced in U.S. higher education. Goodman et al. (2006) argued that each individual might cope with transition differently based on their personal differences. Transitions may involve gains as well

as losses and they are processes over time. Therefore, the outcomes of transitions and the time needed to adjust vary with the individual. This argument confirms the different transition experiences of international students since each individual differs in the background, experience, personality, and the timing of their studying abroad. Therefore, using Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) transition model, further developed by Goodman et al. (2006) and Anderson et al. (2011), guides this study and its search to identify how Caribbean nontraditional international students experience higher education in the US and what supports they may need to better succeed.

Nontraditional Adult Learners

There are numerous criteria to define a nontraditional student. For example, the U.S. Department of Education (2002) has defined nontraditional students that have any of the following characteristics: delays postsecondary enrollment, attends school part-time, works full time, is independent for financial aid proposes, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single caregiver, and does not have a traditional high school diploma. In addition, age is used as a criterion—over 23 years old at the time of enrolment—to identify nontraditional students (Metzner & Bean, 1987). Moreover, Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) argued that nontraditional students have a different backgrounds, such as lower socioeconomic status, different ethnicities, and are first-generation students, compared to the traditional students.

Malcolm Knowles, a classic in the field of adult education, also identified some defining characteristics of the nontraditional adult learner. Six key assumptions about adult learners identified by Knowles (1970) were: self-concept, experience, readiness to learn depends on need, problem-centered focus, internal motivation, and the need to know why they are learning something. Knowles (1970, 1984) identified adult students as conscious and self-directed learners. Adult learners learn from their life experiences so school education should be related to real life and based on their own life experiences (Knowles, 1970, 1984). Chung, Turbull, and Chur-Hansen (2017) conducted a quantitative study using an online mental health survey among 442 undergraduate psychology students and found that nontraditional students had significantly higher resilience in some aspects of life than traditional students. However, they have to overcome personal, societal, and institutional barriers to achieve success in the higher education system (Webber, 2014). Boeren, Nicaise, and Baert (2012) indicated that financial problems, inconvenient time scheduling, and time problems that arise from conflicts in responsibilities are the major barriers to adult learners participating in higher education.

Caribbean Students Study in the USA

While there are numerous studies about the transition experiences of international students in U.S. higher education, very limited professional literature regards Caribbean students studying in U.S. universities. Caribbean students include students from the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Bahamas, and some South American islands, such as Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana (Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014; Hunter-Johnson, Newton, & Cambridge-Johnson, 2014). Caribbean students

represent a small population in the US so they are usually classified as Black/African American and treated as if they have the same issues as African American students (Hudson-Gayle, 2015). Therefore, Caribbean students were considered to experience racial discrimination during U.S. college life. Usually, Caribbean students pursue higher education in the US because of the better quality of the education system. Douglas-Chicoye (2007) conducted interviews with six Caribbean college students who studied in the US, and most of the participants reported that their families supported and encourage them to pursue higher education in the US.

Like other international students, students from the Caribbean also face many challenges to achieve success in a foreign academic system. Caribbean students are mainly from a British system that required them to be more disciplined compared to American students (Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2014). Additionally, in the Caribbean, the class is often teacher-oriented rather than student-oriented, while students in the US are encouraged to react with the instructors and engage in class activities (Nero, 2006). In addition, Hudson-Gayle (2015) distributed the Student-Life Stress Inventory survey to over 200 Caribbean students studying in the US to measure students' stress levels and found that the majority of participants were experiencing moderate stress. Moreover, Douglas-Chicoye (2007) indicated that Caribbean students experience financial issues because they were neither eligible for state or federally funded financial aid programs, nor for funding from their home governments, and because of the disparity in the cost of tuition and the scarcity of legal employment in the US.

Reviewing the literature, there are similarities and differences in the transitional experiences in U.S. higher education between Caribbean students and other international students. For example, since Caribbean islands have smaller higher education sectors, Caribbean students seek to pursue better professional opportunities in the US, which is the same motivation for other international students (Bista & Dagley, 2015; Douglas-Chicoye, 2007). In addition, both Caribbean students and other international students must adjust their learning strategies and styles to meet the requirements of the U.S. education system (Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014; Nero, 2006; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Moreover, although both Caribbean students and other international students experience discrimination in the US, the discrimination faced by Caribbean students is more related to racial issues since they are usually categorized as Black/African American (Hudson-Gayle, 2015; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). However, the biggest difference between Caribbean students and other international students regards language challenges. Compared to English-speaking Caribbean students, most of international students are nonnative English speakers so they experience more challenges caused by language issues than Caribbean students (Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014; Schmidt & Gannaway, 2007; Storch, 2009).

METHODS

Study Design and Data Collection

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design. This qualitative approach was selected because it allows in-depth understanding of the participants'

perspective of the same phenomenon, hence minimizing the researchers' prejudices with a focus to allow the participants' perspective to emerge (Fischer, 2009).

Participants

This study consisted of 15 participants. There was diversity among the participants with regard to their discipline studied. Both genders (11 females and four males) were included in the study, and there was also variation in age levels. A total of 10 universities were represented. The inclusion criteria for this study were: all the participants had to be born in the Bahamas, had to have studied within the United States for at least 2 years, had to plan on returning to their country within 5 years of completing their degree, and must be over the age of 25 years while receiving their degree (see Table 2).

Table 2: Participants' Demographic Profile

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	4	27
Female	11	73
Age range		
21–30	3	20
31–40	5	33
41–50	7	47
Educational program level		
Master's	8	53
Doctorate	7	47
Program of study		
Education	8	53
Business	3	20
Psychology	1	7
Science	3	20

Note. *N* = 15.

Data Collection and Analysis

Boeije (2010) described purposeful sampling as “intentionally selecting participants according to the needs of the study. These participants can teach us a lot about the issues that are of importance to the research” (p. 35). Additionally, this method was selected because it provides a platform for a diverse range of cases relevant to a particular phenomenon or event—in this instance, Caribbean nontraditional international students who are studying abroad in the USA. The purpose of this kind of sample design is to provide as much insight as possible into the event or phenomenon under examination.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Human Subject Committee before conducting data collection. Participants for the study were solicited via emails

and telephone calls utilizing a script provided by the Office of Sponsored Research. Once the participants indicated that they were interested in participating in the study, they were advised to contact the primary researcher of the study. At such time, prior to the interview, the participants were required to complete the informed consent. They were provided detailed information about the overall objective of the study, criteria for the study, study procedures, and the proposed benefits of the study. Upon receipt of the documents, arrangements were made to have the interview conducted at the convenience of the participant. Prospective participants were also given the option to “opt out” of future emails or telephone calls.

Semistructured interviews were the method utilized for data collection. Questions were crafted reflective of the study’s objective and guiding research questions with a focus on challenges and support systems utilized by nontraditional international students pursuing higher education in the United States. The interviews lasted approximately 45–60 min and were audio recorded. Additional notes were taken by the researchers during each session to ensure accuracy. Once completed, the interviews were transcribed immediately after each session. Member checking was conducted by sending a copy of the completed transcript to each participant to review for accuracy of the interview data captured in the transcripts. As validity and reliability are of utmost importance, an independent peer reviewer assisted by reading through the transcriptions confirming themes and categories that corresponded with the research questions. Data was reflective of transcripts and notes and was analyzed using open coding, a method of qualitative analysis used with a focal point of establishing themes and main concepts coding (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Themes and subthemes were identified from the transcripts that reflected the research objectives, research questions, and theoretical framework, which contributed to a greater understanding and explanation of the issues being studied.

RESULTS

This study explored the challenges that Caribbean adult learners encounter while pursuing higher education in the United States and the perceived support systems needed by Caribbean nontraditional adult learners to be successful while pursuing higher education in the United States. Data were collected through semistructured interviews, which were administered to 15 participants from the Caribbean, in particular, from the Bahamas. After careful analysis of their responses, the major themes that emerged with regards to influential factors that impacted their experiences were (a) financial constraints, (b) lack of support, and (c) cultural differences and adaptation. With regard to support systems needed by Caribbean students, the major themes that emerged were (a) family, (b) faculty/mentors, and (c) a network of friends.

Financial Hardship

It was a general consensus among the participants that pursuing higher education in the United States is expensive and resulted in a vast change in their quality of living compared to their home country. All of the participants indicated that they were

financially challenged while pursuing higher education in the United States. However, despite the financial hardship, they were determined to excel and generally indicated that the experience was still rewarding and indicated if they had to do it again, they would. A single female indicated,

I had to overcome many obstacles, particularly financial hardship...however, despite these difficulties, I would not give up this experience for anything in the world and I am a better person because I was able to endure to the end and completed my degree.

A married mother of two children echoed the sentiments with regards to financial hardship. She explained that her husband remained behind in their country while she traveled to the USA to pursue higher education with their two children. She stated, "There was a constant concern about paying tuition and bills in general." While financial hardship was identified as a major theme among the students, the opportunity to be employed as an international student contributed greatly to the financial hardship they experienced. A husband and wife team both pursuing their graduate degrees in the USA with their three children indicated that

...it was extremely difficult to obtain graduate assistantship as international students. Furthermore, as international students, employment was restricted to the university campus and only 20 hours per week. In most instances, the graduate/research/teaching assistantships were given to the American students.

This added an additional layer to the financial hardship experienced by international students.

Lack of Support

The decision to travel outside of one's country to pursue higher education is a decision that evokes a multiplicity of emotions, intellectual processing, and stimulating discussion with family and loved ones. To travel to an unfamiliar country for approximately 2–4 years to obtain a graduate degree embracing an unfamiliar educational system, culture, quality of living, and in the case of many Caribbean students, transitioning from being a majority to being a minority requires some level of support to be successful. As participants discussed the lack of support system, this aspect of the interview evoked a vast amount of emotions as it was deemed necessary to have some support system in place while pursuing higher education in the USA. A single female participant indicated that there is a need for family support. She stated,

...not having support...like a physical family support over there [United States]...I feel it is important to have family support when going through academic challenges. With any challenge, you need that support. And me not having that support was a negative thing for me.

There were numerous participants who indicated a lack of family support due to them being in another country had a negative impact (80%, or $n = 12$). There were also concerns expressed by the participants regarding lack of support from the

universities the participants attended (67%, or $n = 10$). In particular they lacked support from their respective colleges and/or departments. One participant indicated that he felt as though there was a more structured support system when he was an undergraduate student compared to now as a graduate student. He defined lack of support from the college and/or department as “lack of financial support, experiences/opportunities to teach, conduct scholarly research and lack of guidance and/or mentoring from faculty and administration at the university.” While pursuing a graduate degree and preparing for academia, all of the above are essential to one’s success not only as a student but also as a prospective faculty member.

Cultural Difference and Adaptation

A common thread that linked the participants of this study were their challenges adapting to the cultural differences in the United States compared to their home country. Cultural differences as described by many (93%, or $n = 14$) of the participants included ethnic food; enunciation and pronunciation of words and accents; ethnicity and race; religious beliefs; family and individual values; and the ideology of individualism versus collectivism. Concerns as to where to live, where to shop, how to utilize the transportation system, how to find a job, and what it means “not to have credit score and its impact” are all questions that are faced by international students and impact their adaptation to the culture in the USA and their quality of living. One of the participants described her experience as being lonely because of the cultural difference. Another female indicated that

You tend to lack a sense of belonging...initially, I was not concern about assimilating into another culture. I was worried about how I was going to fund my education and get the best possible grades. However, there were times I was really lonely and it took a while for me to meet new persons.

A single female indicated that she was told by the other foreign students that she believed she was “white” because she always sat with the “white people.” She explained, “I never realized this. So my challenge was trying to fit in with the Haitians and Jamaicans because they thought I was so different. That was a major challenge for me...so I found myself living in white America.” A married mother of three children indicated that there was a vast difference with regards to the cultural upbringing. She indicated it took her a while to adapt to passing people or entering an elevator and saying “good morning” or “good afternoon” and no one responding. She said, “no one would even look at me less respond. I thought they were being very rude...as this is considered extremely rude in my culture.” It is not unique to have culturally reflective food, but it can be challenging when studying in a foreign country. Many participants indicated that it took a while for them to adjust to the difference in food, while others indicated that they never adjusted to the food in the USA. A single male participant indicated that he would have native food sent to him while studying in the USA by his mother. This is a usual practice by Caribbean people living in the USA.

English was the predominant language for all participants in this study, but they still experienced language challenges, in this case, being enunciation, pronunciation,

and spelling of words (English vs. British spelling and pronunciation), coupled with their Caribbean accent. The most notable difference between American and British English is the vocabulary. This includes both the pronunciation and spelling of words and hence can create a language barrier. For example, the American version and spelling is “color” while the British version is “colour.” Another example would be the use of collective nouns, which lends to grammatical differences. In American English, collective nouns are singular but in British English, collective nouns can be plural or singular. Additionally, there is a difference in the use of past tense verbs, such as the American “ed” and the British “t” (e.g., learned vs. learnt) Such a difference can create a challenge, not in terms of which is correct, but which is more appropriate in an American setting and being mindful to utilize American English compared to British English. This provided an added layer for isolation and was perceived as different or inferior in the learning environment. With a level of frustration, a married female who traveled to the USA with her kids indicated that “there are some words that are enunciated differently depending on the culture and accent...no culture is better than the other.”

In an effort to adapt to the new culture, many participants indicated that they joined different Christian movements or international student groups, which afforded them the opportunity to be connected to their universities and other international students, specifically catering to Caribbean and west Africans students, within their universities. In addition, some participants indicated that they networked with some of the African American students who would assist them with adapting to the American culture, assisting them with unique hair care and skin needs.

When asked what support systems are needed by international students pursuing higher education in the USA, the major themes that emerged were: (a) family, (b) faculty/mentor, and (c) network of friends.

Family

It was discussed by participants of this study that while it may not have been possible for their family members to be present with them while pursuing higher education, it family support is crucial to the international student. Family support as described by the participants of this study includes: prayer from family members, financial support and resources, encouraging words, emotional support, and a mechanism to keep them culturally grounded.

One female participant indicated that it was necessary for family members to call her. She stated, “it was important to have encouraging words to keep you moving forward”. A couple pursuing their graduate degree indicated that they had to be that support system for each other. They often communicated the challenges they were experiencing academically, culturally, and socially. This strengthened their bond as husband and wife and they indicated that they could not have been successful without each other as international students pursuing higher education in the USA. Another married participant echoed these sentiments stating,

Family support is paramount, particularly from one’s spouse...if your spouse does not support your efforts to study abroad it could be very

challenging as he/she should be your greatest cheerleader. Not to be a part of them and encouraging or supporting could be detrimental to one's psyche. It could result in emotional strain and stress.

Faculty and/or Mentors

It was a general consensus by the participants of this study that there is a need of support from faculty and/or a mentor within their respective programs. As international students studying in the USA without the presence of any family members, faculty, staff, and administrators within that university may be the only support system that students have initially. There were some participants (67%, or $n = 10$) who indicated that the lack of support system at their respective universities made them feel as though they were alone in the matriculation process of their programs because questions were not answered by university personnel, as if the university personnel were not interested in the challenges an international student may be experiencing. There were other participants (26%, or $n = 4$) who indicated that it was only because of a supportive faculty and department that they were able to excel in their program. One participant indicated that one of her most pleasant experiences while studying in the USA was her lecturers "actually taking time with me and assisting me particularly in subjects I was not familiar with or had difficulty with." A graduate student indicated that once he had identified a faculty mentor within his program, this changed the quality of student life for him. He was then properly prepared for academia and provided some of the same opportunities extended to the American students such as a graduate assistantship, teaching opportunities, and mentoring with regards to research and scholarship.

A Network of Friends

Many participants (93%, or $n = 14$) indicated that there is an apparent need for a network of friends as international students. One participant indicated that although she was faced with many challenges as an international student, once she connected with other students, specifically other international students, "I started to become more balanced in my approach...not just focusing on funding my education but I also became more socially connected with other people. I think connecting with other people really helped me." A male graduate student expressed that if it was not for networking with other students, he would not have secured a graduate assistantship. He further explained that the opportunity to network with other students assists with creating balance and an outlet from the challenges of academia. Another female indicated that it was not until she had a network of friends that it assisted her with regards to assignments and academic success. She stated,

Having a network of friends to support you in terms of working together on projects, providing class notes when you miss a lesson, or simply providing personal support is important. In addition, the financial assistance that many of them provide cannot be understated.

DISCUSSION

The major themes that emerged with regards to challenges that impacted nontraditional Caribbean international student experiences were (a) financial constraints, (b) lack of support, and (c) cultural differences and adaptation. With regards to support systems, the major themes that emerged were: (a) family, (b) faculty/mentors, and (c) a network of friends. While the findings from this study are consistent with findings regarding non-Caribbean or traditional international students challenges, this study adds a unique perspective and affords an opportunity for a voice in the academic literature regarding nontraditional Caribbean students as international students. Most of the literature pertaining to international students reflects larger countries that are represented in the USA, such as China which reflects 32.5 % of the international student population (IIE, 2017b). Hence, most of the literature regarding international students in the USA is from a Chinese perspective.

The findings support Schlossberg's adult transition theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995), which includes four major factors influencing the adults' transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. The findings have shown that financial constraints, lack of support, and cultural issues are different situations that Caribbean nontraditional international students experienced in the transition to U.S. higher education. Also, the personal characteristics of international students influence their transition experiences, such as their financial, marital, and academic status. According to the findings, international students have limited support from their family and universities and they also try to find mentors and establish new networks of friends as their strategies to cope with the challenges.

This study also adds to the literature with regard to the lack of support specifically from family and at an institutional level. This theme, specifically as it relates to family, may be foundationally based on the culture within the Caribbean and Latin America, which is very family-oriented and values the presence of family. In addition, it also may reflect the cultural difference in the Caribbean, which is grounded more on collectivism than individualism compared to the American culture, which is perceived as the opposite. Hence this provides an explanation as to why the absence of family members, especially during a challenging time, is considered to be a challenge, which supports previous studies (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Rao, 2017).

With regard to lack of support at an institutional level, international students in comparison to American students encounter added layers of conflict while pursuing higher education, which would require a greater level of support from an institutional level, which is also reported by previous studies (Douglas-Chicoye, 2007; Glass, Buus, & Braskamp, 2013; Horne, Lin, Anson, & Jacobson, 2018; Urban & Palmer, 2015). Such added layers include the visa process, work restriction as a result of immigration status, obtaining credit or having no credit, or obtaining a Social Security number, all of which are relative to international status. These factors influence their ability to receive housing, vehicles, access to daycare facilities for their children, and a line of credit, which directly requires support from an institutional level. In addition, these graduate students need an added level of experience that can only be obtained at their institution because of their visa restrictions. To this end, it is imperative that

faculty, administration, and staff at institutions of higher education are aware of such restrictions imposed on international students and utilize this restriction as a motivation to assist international students for employability in academia or their profession of choice.

While language and culture have been identified as a challenge in previous literature (Khoshlessan & Das, 2017; Rao, 2017; Straker, 2016; Zhang, 2016), it is most often from the perspective of English as a second language while pursuing higher education in the USA. However, within this specific study, language focuses more on accent and different approaches to English (British compared to American) and the challenges it creates in an American institution of higher education who speaks and writes American English. The Caribbean accent also leads to a difference in the pronunciation and enunciation of words. In some instances among American students, this can create a divide rather than a learning opportunity.

Limitations

There were two major limitations of the study. First, participants were all Bahamians and did not represent other Caribbean countries. Second, there were only 15 participants in the study, which does not lend to the generalization of the results. It is proposed to conduct a larger study with participants representing more Caribbean countries in future research. Also, future studies should include students enrolled in both graduate and undergraduate degrees.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the factors that impact the experience of Caribbean nontraditional adult learners while pursuing higher education in the United States and the perceived support systems needed by Caribbean adult learners to be successful. This research is meaningful and contributes to the fields of adult learners and learning, adult education, international students, and higher education in many ways. The findings of this research validate the current literature on the factors impacting international students pursuing higher education in a foreign country.

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