Peer-Reviewed Article

OJED
OPEN JOURNALS IN EDUCATION

© *Journal of International Students*
Volume 10, Issue 3 (2020), pp. 553-570
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
Doi: 10.32674/jis.v10i3.969
ojed.org/jis

"Don't Change Yourselves": International Students' Concepts of Belonging at a Liberal Arts College

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ABSTRACT

While international students face many similar challenges, regardless of their location of study, the unique aspects of learning institutions may lead to different outcomes. Cognizant of this situation, we conducted a study designed to analyze the experiences of 28 students attending an undergraduate liberal arts college. The comments expressed by our informants underscore the sense of agency students developed as they responded to challenging circumstances that did not always recognize their unique perspectives. The subcultures they formed with other international students helped them adjust to their new surroundings without feeling obligated to discard unique aspects of themselves. Although the lived experiences of the students we interviewed rarely matched the images they carried with them when they matriculated, their comments indicated that they ultimately achieved of their goals for studying abroad. These findings offer fresh insights into the identities and experiences of a student population that is often overlooked in research on international education.

Keywords: higher education, international education, liberal arts, study abroad

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Eager to develop an understanding of a foreign culture, learn a new language, or gain skills that will improve their employment prospects, large numbers of students embrace the opportunity to study abroad. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2019), the number of international students studying in the United States has steadily increased over the past 25 years. During the 2018–2019 academic year, this number totaled 1,095,299—an all-time high. International study abroad programs have developed into a major industry, contributing $42.7 billion to the U.S. economy in 2018 (IIE, 2019).

Institutions of higher education often eagerly highlight the benefits of international education, both for domestic students who study in another country and in terms of the positive contributions that students from other countries bring to the host campuses. Facilitating academic exchanges among college students from different national and cultural backgrounds has the potential to foster their cross-cultural awareness, communication skills, and social cohesion (Volet & Ang, 1998). According to Knight and de Wit (1995), international education can help students "to understand, appreciate, and articulate the reality of interdependence among nations (environmental, economic, cultural and social)" and thus "prepare them to function in an international and inter-cultural context" (p. 13). Globalization has made it increasingly important for college students to develop these attitudes and competencies (Bittencourt et al., 2019).

Growth in the international education industry has attracted the attention of researchers interested in both the impact of study abroad programs on the institutions that accept international students and the experiences of those individuals. Over the last 20 years, there has been a shift in methods from primarily large-scale quantitative surveys to more qualitative studies that focus on the experiences of actual students (Page & Chahboun, 2019). This has produced a more nuanced and complex understanding of the experiences of international students, documenting both the specific factors that tend to increase student satisfaction as well as the challenges that confront individuals living in unfamiliar social and cultural contexts (Brown, 2009; Zhou et al., 2011). Qualitative studies that "demute" the students and allow them to articulate their own experiences, in particular, "represent an encouraging development where the types of perspectives used are becoming more diverse, more complex, and the viewpoints of the students themselves are being given more emphasis" (Page & Chahboun, 2019, p. 2).

This study was designed to provide such insights into the topic of international education. The research methodology employed centered on the words expressed by students as they reflected on their experiences studying abroad. Another distinct feature of this project is the research site: a private liberal arts college located on the east coast of the United States. Although scholarship that highlights the emic perspectives of international students provides a valuable analytic tool (Page & Chahboun, 2019), researchers have rarely used that methodological approach to study liberal arts colleges. This is not surprising, given that R1 research universities are the most common institutional home for scholars interested in this topic. Yet the unique characteristics of liberal arts colleges also make them fertile sites for research that explores the experiences of international students.

While international students face many similar challenges, regardless of their location of study, the unique context of the undergraduate liberal arts college may lead to different outcomes for people who opt to study at those institutions. Liberal arts colleges tend to differ from large R1 universities in terms of size, curricular requirements, social environment, and extracurricular activities offered. Most liberal arts colleges are residential, and strive to create a strong sense of community among students and faculty (Hersch, 2000; Koblik & Graubard, 2000). Academic as well as extracurricular activities are regarded as opportunities to foster that sense of community. Classes tend to be smaller than at research universities and to encourage the active participation of students. According to Lang (2000), “The philosophy of liberal arts is the philosophy of a democratic society in which citizenship, social responsibility, and community are inseparable” (p. 140). Of course, not all liberal arts colleges fulfill this promise, but Lang’s statement succinctly summarizes the ideals of liberal arts education.

On the surface, the liberal arts mission would appear to support the goals frequently ascribed to international education. The emphasis on community-building, close relationships between students and faculty, and learning through extracurricular activities, in particular, could help international students studying at liberal arts colleges develop stronger ties to their host institutions than is often the case at large R1 universities. The dearth of research on this topic, however, makes it difficult to state with any confidence how the education provided by liberal arts colleges shapes the lives of international students. Cognizant of this situation, we conducted a study designed to document and analyze the experiences of a sample of students attending an undergraduate liberal arts institution, which we will refer to as Bailey College. Our research was anchored by the following questions:

1. What specific conditions exerted the most powerful influence on their adjustment to college life?
2. How do international students articulate their most successful and challenging experiences at a liberal arts college?

Analysis of the data we collected indicates that students at liberal arts college do go through a socialization process that differs from their peers at large research universities in several key respects. In the sections that follow, we present the findings of our work. Those findings offer fresh insights into the identities and experiences of a student population that is often overlooked in research on international education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research that examines the experiences of students who venture abroad to study offers some valuable insights into the adaptations that international students make as they adjust to unfamiliar learning environments. Scholarship on this topic is frequently premised on the assumption that bringing students with different cultural backgrounds together to live, work, and study will yield widespread benefits for members of the host institution as well the individuals who come to study there. Studies that document the lived experiences of sojourners, however, suggest that this goal is not always met. In a review of literature on this topic, De Vita (2007) posited that “the ideal of transforming a culturally diverse student population into a valued resource for activating processes of international connectivity, social connectivity and intercultural learning is still very much that, an ideal" (p. 165).

A multitude of studies offer evidence in support of De Vita's assertion. Over the past 25 years, researchers have documented in great detail the specific factors that impede international students' smooth adjustment to their host institutions. This body of literature highlights social, administrative, curricular, and pedagogical factors that interfere with the objective of transforming "the campus and the classroom into a vibrant microcosm of the world" (Leask, 2009, p. 206). Both the formal and informal curriculum in host institutions can create "cultural silos" that prevent international students from thriving in their new environments (Leask & Carroll, 2011, p. 649).

One of the most common themes of this scholarship is that linguistic challenges frequently confront nonnative English speakers (Brown, 2009; Leong, 2015). Lack of fluency in the dominant language can create barriers to expression for international students, as well as mental stress and strain (Bittencourt et al., 2019). Individuals who lack strong English language skills may have trouble comprehending lectures, making sense of assigned readings, expressing themselves fluently in writing, and reviewing for examinations efficiently (Leder & Forgasz, 2004). This is especially true for East Asian students who study at institutions of higher education in the United States (Zhou et al., 2011).

The lack of command of the dominant language in a college or university can create social challenges for international students as well. Difficulty expressing themselves fluently in the host language, unfamiliarity with local idioms, and limited understanding of the local culture can all undermine visiting students' attempts to develop friendships with domestic students. According to Belford (2017), "[F]riendship formation plays a significant role in how international students experience cross-cultural transitions" (p. 502). Yet research on this topic indicates that international students frequently have trouble making friends from the host culture (Ward et al., 2001). Although these students are often eager to develop bonds with host nationals, "student expectations of interacting with the host are usually unfilled as contact is described in most studies of friendship patterns as rare or nonexistent" (Brown, 2009, p. 440).

Another challenge for international students that researchers frequently highlight relates to the learning environments and pedagogical practices common to host institutions. Pupils who have previously been educated in schools where lecture is the predominant form of instruction must adjust to more interactive classrooms; those who do not alter their behavior may be labeled as passive or surface learners (Watkins & Biggs, 1996). Fox (1994) concluded that academics in Western cultures tend to regard international students as lacking the ability to analyze difficult texts and to develop logical arguments of their own. Furthermore, when such issues surface, instructors frequently misinterpret the behavior of international students and expect those students to adjust to their pedagogical approaches, without modifying their own instructional practices (Weikala & Watkins, 2008).

Clearly, international students face a host of challenges when they venture abroad to study. Yet research published over the last decade has raised important questions about the way those challenges have been framed in the literature. Until recently, research that presented international students as "having a set of identifiable problems rather than focusing on any inadequacies within the host community" (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 388) were the norm. The prevalence of such deficit models essentialized the experiences of international students and reinforced their ascribed status as outsiders. Studies that look at the experiences of sojourners from their perspective, in contrast, can complicate our understanding of international students, adding valuable layers to analyses of their experiences (Jones, 2013; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). While acknowledging the difficulties often faced by international students, these qualitative studies also draw attention to the strategies that individuals can employ to overcome those obstacles.

This growing body of research suggests that even when international students struggle to penetrate mainstream campus cultures, they may still benefit from the study abroad experience. Social isolation does not necessarily lead to failure, as deficit models sometimes imply. Students who are not welcomed into the inner circle of host institutions may protest against or negotiate problematic conditions to their own benefit (Page & Chahboun, 2019). They may also acquire skills and attitudes that ultimately prove valuable. For example, international students frequently form strong co-national networks that yield social as well as academic benefits (Bittencourt et al., 2019). Students may emerge from this process with skills and social capital that enhance their employment prospects at home. Through their interactions with other students, both domestic and international, they may also develop cross-cultural competencies that will be valuable regardless of their ultimate place of residence or career pathway (Jones, 2013; Rizvi, 2005). This evidence problematizes stereotypical depictions of international students as passive reactants to institutions that relegate them to the margins of campus.

THE RESEARCH SETTING

Bailey College is a highly selective, small U.S. liberal arts college in the northeast that was founded in the mid-1800s. The school is known for its strong commitment to financial aid, low teacher–student ratios, and support for diversity. Students come from a wide range of backgrounds with varying social, political, and religious beliefs, and respecting these differences is a foundational aspect of Bailey's community. Included in these varying backgrounds are numerous first-generation students as well as many international students.

Bailey started admitting international students in the early 1900s when the president of the institution sought for ways to "emphasize the international aspect of learning" on campus. In the mid 1900s, an article in Bailey's school paper stated that "Every year there are new foreign students coming to [Bailey] from all over the world. They are encouraged to come, welcomed warmly and given all the help we can give because [Bailey] believes that their presence adds a vital ingredient to the process of learning and living in this community" (1953). This outlook has not changed over the years as the number of international students at Bailey has continued to grow. Today, Bailey's international community consists of more than 300 students from over 60 countries.

Once admitted to Bailey, international students have access to a wide range of services including the Office of International Students (OIS). This office consists of a director and a team of student interns that provides international students with guidance on taxes, immigration, employment, and visas as well as programming throughout their time at Bailey. Programs for international students include international orientation, trips to nearby cities, international photo contests, and international dance performances. The mission of this programing is threefold: to build a sense of belonging among all the international students, to learn how to navigate difference particularly in the context of communication across cultures, and to cultivate intercultural competence and global citizenship among all students. In addition to OIS, international students also have access to the Bailey International Students' Association (BISA), a student-run organization for international programming that was started in 1974. BISA complements OIS by providing more casual student-only events, which gives students an opportunity to get to know each other in a more informal setting.

METHOD

The objective for this research project was to document and analyze the experiences of international students studying at an undergraduate liberal arts institution. The consensual qualitative research method, which emphasizes words rather than numbers, seemed best suited to the goals of our research. This inductive approach relies on open-ended interviews, small samples, attention to context, and the integration of multiple perspectives on the issues being studied to explore the experiences, attitudes, and convictions of a group of informants (Hill, 2012). Rather than study a large number of students attending multiple institutions, we opted to closely examine the experiences of a relatively small number of informants; our objective was to develop a nuanced understanding of those individuals, rather than to generate findings that could be applied to a large number of colleges and universities.

Participants

We employed a purposeful sampling procedure to produce a group of informants who brought a range of experiences and opinions to the project. According to Patton (1990), "[T]he logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth" (p. 169). We chose to study a liberal arts college in the northeastern area of the United States that has consistently accepted a sizeable number of international students. The most recent statistics available indicate that students who hold foreign citizenship constitute approximately 13% of the Bailey student body. With the assistance of OIS, we distributed an electronic survey to 350 individuals identified as international students by the college. Sixty-two students completed and returned the survey (a response rate of 17.7%).

Seeking to hear from people with a range of backgrounds and experiences, we identified four regions of the world (Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America) that send the largest number of students to the college. Next, we randomly selected students from each geographical area and invited them to take part in in-depth interviews about their experiences studying at the college. When a student declined to participate, we contacted the next person on the list of survey completers, until we reached our target of 30 interviewees. Two students dropped out of the study, which produced a total of 28 interviewees. All of the people included in this sample were undergraduate students who hold passports in countries other than the United States. They ranged in age from 18 to 22, and had completed at least 1 year of college; 60% were female and 40% were male. Although this sampling approach was not scientific, we believe it provided us with a collection of interviewees representing a range of linguistic, cultural, religious, educational, and gender backgrounds.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews with the 28 students were conducted over 5 weeks in the fall of 2017. The semi-structured interviews included 37 core questions. Before the interviews began, participants filled out a short questionnaire. Interviewers posed unscripted follow-up questions based on the responses provided by informants; interviewees were free to decline to respond to individual prompts, and to explore areas of interest in greater depth. The discussions that developed included "a mixture of conversation and embedded questions" (Fetterman, 1989, p. 49) designed to produce a balanced rapport (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). Interviews were conducted in a variety of locations (e.g., dormitory room, library, cafeteria), depending on the informant's preference. All of the interviews were conducted in English and digitally recorded. Participants signed consent forms and had the option of withdrawing their participation at any point.

Members of the research team transcribed the interviews and developed a coding system together. After reviewing the set of transcribed interviews, each researcher constructed a list of codes that could be used to analyze the data. Following the inductive approach to constructing a domain list described by Thompson et al. (2012, p. 104), the research team then met to discuss the codes that had emerged from the independent reviews of transcripts. Researchers shared their rationales for selecting the codes they came up with, provided each other with critical feedback, ultimately producing a consolidated set of codes. All of the transcripts were then coded using the categories agreed upon by the research team. Additionally, each transcript was given an identification code to ensure the interviewees remained anonymous during the coding process. An inductive analysis was used to identify patterns, themes, and categories of analysis that emerged from the data. All interviewees were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

RESULTS

Our analysis of the survey and interview data we collected provides support for some conclusions drawn by research that examines the experiences of individuals studying at large research universities, and also highlights some aspects that are unique to undergraduate international students studying at a liberal arts college. Below, we present interview data that relate to the two research questions that guided our study.

Q1: What specific conditions exerted the most powerful influence on their adjustment to college life?

When international students arrive on an unfamiliar college campus, they often experience some form of cultural dissonance. Structured programs designed to enhance their sense of belonging can ease the transition from home to a new school (Andrade, 2006). Comments shared by our informants supported this idea. Although interviewees expressed their appreciation for a variety of individuals and programs, the activity that seemed to have a particularly powerful impact on their adjustment was international student orientation (ISO).

At Bailey, first-year international students are asked to arrive on campus 4 days before the campus-wide new student orientation (NSO) offered by the college. During this initial time with only international students on campus, OIS organizes numerous activities for new students: shopping trips to the nearby mall, campus tours, introduction sessions with other administrative offices, information sessions, picnics, etc. According to the international students we interviewed, ISO was instrumental in smoothing their transition to their new surroundings. The structure and tone of the orientation allayed their initial anxiety about studying abroad and helped them establish valuable support networks. The interview excerpts below highlight some of the specific ways that ISO helped international students adapt to their new environment:

> Rahul: Orientation was just super chill… All the internationals were in the same boat as me right. Because for most of them it was the first time away from home, different country, different culture, they're all nervous. So, everyone in the beginning was making an effort to be friends so it was just really nice, family, community. I made really good friends.

> Rakesh: International orientation, I couldn't have done it without it. It's extremely necessary. [It prepares you] for certain things, for certain ways of thinking, vocabulary. It's tough making friends when you're so conscious that what you're talking about, how you're talking about, what you sound like.

Although most informants emphasized the positive aspects of ISO, some acknowledged problematic ones. Several individuals, for example, noted that holding a separate orientation for international students reinforces divisions between international and domestic students. At a critical time in the adjustment process, international students at Bailey receive valuable support, but in a format that underscores their differences from domestic students, as Gabriela observed:

> Gabriela: There's a perception that international students stick to international students… I think it's true. It's not that we don't interact with American students; it's because international orientation comes first and there is a certain camaraderie that comes from it. You embrace other international students.

Interviewees also described a sense of dissonance between ISO and NSO. For many of the people we interviewed, ISO alleviated the stress they experienced by letting them settle in before domestic first-year students arrive; NSO, in contrast, actually heightened feelings of alienation and loneliness for them because the campus-wide orientation did not acknowledge their presence or the contributions they made to the incoming class. The U.S.-centric approach to activities purportedly designed to welcome new domestic students to campus made some international students feel invisible:

> Interviewer: How would you have improved your transition?
>
> Rakesh: In orientation [there should be] a recognition that there are international students. The only time our existence is explicitly mentioned is during [the] *I Am Bailey* [workshop], but beyond that there's no inclusion in any programming or any messaging or any activities so just that you see that someone knows you exist.

The feedback our informants offered in regard to both ISO and NSO suggests that while international students do seek concrete information about the practical challenges associated with living abroad, the issues they found most perplexing related to the norms that guide social interactions at Bailey. They were more interested in talking about how to engage in a politically charged conversation with other students than in learning how to open a bank account or where to buy laundry soap. OIS did offer workshops during ISO designed to familiarize international students with American popular culture and language, but students expressed mixed reactions to these events. Some students were struck by the limited attention devoted to race relations and, more broadly, U.S. politics. As Niklas picked up on, the framework through which liberal arts colleges approach these conversations is built on U.S. context and history. While universities are often praised for their efforts to recruit international students, informants indicated that expanding access to their campuses is not sufficient:

> Nadiah: I feel like OIS is kind of in a place where maybe it needs to think about how to address the political realities of international students' experiences. And I think OIS does a wonderful job right now in terms of administrative, and legal, and financial support, things like that. I also feel like there's also a lot of grievances that go beyond OIS. Like just dealing with all of the realities that have come up post 2016 [the travel ban, arrests of immigrants, etc.] … OIS needs to recalibrate its mission a little to face those things head on.

Clearly, students appreciated the support provided by OIS during orientation. For many, the office became a sort of home base that they returned to throughout their time at the college. The office affirmed their value as citizens of the college and celebrated their unique talents. It also helped students establish support networks that they relied on throughout their time at Bailey. Yet, the comments above suggest that activities organized by OIS also reinforced international students' sense of separation from mainstream campus culture. Adapting to life at Bailey was a complex process that involved negotiating implicit, often opaque, norms that were rarely discussed openly.

Q2: How do international students articulate their most successful and challenging experiences at a liberal arts college?

Research on international education often emphasizes the academic challenges that students face while studying abroad. Lack of fluency in English, in particular, can prevent international students from realizing their goals. The majority of students we interviewed, in contrast, expressed satisfaction with their academic experiences at Bailey. In reflecting on their courses, most indicated that they felt well prepared to succeed in their classes, as the following comment illustrates:

> Oliver: I maybe expected it to be a little more academically rigorous. For a long time I got by with doing not that much work and getting pretty good grades… In terms of the workload, I thought it would be heavier. I thought a lot of classes would go into more depth on some issues.

A variety of factors help to explain the high levels of academic success reported by international students at Bailey. Two influences appear particularly significant. First, admission standards at the college are quite high. Bailey is commonly labeled as a "highly selective" institution. International students must score at least 100 on the internet-based TOEFL exam to qualify for admission, and are encouraged to take the most challenging courses offered at their high schools. Due to these rigorous entrance requirements, most students admitted to Bailey have strong academic and linguistic foundations to build upon. Second, liberal arts institutions like Bailey emphasize undergraduate teaching and mentoring, which is not always the case at large research universities. The student–faculty ratio at Bailey was 8:1 the year we conducted our research. This academic support network reduced the chances that students who experienced academic difficulties would fall through the cracks. We do not mean to suggest that all international students at Bailey thrived in the classroom. In reflecting on their academic experiences, several interviewees expressed frustration or concern with less than optimal learning conditions. However, such critical comments tended to highlight issues related to learning climate rather than level of difficulty:

> Beatrice: I feel like it's the same, but for some reason, I don't feel the courage to talk in class. Back home I talk a lot in class. I answer questions. I would ask questions. But like not really here. I don't know the classroom environment. I have been tense. I don't want to be the girl who is always answering the questions.

> Nadiah: Why do I feel so nervous about participating sometimes? I honestly feel like it's because… psych majors tend to be mostly white students and white professors, and that's a little awkward to deal with, especially when we are talking about topics like stereotyping [or] homelessness, topics that I feel get a little strange when you have mostly privileged people in the room

> talking about it. Sometimes I feel like professors and students themselves don't have an awareness of that.

These comments speak to a reality that has rarely been highlighted in research on international education: the cogent influence that sociopolitical context can exert on all aspects of life for sojourning students. Although Bailey frequently declares its commitment to diversity and inclusion, comments made by international students underscored the limitations of those avowals from the administration. They frequently struggled to negotiate unstated norms related to self-expression at the college, and felt that they had to carefully self-censor their comments or risk being criticized by their peers.

Our analysis suggests that the political culture on Bailey's campus often determines how students interact with domestic students, or, more specifically, do not interact. Many of the international students we interviewed indicated that they prefer to listen to, rather than engage in, sensitive conversations. While some individuals indicated that this disengagement stems partially from a lack of familiarity with or interest in U.S. politics, the presence of a "call-out culture" on campus had a more powerful influence on their behavior. We loosely define this "call-out culture" as an environment in which people are rigid in their beliefs and that student who question those beliefs fear being called out.

Remarks shared by our participants reveal that at Bailey the modes of liberal/conservative and open-minded/close-minded are collapsed: Students tend to associate liberal with open-mindedness and link conservatism with close-mindedness. Many of the students we spoke with initially accepted this oversimplification of ideologies. Yet they gradually learned that if they expressed ideas using certain words or examples, they were often branded with labels that impeded their ability to form relationships with domestic students:

> Gabriela: This is what Bailey makes you feel—that you can't say these things because everything is so black and white. And once you're racist, you're [a] racist forever and everyone will know because there's a culture of calling out, which I can see has value, but they've used it to a point where it's detrimental and it takes away conversation.

Worried that they might say something considered controversial, international students often avoided entering conversations about politics, even though their unique backgrounds could have added depth to many of those conversations. In this way, the "call-out culture" generated a form of self-censorship that privileged the opinions of some students above others. A number of interviewees explained that they felt more comfortable engaging in political discussions with other international students, who were not likely to criticize them if their opinions diverged from their own, as the following comments illustrate:

> Rahul: I feel because—I think this is a thing for most internationals—but sensitivity is less of an issue outside of the U.S., so I'm less careful of what I say when I'm around internationals than I am around domestic students.

> Ruensa: I've noticed a lot of the time I can't express myself freely when I'm in the presence of domestic students. There's this exhausting need to be politically correct all the time, and that's not exactly a bad thing. But at the same time, it's exhausting… With international students, you can just tell them, oh I know nothing about this, and you won't be called out in any way.

In the eyes of many international students, the call-out culture at Bailey created an exclusionary environment that impeded honest discussions among people from different backgrounds. The hyper-critical attitudes of some domestic students were especially troubling to individuals from countries who faced serious economic and social challenges. From their perspective, the heavy emphasis placed on issues related to individual identity often overshadowed more systemic challenges that demanded attention, as Antoine noted:

> I guess there are a few times where I feel like people don't get it because they are all American… Issues they have I feel like aren't issues the common person has… When people in Jamaica are struggling, they are struggling to go to school, to eat, have lunch money. Here your issues are if someone misgenders you… It's hard for me to take a lot of it seriously.

The most common strategies international studies relied on to cope with such situations were self-censorship and self-segregation. These coping mechanisms helped interviewees manage the stress they experienced. Rather than enter into risky territory, they frequently remained silent or expressed their feelings honestly only in the company of other international students.

Although most interviewees related examples of feeling excluded on campus, they tended to frame such situations as opportunities for personal growth. Being thrust into an unfamiliar cultural context challenged them to develop coping strategies they had not relied on in the past. These strategies included both psychological and relational adjustments to unexpected situations. When confronted by what could be regarded as unfortunate circumstances, international students frequently relied on each other for support and guidance:

> Isabela: On many levels, I feel like all international students, it doesn't matter where we come from, we are more similar to each other than with any American. In many ways: in the ways our families work, in the ways we see family and see other things.

> Nicole: I realized the international community is the closest sense of home that I'd get just because we're all bonding over a sense of displacement—we share that with each other, and we share homesickness with each other and culture shock.

Furthermore, forging ties with other students experiencing similar challenges helped international students overcome the barriers they faced without modifying their core beliefs or values. Several of the individuals we interviewed emphasized both the monocultural aspects of the Bailey campus culture and the importance of resisting pressure to assimilate into that culture. Interviewees stressed that internationals students should not feel obliged to sacrifice facets of their identities in an attempt to seem more American:

> Rakesh: You don't have to fit in, so don't try to fit in. Don't change yourself. Don't change your language. Don't change the way you speak. Don't change what you [watch] on TV. Don't change what you listen to. Don't be afraid to play your own music in your room. Don't do all of those things. Don't feel like you have to be American to be friends.
>
> Kabir: Be proud of where you're from. A lot of people are scared of getting their identity, though; they'd rather adjust to U.S. stuff. Keep your own mannerisms and your thought processes. That's important. Be yourself and try not to change yourself too much. You'll find your own friend group. You'll find your own niche.
>
> Veronike: I really like how people have the freedom to be whoever they want, wear whatever they want, do whatever they want, not being judged.

DISCUSSION

Our informants seemed to embrace Bailey's mission, which was reflected in their desire to participate actively in a learning community that celebrated, at least on the surface, diversity of thought and action. In discussing their experiences at Bailey, they spoke in great detail about the social dimensions of their experiences abroad. Although they were motivated to get good grades and develop meaningful relationships with other students, achieving a sense of belonging on campus seemed just as important to most of them.

Interviewees described in detail the benefits of programs such as ISO, informal consultations with OIS staff, and special programs offered throughout the academic year. These activities served two key functions. First, they helped new students navigate institutional structures on campus. For instance, students received valuable information about visas, class registration, and medical services. Second, OIS strengthened connections among international students. Becoming a part of that community mitigated the stresses experienced by new students. Yet international students continued to face challenges long after completing orientation. After becoming acclimated to life at Bailey, most international students sought to integrate themselves more thoroughly into the learning community. Becoming active and respected members of the student body, however, required effort not only of the newcomers but also of domestic students. For this melding of personalities to occur, members of the dominant culture needed to welcome new students into their circles.

Our interview data indicate that domestic students generally treated international students kindly and appeared eager to get to know them at a surface level, but genial interactions did not always produce relationships anchored in mutual trust and respect. Although domestic students did not actively reject attempts by international students to develop close friendships, social norms, cultural reference points, and existing relationships complicated this process. Underlying all of these challenges was a call-out culture that made many international students hesitant to join conversations focused on politically or socially sensitive topics. Following a pattern highlighted by other researchers (Ward et al., 2001), the international students we interviewed often had trouble developing enduring relationships with domestic students. Rather than draw attention to their unfamiliarity with unstated norms, international students frequently removed themselves, either physically or psychologically, from precarious circumstances. Instead of forging bonds with host country students, they developed a sense of solidarity with other "outsiders."

All of the students we interviewed did initially face some challenges at Bailey. These included common adjustment issues as well as more complex challenges related to finding a sense of place on a campus that purports to embrace diversity, but does not always follow through on that promise. Yet social isolation did not lead to failure for most of our informants, who negotiated problematic conditions to their own benefit. International students at Bailey tended to forge a sense of belonging, despite not having many close friendships with domestic students. Connections to other internationals helped sojourning students adjust to their new surroundings without feeling obligated to discard unique aspects of themselves. This made it possible for them to "integrate" rather than to "assimilate" (Andrade, 2006).

Although many of the students we interviewed were initially disappointed to learn that they would not be warmly welcomed into the dominant culture on campus, they often came to appreciate their social location on campus. Rather than conform to values that conflicted with their own, students like Rakesh advised their peers, "Don't try to fit in. Don't change yourself." The comments expressed by our informants underscore the sense of agency international students developed as they responded to challenging circumstances at a small liberal arts college that did not always recognize their unique perspectives. As Kari remarked, "I feel like I've grown a lot at Bailey. As I said before, I felt like I wouldn't go outside of my comfort zone if I'd stayed at home. … So I feel like, in that sense, in terms of personal growth, I've been really successful."

Although the lived experiences of the students we interviewed rarely matched the images they carried with them when they began first-year orientation, their comments indicated that they did meet many of their goals for studying abroad. In reflecting on their experiences at the college, they provided a wealth of evidence that they had come to "understand, appreciate, and articulate the reality of interdependence among nations" (Knight & Witt, 1995, p. 13). Although that reality was not always comforting, it had prepared them to function in international and intercultural contexts. In negotiating an unfamiliar culture and forming relationships with other sojourners, the international students achieved the objectives of both liberal arts and international education presented in the opening section of this paper.

Implications for Further Research

The findings of this study highlight the unique insights that international students can provide into their own experiences and conditions in their host institutions. Although scholars have begun to pay closer attention to the emic perspectives of the studies they study, more research in this area can deepen understanding of the study abroad experience. Studies that "focus on the social realities created by the participants themselves" (Page & Chahboun, 2019, p. 5) can draw attention to the multiple facets and experiences of a student population that is often depicted as homogeneous. Such qualitative studies have the potential to add multiple layers to conclusions drawn based on large-scale qualitative surveys.

Another way that researchers can enhance the literature is to study students and institutions that have been overlooked. Our analysis emphasizes that international students at liberal arts colleges may enter the process of studying abroad with different backgrounds, expectations, and needs that differ from their peers at large research universities. Studying students who opt to study at universities with unique structural, academic, or demographic features, may generate new perspectives that challenge extant assumptions about the contours of international education. We have not, for instance, come across research that studies international students at single-sex institutions, historically black colleges, or art schools.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this research is its scope. All of the participants attended the same college. Although we opted to focus exclusively undergraduate students, our sample does not represent the array of individuals who attend colleges in the United States or in other English-speaking countries. Students attending public institutions of higher education might face challenges that contrast markedly from the students we surveyed and interviewed for this study. Furthermore, our sample does not mirror Bailey's international student population. Not all nationalities of international students were represented in the sample. All of these factors limit the generalizability of our findings. The ideas presented in this essay might not capture the realities at other undergraduate institutions in the United States or abroad. The conclusions presented in this article are offered with the goal of expanding understanding of the unique experiences of international students who attend on undergraduate liberal arts institution.

CONCLUSION

This study of the experiences of international students studying at a liberal arts college in the United States confirms the findings of previously published research, but also offers some new insights into this topic. The data we collected underscores the logistical, academic, and personal challenges that students from other countries face when they join an unfamiliar learning community. Studying abroad can produce feelings of instability that make it difficult for students to reach their potential in the classroom. They may also face challenges as they attempt to develop a sense of belonging on campus. Most of the international students who participated in this study indicated that they were succeeding academically. They also expressed high levels of overall satisfaction with their experiences at Bailey College. However, this general sense of contentment masked some underlying tensions tied to campus life for international students at Bailey. Most interviewees did express feelings of connectedness, but the people they felt most attached to and supported by were other international students. International students' descriptions of their place in the learning community indicated they had developed strong affiliations with subcultures of foreign students within an institution that accepted but did not always embrace them. Through relationships forged with other international students, they acquired skills and developed cross-cultural competencies that supported both their immediate needs and long-term goals.

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