EXPLORING THE TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF BAHAMIAN STUDENTS STUDYING IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT: Within recent years, there has been a trend of students (traditional and nontraditional) travelling abroad, more particularly to the United States, with the view of pursuing higher education at both the graduate and undergraduate level. Among the most popular influential factors to obtain higher education internationally are government and private scholarships, international exposure and experience, professional development, and a quality of education that could not have been obtained locally. Despite the accelerant that ignited the desire for travel, most students are not prepared for the vast social and cultural difference in the educational system. However international students are resilient, adapt and are successful and often result in them transforming as individuals. This qualitative study examined the effects of U.S. based education on Bahamian students, from the perspective of transformational learning theory. Emphasis was placed on the extent to which these students' international learning experiences transformed them into scholars of positive social change within their respective fields of study. Data were collected utilizing semi structured interviews of 10 Bahamian students. All of the participants were born in The Bahamas, but traveled to the United States to pursue higher education as a nontraditional adult learner.   The study results provide a foundational platform for current and future Bahamian adult learners pursuing higher education in the United States.

Keywords: Transformation, Bahamas, Non-Traditional Adult Learners

The concept of travelling abroad to pursue higher education is not necessarily unique to The Bahamas but is a notion explored by many individuals at an international level. This concept is often coupled with the expectation of receiving a better quality of life, a diverse educational experience, personal and professional development, financial stability, experience and relevant exposure which is often due to the limited supply of higher education opportunities in their host country. Despite the motivation to pursue higher education, there are some perceived challenges as it relates to relocating to a foreign country and enrolling in an unfamiliar educational system. Further, as a result of embracing such opportunities, change at an individual level becomes inevitable. Hence, these individuals who study abroad often transform as individuals and as learners which adds further complications upon return to their host country.

It may be a myth that the underlying benefit of travelling to the U.S. is only advantageous to the international student because universities and the American economy at large benefit greatly from the inclusion of international students in American higher education. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, in 2014, more than $30 billion was contributed to the U.S. economy by international students studying in the U.S. Funds to pursue higher education were generated as a result of personal, family, scholarships, universities or governmental funds of the international students and their host countries.

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Examining from an academic perspective, the inclusion of international students in the U.S. learning environment contributes greatly to a diverse student population, incorporation of creative teaching styles, networking opportunities, and inclusion of global perspectives. On this premise, this study was designed to explore the socio-cultural experiences of Bahamians studying abroad in the U.S. and examine how they have transformed as individuals and their perception of returning home upon completion of their studies.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded upon the theory of transformation (Mezirow, 1994). This theory is one that encompasses adult learning processes, generic structures, and elements, which are acted upon in certain situations or cultures. This theory posited that through reflection (when solving a problem), one's actions and thoughts are adjusted, or rather *transformed*, in an effort to yield a different result. Due to the social nature of this theory, its application is specifically useful in social contexts, where differences may arise, such as in a school environment. This theory suggests that through learning and enlightenment, transformation occurs.

Literature Review

Why Students Pursue Higher Education Outside of their Native Home

The trend of students leaving their native home to seek higher education internationally, particularly within the United States, has increased significantly over the past decade (Fielding & Gibson, 2005). More so in recent years, it has been found that the enrollment of non-traditional learners attending institutions of higher learning in the United States has proliferated (Jesnek, 2012). The most common reasons why individuals seek higher education outside of their native home, which emerged throughout the literature, include (a) better training and skills acquisition, (b) exposure to a different culture, or a better way of life, and (c) to receive opportunities that would better assist them in becoming a more successful contributor to their respective fields of study (Abdullah, Adebayo, & Talib, 2015; Fielding & Gibson, 2005; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007; Yusoff, 2011). The purpose of this review of literature is three-fold (a) to examine factors that impact the adjustment process of non-traditional, international learners enrolled in institutions of higher learning, (b) highlight ways in which non-traditional learners have been transformed by their transition to and from an international institution of higher learning, and (c) explore how socio-cultural differences have influenced the learning experiences of the non-traditional learner.

However, as researchers (Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, & Ishak, 2010; Mittal, & Wieling, 2006; Poyrazli, & Kavanaugh, 2006; Ye, 2006; Yusoff, 2011) have found, the transition from a student's native land to an international institution of higher learning presents many experiences, and perhaps challenges, which impact the learner, thereby influencing the overall learning experience. This transition may result in the transformation of the non-traditional learner as s/he begins to see oneself from the perspective of an adult

174

learner. However, based upon the theory of transformation, the learner's personal perceptions are reevaluated, and perhaps questioned, in light of new paradigms and situations (Mezirow, 2000). It is interesting to note that the majority of one's reflection occurs within the context of problem-solving. This justifies how one's thinking and actions are adjusted or *transformed* when faced with a challenge of some kind. It also embodies the process of communicative learning, which is simply trying to understand what someone means and is an important process when interacting with individuals from diverse cultures and ethnicities.

International students derive from a myriad of culturally diverse backgrounds, and this factor is one of the primary reasons why these students experience difficulty in adjusting to their new learning environments. While psychologists like Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1951) supported that individuals learn through interactions within their environment, others (Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, & Ishak, 2010; Ye, 2006) have found that socio-cultural differences can pose a difficulty for students studying outside of their native home. As a result, misunderstanding, socio-cultural differences such as language and cultural norms can affect communication between individuals (students and their peers/students and their instructors). This, according to Yusoff (2011) causes students to experience feelings of insecurity, nostalgia, and low self-efficacy, thus hindering successful adjustment.

Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) conducted a qualitative study, which was taken from an ecological perspective. This study took place at a U.S. institution which offered degrees at the baccalaureate, master's, and doctorate levels. The purpose of the study was to determine whether the needs of the international students were adequately met by the university. The participants included 15 students (12 males, 3 females), and focus group interviews were used to collect data. The participants represented various nationalities including German, Korean, Indian, Chinese, Turkish, and Mexican. The study revealed several areas of concern, in relation to students' adjustment process. The more paramount issues were communication with peers, and social interaction. The study also found that students' experiences both inside and outside of their classroom environments significantly impacted the adjustment process.

Yusoff's (2011) quantitative study investigated the relationship between social support, self-efficacy, and socio-cultural adjustment. This study was conducted in a public higher education institution in Malaysia, and the participants consisted of 185 international undergraduate students. The hypotheses were tested using a multiple linear regression analysis. Findings from this study indicated that support from friends is positively related to the process of socio-cultural adjustment. In a qualitative study, Mittal and Wieling (2006) examined international doctoral students' experiences. Data were collected using 13 in-depth interviews, and findings revealed that most participants experienced some type of adjustment problems. Participants expressed the need for more academic and career support, in addition to increased recognition for their cultural differences.

Ye (2006) examined the relationships between social support, acculturative stress and the use of online ethnic social groups. The participants of this study included Chinese students pursuing doctoral degrees in the United States. Findings revealed that students who received adequate social support, exhibited less feelings of fear, in terms of their adjustment process. It was also found that students who received high levels of support from their social ethnic groups experienced less acculturative stress. Researchers (Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, & Ishak, 2010; Mittal, & Wieling, 2006; Poyrazli, & Kavanaugh, 2006; Ye, 2006; Yusoff, 2011) have confirmed that socio-cultural elements such as language, social support, and the interpersonal interactions all play a significant role in determining how successful an international student's adjustment will be in the future.

Socio-cultural Challenges

Language. Research has shown that language barriers negatively impact international students' ability to adjust to their new academic environments (Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, & Ishak, 2010). Poyrazli and Grahame's (2007) findings correspond with those of Mahmud, Amat, Rahman and Ishak (2010), who found that the inability to communicate effectively across cultures limits the student's ability to be fully involved in both his learning, in addition to his adjustment process. Li and Gasser (2005) and Yusoff (2011) argued that there existed a significant correlation between socio-cultural adjustment and one's level of self-efficacy. These researchers found that international (foreign) students who were capable of communicating effectively in the native language of their host country, expressed higher levels of confidence in their abilities as an adult learner. In support of such findings, Bamber and Tett (2000) proposed that institutions of higher education provide transitional programs for their international students. Verbik and Lasanowski (2007) and Jesnek (2012) also supported the concept of transitional programs, and concurred that such programs be sustained throughout the entire duration of the students' programs of study. According to Yusoff (2011), "language self-confidence played a pivotal role, mediating the relations between psychological adjustment and sociocultural difficulty" (p. 4).

Social support. Researchers defend that social support is a critical factor in improving international students' adjustment processes (Yusoff, 2007). These students are separated from their homes, and familiar support systems, only to find themselves in unfamiliar territories, where they   are forced to find new support. In addition to the challenge of language differences across cultures, researchers (Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Ye, 2006) have found that international students were often faced with a lack of social support whether from their peers or instructors. Participants in Verbik and Lasanowski's (2007) study expressed concern about not receiving the experience that was advertised by the university in which they were enrolled. This view was shared by participants in a similar study conducted by Abdullah, Adebayo and Talib (2015), who found that students who did not receive sufficient academic or social support, experienced feelings of low self-efficacy, anger, depression, and often felt as if they were discriminated against. Similarly, Mittal and Weiling's (2006) findings showed that international students desired a higher level of academic and career support. Such findings corresponded with

those of Ye's (2006) study, which defended the fact that higher levels of interpersonal social support for international students reduce the level of stress associated with their adjustment process (Ysuoff, p. 5). International students expressed the view that they did not feel welcomed, or prepared for by the institution of higher education that offered them admission. While social support is considered crucial, the establishment of relationships across cultures is not easy, in light of students' varying beliefs, customs, and dispositions.

The development of relationships across cultures speaks to the level of transformation experienced by the individual (Mezirow, 1994). The theory of transformation, as explained previously, involves adult learning processes, and is determined by cultures and situations in which one finds oneself. This therefore speaks to the importance of individuals becoming more social in nature, if they are to effectively adapt to their new surroundings, and foster cooperative relations with others. Some students have a tendency of being fearful of situations or people that threaten their beliefs or assumptions. Through interaction with others, however, we have the opportunity to examine and reflect upon our preconceptions, in an effort to determine whether or not a change is warranted (Mezirow, 1994, p. 223).

Non-traditional learners. According to current research, non-traditional learners are becoming more prevalent in higher education within The United States of America (Wyatt, 2011). How do these learners differ from the traditional learner? Non-traditional learners are individuals who are 25 or more years of age, and are often inadequately prepared for college-level work. Many of these learners return to college to obtain an undergraduate or graduate degree, in an attempt to enhance their performance on their jobs, or to qualify for promotions. These learners have been found to be more challenged than the traditional college student (aged 18-24 years), as they have additional obligations such as kids and full time jobs, in addition to returning to college to obtain a higher degree (Spainer, 2001)

Institutions of higher learning are faced with a daunting task of engaging the non-traditional learner. In recent years, student engagement has been deemed highly critical to student success (Atnafu, 2012). In light of the many responsibilities the non-traditional learner has, it is difficult to ensure that they are consistently motivated. Lack of motivation, which negatively impacts student engagement, has been found to be a paramount cause of student attrition (Wyatt, 2011). Research therefore justified the importance of creating learning communities on college campuses, in an effort to attract, motivate, and engage its non-traditional learner, in particular. In doing this, these students are able to adjust more smoothly to their new learning, and social environments.

Mahmud, Amat, Rahman and Ishak (2010), conducted a qualitative study which examined the experiences faced by non-traditional students which negatively impacted their adjustment within international institutions of higher learning. The study's participants included 30 international students who studied at public funded universities. Data were obtained through the use of six focus groups (each consisting of five to six students). The participants were natives of South East Asia, Africa, China, and the

Middle East. The study revealed three major elements of culture that negatively impacted students' learning and adjustment: (a) language, (b) values, and (c) food. Mahmud, Amat, Rahman and Ishak (2010) defended that ensuring successful adjustment to any institution is not only the responsibility of the institution, but the student as well. Bamber and Tett 2000) suggested that an institution of higher learning ensure that the [non-traditional] students are supported through the establishment of systems and policies that facilitate students' transition. Bamber and Tett ((2000) also purported that students should apply coping strategies in an effort to help themselves adjust to their new learning environment, specifically to the demands of college life. It is at this point that the transitional process of the student begins to unfold.

Method

Study Setting

The Commonwealth of The Bahamas is an archipelago of 700 plus islands and cays. Located north of the Caribbean, this country has an ongoing tradition of providing financial opportunities for its citizens to study abroad, particularly in the United States of America. The Bahamas' Ministry of Education is responsible for the educational system within the country. There are 247 schools in The Bahamas (159 public schools, 88 private schools). The College of The Bahamas is the country's flagship for higher education. Additionally, there is one community college, The Bahamas Baptist Community College, also located on the island of New Providence. Several American universities have campuses established on the island of New Providence, and offer degree programs to Bahamians. Such institutions include Omega College, Nova Southeastern University, University of Miami, Kent State University, Barry University, and Sojourner-Douglas College. Through organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS), and the Inter-Development Bank, the Bahamas' Ministry of Education has offered numerous scholarships for the pursuit of undergraduate and graduate studies in a myriad of fields. This tradition has been ongoing for centuries. Whether as a non-traditional adult learner, or a recent graduate from high school, Bahamian students have sought to enhance their academic and professional skills in the United States, as in some cases, desired programs of study are not available in their homeland.

Study Design and Data Collection

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design. Data were collected through the use of semi- structured interviews, from 10 Bahamian participants throughout the island of New Providence in The Bahamas. The interview questions were delineated by the researcher. The interviews were conducted in person, and recorded. Immediately following each interview, the audio data were transcribed. Analysis of the data were carried out through the process of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 2010), in an effort to establish themes and major concepts. The recurring themes retrieved from the data were used to construct a table of the major themes, as well as subthemes. This process facilitated a more profound understanding of the phenomenon being studied. In an effort to ensure validity and reliability, the data were peer reviewed to ensure that the themes

were in alignment with the research questions. The research questions that guided the research were (a) What is the lived experience of Caribbean students as adult learners while pursuing higher education in the United States? (b) What are some possible factors that affect the success of Caribbean students as adult learners in their pursuit of higher education in the United States? (c) How do Caribbean students as adult learners in pursuit of higher education in the United States describe sociocultural factors as an influence and/or impediment on educational success? (d) How would Caribbean students describe transforming as a learner after pursuing higher education in the USA? (e) What are the perceptions of Caribbean students regarding returning home after pursuing a higher education in the U.S.?

Participants

The method of convenience sampling was used to select participants, as this was better suited, considering the easy access to participants (Andrews & Frankel, 2010). A group of teachers ($n=10$), all of which met the inclusion criteria, was selected to participate in this study. To meet the inclusion criteria, all participants had to have studied in the United States for at least two years, having returned home (The Bahamas) within the past three years. All of the participants were notified of their rights, as they pertained to the Institutional Review Board.

Findings

There were 10 participants interviewed for this study, eight females (80%) and two males (20%). The participants' highest levels of education varied between Bachelor's Degree and Master's Degree. There were seven participants whose highest level of education was a Master's Degree (70%), and three participants (30%) whose highest level of education was a Bachelor's Degree. Number of years of study in the United States ranged from 3 to 10 years.

Challenges

This study's findings revealed that pursuing a higher education in a foreign country can wreak havoc on one's emotions, when trying to adapt to customs and lifestyles different from your own. In a few instances, however, participants of this study expressed that their intrinsic motivation to continue in their studies was stronger, because they enjoyed their area of study. One of the female participants stated, *Despite the challenges I faced upon attending university in the US, I continued to the end of my program, because I enjoy what I do (nursing).* Another female participant stated, *I was still able to find joy in my experience, regardless of my struggles, because of the passion I have for my career.* This defends the research that posited intrinsic motivation as critical in the adult learning process. According to Atnafu (2012), learners are more likely to pursue a task if they are actively engaged. Engagement, as argued by Atnafu (2012), enhances one's level of intrinsic motivation, and lengthens the amount of time that an individual will choose to participate in any given task.

The data obtained through this study showed that the Bahamian students who studied in the United States, were plagued with several challenges, most of which they all shared. Such challenges included (a) financial restrictions, (b) lack of social support, and (c) adapting to diverse cultures and ethnicities. In an effort to better facilitate their assimilation into a new academic and social culture these participants indicated the significance of implementing various coping strategies. One of the male participants recalled that after he had become a member of football team, it was easier for him to fit in with the American students with whom he often had to interact. He found that this strategy (joining a team) made him feel more comfortable making friends with persons who were different from him, as they would now have something in common. A female participant mentioned that her coping strategy for fitting in, and making new friends within her university, was to join the university's choir. These individuals found that the key to fitting in was simply to be sociable with the colleagues around them, in an atmosphere that was comfortable and relaxed. Researchers defended the strategy of socializing as an effective way of learning more about the people with whom we interact on a daily basis (Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005).

Finances. An important part of studying abroad is the financial aspect. Relocating to a foreign country is expensive, and as several of the study's participants stated, this was cause for discouragement as they engaged in their studies. One of the participants who was forced to take her three-year old daughter along with her while she completed her Master's degree in the U.S., found that it was extremely difficult finding funds for housing, transportation, food, and text materials. Being a working mom in her native home, she mentioned that she had to save for three years in an effort to have enough money to satisfy her tuition costs for an American university. The disadvantage of being a non-traditional student, as experienced by 70% of the study's participants (1 male, 6 females), is the difficulty in obtaining a full scholarship to pursue a higher education. According to one of the participants, younger students have a greater probability of securing a scholarship than older students.

Lack of social support. Support from family, friends, and professors was a common factor that was identified by participants as being significant to their learning process while studying overseas. Being separated from one's family leaves an individual feeling lonely. The absence of support during difficult and stressful times often resulted in periods of sadness. One participant mentioned that she felt as if she did not truly belong at the university where she studied. This sentiment was shared by other participants who also felt that without a network of individuals to lean on when situations arose, adjusting to a strange environment was extremely difficult. In contrast, as one of the male participants pointed out, having a supportive program coordinator helped him greatly through his academic journey. Another male student who was fortunate to have his brother attend the same university he attended, discussed how having his brother near him, made him feel more at peace in an unfamiliar world. One of the female participants expressed her appreciation for the ways in which her instructors often facilitated socialization and cooperation through group assignments and class activities. She reflected on how working along with other diverse learners helped to grasped concepts

which she would not have normally grasped, had she worked alone. This is indicative of the role of faculty in promoting student fellowship, collaboration, and cooperation. This is a validation of Vygotsky's (1969) socio-cultural theory, which purported that students learn through interactions within their social environments.

Socio-cultural factors. All of the participants in this study expressed that their initial concern regarding studying in The United Sates was interacting with individuals from different cultures and beliefs, and persuasions. They feared that their personal values would be negatively influenced and even changed. However, the participants found that the key to effectively, and peacefully interacting with people from diverse backgrounds, is to respect their culture and ways of thinking. One of the female participants reflected on a situation where her roommate tried to convert her from Christianity. However, she found that through mature communication and openness with each other, her roommate realized that what she was trying to do was wrong. According to one of the participants, *No one should try to impose their beliefs on another individual. We should choose to respect one another's culture, and agree to disagree.* When asked if their personal beliefs were changed in any way, due to exposure to diversity in The United States, the participants all replied that their cultural beliefs and patterns remained just as strong as when they first relocated to The United States. Several participants shared the realities of the pressure placed upon them as an outsider:

I would not say that there was no peer pressure. As an adult, I experienced pressure while I pursued higher education. I was pressured to rethink my values, but at the end of the day, I knew that I was who I was because of how I grew up, and I maintained that belief.

Some of the other students from other countries who were studying in the U.S. questioned my religion. This was very uncomfortable for me. I never experienced this before, coming from a small country. We shared about our different faiths, and did not get upset with each other. We tried to refrain from trying to prove that each other's religion was the correct one.

I was shocked to discover that people in the United States were so open about alternative lifestyles. I ended up having a roommate that was gay, but I did not discriminate against him, and he respected my wishes.

Positive Influences

This study's findings showed that amidst the challenges associated with studying in a foreign country, there were several positive factors that contributed to the participants' successful completion of their degrees (a) support from classmates and friends, (b) intrinsic motivation, and (c) supportive faculty. Three of the participants expressed that they were inwardly motivated to continue in their quest, despite their challenges because they possessed a joy for their areas of study. This is confirmed by research, which suggested that motivation drives engagement

(Keengwe, Onchwari, & Agamba, 2014). One of the participants credited his successful completion to his academic advisor and program coordinator who were always supportive of his efforts, and made themselves available for him whenever he had questions or concerns. Research has proven that supportive instructors maximize their students' potential, and enhance students' self-concept and self-efficacy (Movahedzadeh, 2011). Another participant stated, *It was good to have a professional to talk to, and to share my concerns with. They did not only listen to me, but thought of ways to bring about a resolution to my issue.*

Transformation

Data from this study indicated that the participants, upon returning home from studying in the United States, were more knowledgeable than they were when they first began their degree programs. One participant found himself to be more skillful than he was prior to completing his higher education, and other participants described themselves as being less naïve regarding the cultures of people from other countries around the world. One of the male participants mentioned that because of his international training, he has experienced a shift in his thinking, as he views situations differently, and from a more objective perspective, now. Almost as if in shock, one student exclaimed, *I couldn't believe how out of date we (my company) are, compared to businesses in the United States.* The participants expressed concern regarding their ability to adjust to working in their home country again. It was found that after being exposed to work ethics of America, the work ethics of their country needed a change. *Everything is so slow. When I worked in The States, people (employees) were held accountable, and efficiency was demanded. Here, it's just, anything goes.*

One barrier to the efforts of the transformed adult scholar is the nonchalance exuded by colleagues who have not achieved the level of training and competence as his counterparts. With the exception of three of the participants, it was found that upon returning home, individuals experienced major adversity in attempting to change the status quo of their working environment. These seven participants found that their colleagues were not as open to change as they had anticipated. In such a case, it is incumbent for employers to use their trained employees in devising change initiatives that would eventually change the overall atmosphere of the organization in a positive way. The purpose for pursuing a higher education is to not only transform oneself but to transform the world in which we all live.

Recommendations

The most common recommendations given by the participants of this study include (a) maintaining family connections, regardless of how far away, (b) socializing more in an effort to develop new friendships and relationships among peers and faculty, (c) remaining open to the differences in others without compromising one's own beliefs. The participants emphasized the importance of collaboration and networking when operating out of one's element.

<center>**Discussion**</center>

Implications for Students Studying Abroad

The findings of this research validated the current literature on the factors impacting one's study in a foreign country. Pursuing higher education in a country other than one's native land has been found to affect a student emotionally, culturally, socially, and ultimately, academically as well. This suggests, therefore, that when considering studies within the United States, or any other country, it is imperative that the learner mentally prepare oneself for the potential changes or challenges that may negatively impact one's success. As identified by various participants, implementing particular coping strategies was useful in aiding their adjustment to a different culture. Some participants stated that being open-minded towards individuals who were of a different culture, was effective in fitting in, while simultaneously maintaining their personal cultural beliefs.

Support from family and friends was identified as one of the most significant contributors to students' academic success. This is an implication of the importance of keeping the lines of communication open with relatives and friends, even when far away. The need for social support speaks to the significance of developing positive relationships with colleagues, classmates, and more importantly professors and instructors on campus. Few of the participants acknowledged the major role their professors played in making them feel comfortable in their classes, and assisting them whenever they felt confused or uncertain about a specific concept. It was this feeling of comfort that motivated the students in continuing with their studies. As this research found, unmotivated learners are more likely to discontinue their studies, than those learners who are confident in their self-efficacy, and receive consistent support from faculty.

The effective development of relationships among learners of diverse cultures, ethnicities and beliefs strongly depended upon one's overall attitude and outlook. Looking upon the culture or beliefs of other students with disdain was found to be disadvantageous to the growth of professional friendships. Some of the participants of this study found that their personal culture and beliefs were not threatened or negatively influenced in any way by the American (or any other) students they met on campus. Participants emphasized the crucial role played by professional networking in their learning process. "Peer learning," as one student described, was an important source of extrinsic motivation for him. This study showed that the ability to successfully adjust to a new way of life was determined by one's mindset.

Another important factor to consider when studying in a country away from home is the matter of one's finances. Studying at American universities is a very costly venture, especially if one is not fortunate to have been provided with a scholarship. Financial constraints affected how many courses students could afford to take within any given semester, thereby prolonging their length of study. Limited finances also affected how often students were able to visit their home country to reunite with their families. This long absence from family adds stress to an already stressful and unfamiliar learning process. The lack of financial support, as highlighted by several participants, caused

<center>183</center>

many of their counterparts to drop out of university until they were able to financially support themselves again. This financial strain, coupled with feelings of nostalgia and loneliness, significantly hindered students' learning progress.

Professionals are faced with a myriad of mixed feelings upon returning home from studying abroad. Being more enlightened, as some participants described their transformation, removes the scales that once hindered their ability to see how obsolete and perhaps ineffective their past working environments were. This more specifically applied to the non-traditional learners who were previously a part of the workforce. Returning to one's previous place of employment after receiving more advanced training, and acquiring new skills, can leave an individual feeling despondent, as his colleagues, and perhaps employer, may not necessarily be open to suggested change initiatives. This, as some participants expressed, made their newly obtained degree seem negligible.

Implications for Institutions of Higher Learning

As supported by this study, a greater part of adjusting to a new academic environment is the initial feeling of a sense of belonging. Not feeling welcomed by their respective universities was a major concern. The campus life experienced upon a student's initial arrival should not differ from the campus life advertised by the university. Institutions must endeavor to provide genuine opportunities for students to become assimilated into their learning environment, and create a community of which students could feel a part. Faculty interactions with students are crucial to the academic success, and assimilation process of foreign students. Institutions should ensure that special programs are in place that would provide an added support for students (e.g., mentoring programs, new student associations, etc.).

Limitation of the Study

While this study is a useful resource for both traditional and non-traditional Bahamian students studying (and considering studying) in The United States of America (or anywhere outside of The Bahamas), the sample size used is rather small, and does not allow for an adequate generalization.

Conclusion

The process of transformational learning is only as successful as the learner's adjustment to his learning environment. Several factors were cited in this study, as being significant contributors to the successful learning process of the non-traditional learner pursuing higher education in a foreign country (U.S.) (a) social support from family, friends, and instructors, (b) financial support, and (c) the feeling of belonging created by the institution. It is equally important to consider the cultural diversity of colleagues and students, which could become a potentially negative influence upon one's academic progress and personal level of intrinsic motivation. Research proposed that it is critical for students to adopt coping strategies that would assist them in becoming assimilated into new and diverse environments. Transformation, as a learner, can be a daunting

experience, as one's new ideas, skills and training may be faced with opposition upon returning home. Being exposed to newfangled techniques, strategies, and skills, are not often met with enthusiasm from others less trained or exposed. This speaks to the need for organizations to provide consistent levels of professional development for its staff, in an effort to provide all employees with equal opportunities for professional training and advancement. This study serves as a basis for future research in the area of study abroad, specifically from the perspective of Bahamian students.

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