

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN THE FIRST SEMESTER AND THE SUBSEQUENT SEMESTER IN THE U.S.

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to identify differences that impact international graduate student performance in the first semester compared to the subsequent semesters. This study was a qualitative study focused on the factors associated with international graduate student academic performance between the first semester and their subsequent semesters in the U.S. For the purpose of this study, a 30-minute interview was conducted with international graduate students from the USF Tampa and Sarasota campuses. In total, 19 international graduate students were interviewed from a variety of ethnicities and from the College of Education and the College of Hospitality and Tourism Leadership. In their first semester, international graduate students were generally motivated to get a degree in the U.S., had passion to study in their academic field in the U.S., had to meet family expectations, and had government scholarship/graduate/teaching assistantship responsibilities. However, they often had problems with language, unfamiliar social environment/culture shock, homesickness, financial problems, and transportation in their first semester. The majority of international graduate students successfully dealt with the main problems (language, culture shock, and transportation); however, homesickness and financial issues were still major concerns for them. More financial support could bring more success to international graduate students. International graduate students who earned under \$20,000 reported a negative effect on their overall academic performance due to financial stressors.

Keywords: International students, graduate study, academic achievement, challenges, motivation

Many international students travel around the world and are pursuing higher education at universities outside their own countries. Research has shown that the United States (U.S.) is one of the most preferred countries for international students to pursue higher education (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). In addition, according to the Institute of International Education (IIE) *Open Doors Report* (2015), there is an increased tendency for international students to study in the U.S. While the number of international students enrolled at U.S. colleges was 572,509 in the academic year 2003/2004, it had reached 974,926 international students in the academic year 2014/2015. This was a 10% increase during the 2013-2014 academic year. Moreover, out of 974,926 international students enrolled in the academic year 2014/2015, 362,228 of them were enrolled in a graduate program (IIE, 2015). This number accounted for 37% of the total international students.

Although many international students prefer to study in the U.S., international students may encounter problems from the application process through graduation. According to Lee and Rice (2007), "students coming to the U.S. may encounter difficulties beginning

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as early as obtaining permission to pursue education” (p. 385). Living abroad is itself a challenge for many people. When adding the pressures of learning in a foreign language in the study abroad process, it becomes very difficult for international students to handle the stresses of their daily life (Greenfield, Johnston, & Williams, 1986). Therefore, although international students excel academically in their native country, the majority of them tend to have challenges or fail in their first semester of study in the U.S. (Pedersen, 1991).

Literature Review

Mamiseishvili (2012) states that “no matter how prepared international students are academically, how proficient they are in English, or how familiar they are with U.S. cultural norms, they still face unique challenges to succeed in a foreign environment away from friends, family, and familiar surroundings” (p. 2). Challenges that international students face have included social and community issues, cultural differences (Lee & Rice, 2007), language barriers (Andrade, 2006), homesickness, financial problems (Kaczmarek, Matlock, Merta, Ames, & Ross, 1994), and a new educational system (Hellstén & Prescott, 2004), which are some of the most important challenges. These are some of the many factors that international students face in their pursuit of higher education in the U.S. Therefore, academic failure and/or a performance gap for international students can be attributed to many of these factors.

The majority of the literature based on international students is focused on adjustment issues (Andrade, 2006; Poyrazli, Arbona, Bullington, & Pisecco, 2001; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), culture (Lee & Rice, 2007; Olaniran, 1996; Zimmermann, 1995), coping styles and strategies (Bailey & Dua, 1999; Moore & Constantine, 2005), engagement in educational practices (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005), and social interactions (Leask, 2009; Trice, 2004). Also, there is much research on international students’ academic achievement and the difficulties that international students encounter during their studies. Most of these researchers have focused on the relationship between English language proficiency and students’ academic achievement (Andrade, 2006, 2009; Stoyhoff, 1997). However, the question of whether international student performance improves over time or not (from the first semester in U.S. to subsequent semesters) and what impacts them during this period has not been studied. There has been a lack of research on whether there was an academic performance difference between the first semester and subsequent semesters of international graduate students. The purpose of this study was to identify differences that impact international graduate student performance in the first semester compared to the subsequent semesters. Therefore, this study addressed the gap in the literature and provided a small examination of differences that impact international graduate student performance.

Research Goals

The research objectives of this study were: to determine the factors of academic performance between the first and subsequent semesters of international graduate students, to determine whether or not concerns listed by international graduate students

affect the performance of international graduate students between their first and subsequent semesters, and to determine if there was an academic improvement between the first and subsequent semesters for international graduate students.

Methods

This study was a qualitative inquiry, focused on the factors associated with international graduate student academic performance between the first semester and their subsequent semesters in the U.S. After intensive research on international student factors related to academic performance, interview questions were prepared for the international graduate students. The interview questions were pre-tested with some international graduate students who had been in the U.S. before and, according to their feedback from the interview; the questions were re-worded and/or refined. The 30-minute interview was given to international graduate students from the University of South Florida (USF) Tampa campus and the USF Sarasota campus where there were 9,550 graduate students, 2,100 international students, and more than 150 countries represented. In total, 19 international graduate students were interviewed. Since international graduate students' academic performance between the first semester and their subsequent semesters in the U.S. was the aim of the research, only international graduate students who had been in their degree programs for at least two semesters were interviewed. All the interviews were transcribed and interpreted.

Limitations

Among the limitations of this study was the sample size, which was small; hence, larger studies might confirm these results. In addition, the results of this study may not be generalized beyond the represented countries. Furthermore, the results of this study may not be generalized beyond the international graduate students from USF. Another limitation was that the sample size of this study did not include any international graduate students who lived on-campus; thus, the results may not be generalized beyond them. In addition, students who were self-funded while enrolled at the university were not equally represented.

Findings

Of the 19 interviewees, three students were from Saudi Arabia, one student was Albanian, two students were Chinese, one student was Indian, one student was Lebanese, one student was Palestinian, one student was Syrian, eight students were Turkish, and one student was Vietnamese. All of the participants in this study were living off-campus. Seven students were female and 12 students were male. Eight were 23-27 years old, seven of them were 28-32 years old, two were 33-37 years old, one was 38-42 years old and one was over 48 years. Six of the international graduate students interviewed had not been to the U.S. prior to their graduate degree program, seven had been in the U.S. only a year, four spent two years prior to their graduate degree program, one spent seven years, and one spent 18 years in the U.S. prior to the graduate degree program. Of the participants, six students were pursuing their master's degree programs and 13 their

doctoral degree programs. Graduate degree programs of the studied sample included Hospitality Management ($n = 7$), Adult Education ($n = 4$), Special Education ($n = 3$), Instructional Technology ($n = 2$), TESOL ($n = 2$), and Early Childhood Education ($n = 1$).

Of the participants, eight had an income of \$19,999 or less, eight, an income of \$20,000-\$39,000, and three an income of \$40,000-59,999. Regarding sources of income, three students were self-funded, eight had a scholarship from their government, and eight were funded through their graduate teaching assistantship. According to IIE (2015), among the international students 63.6% were personal (self) and family funded, 20.9% are U.S. college or university funded (graduate or teaching assistantship), and 7.7% foreign government or university funded. All other sources of funding (subsequent employment, foreign private sponsor, U.S. government, U.S. private sponsor, international organization and other sources) accounted for 7.9% in the academic year 2014/2015. As a result, three primary sources of funding for international students were represented in the study sample.

In their first semester, international graduate students are mostly motivated by (a) having a graduate degree from the U.S., (b) passion and intrinsic motivation to study their academic field in the U.S., (c) family expectations, (d) government scholarship/graduate/teaching assistantship responsibilities and accountability, and (e) academic expenses. On the other hand, in their first semester in the U.S., the obstacles/challenges international graduate students typically had during their first semester in the U.S. were: (a) language barriers, (b) unfamiliar social environment/culture shock, (c) homesickness, (d) financial problems, and (e) transportation.

The majority of the international graduate students ($n = 11$) did not have the same problems in their subsequent semesters as their first semester. They fixed these problems by (a) developing better fluency in English through hard work and a writing center, (b) having more native friends to help assist them in overcoming cultural shock and embracing cultural assimilation, and (c) buying a car or carpooling to alleviate transportation issues. Three students handled some of the problems, but they were still suffering from financial problems and homesickness. However, five international graduate students reported that they had the same obstacles/challenges in their subsequent semesters.

Although the majority of the interviewees ($n = 15$) had either a neighbor or roommate from their native country, more than half of them ($n = 8$) thought that having people from their country that they could associate with did not affect their academic performance. The main reasons for having neighbors from their country that they could associate with did not affect their academic performance were high self-esteem and intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, other international graduate students reported that they felt more comfortable, safer, emotionally better, more secure in their ability to help each other in classes, familiar with the environment, and they solved transportation issues by carpooling when they had a neighbor or roommate from their native country. Therefore,

they believed that having people from their country with whom they could associate affected their academic performance.

Except for two respondents, there was an overall improvement in academic performance among international graduate students between their first and subsequent semesters. The reasons for this were (a) getting comfortable with environment/social environment (friendship, culture, and food) and embracing cultural assimilation, (b) familiarity with the American higher education system including the teaching styles and assignments, and (c) developing better fluency while speaking English during their studies prior to their subsequent semesters. Two respondents reported that there was no change in their academic performance. When asked about the reason, both mentioned that they had a degree from a similar education system back in their home country.

Although the main three factors that influenced the overall academic performance of international graduate students were (a) language, (b) culture, and (c) financial problems, in regards to the GPAs of international graduate students in this study who were interviewed, five students said that there was no change in their GPAs, and the remaining ($n = 14$) said that their GPAs improved from their first semester to their subsequent semesters. In other words, none of the international graduate students reported struggling in their academic performance.

Conclusions

To summarize, international graduate students who spent at least two years in the U.S. before beginning their graduate degree reported better English language skills than those who began their degree programs with less time in the U.S. International graduate students who lived in the U.S. one year identified English language barriers, unfamiliar social environment, and cultural issues as their main obstacles. However, international graduate students who had not lived in the U.S. before entry into their graduate degree programs also mentioned language barriers and unfamiliar social environment as obstacles; in addition, culture shock and financial issues were problems. Therefore, spending at least two years before their graduate degree program in the U.S. might increase chances for academic success to international graduate students since many of these problems could be eliminated within a two-year period.

Moreover, from the first semester to subsequent semesters, international graduate students successfully dealt with the main problems (language barriers, culture shock, and transportation); however, homesickness and financial issues were still major concerns. In addition, more financial support could bring more success to international graduate students. International graduate students who earned under \$20,000 reported a negative effect on their overall academic performance due to financial stressors, while those who earned \$20,000 or more did not report a negative academic performance effect due to financial strain. Due to the limitations of this study, it was difficult to report a relationship between demographics (i.e., gender, age, cultural background), except for income and international graduate student academic performance.

Lastly, the international graduate students in this study reported obstacles that were consistent with results reported in the literature review. Major problems that were reported in this study were cultural differences/culture shock, language barriers, and financial problems.

Implications

- Most of the studies related to international student problems had reported language barriers similar to this study. However, this problem may be eliminated by an extended period time spent in U.S. prior to graduate studies.
- For best academic performance, financial aid allotted to international graduate students should exceed \$20,000 per year. In this way, it may eliminate most of the financial stressors from the academic performance of international graduate students.
- Transportation was an issue because of the lack of a comprehensive transportation system in Florida. This problem may or may not be a problem in other cities or states.

Further Study

When considering further study regarding international graduate students, this study may be replicated according to the country's economic or human development index such as that developed by the United Nations Development Programme (n.d.). In addition, this study may be replicated using larger cities in the U.S. due to a higher volume of international people, ease of transportation, and better financial opportunities. Another option could be to select locations that might be top U.S. cities for states hosting international graduate students. These top U.S. institutions might be a good option as a context to conduct additional research. This study could be replicated for students who live on campus or for comparison between on-campus and off-campus students. If the top places of origin of international graduate students were added as a future variable to study, it might provide a clearer picture of the impact of cultural differences. Furthermore, quantitative or mixed methods might be applied to collect more data.

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