

Graduate Students Perceptions of Success in United States Colleges

Mousa S. Alfaifi

College of Education, King Saud University, Riyadh, KSA

Heba AbuZayyad-Nuseibeh

College of Education, University of South Florida, Tampa, USA

Nadia Awaida

College of Education, University of Balmad Dubai, Dubai, UAE

Wayne W. James

College of Education, University of South Florida, Tampa, USA

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate Saudi students' behaviors at higher education institutions in the US, by clarifying the reasons behind their retentions and the reasons for their dropout (leaving the school), in order to limit the increase in this issue. Data were collected through three focus groups. The participants in this study were 15 graduate students studying in the United States. The method used to prepare focus group data for analyzing in this study was an abridged transcript. The analysis framework in this study was constant comparative. The findings of this study were most participants saw the definition of student success in colleges as: achieving the goals of the study, passing all courses, graduating on time, and diligence and persistence. The most frequent factors which led students to postgraduate study were: obtaining a high level of education, self-improvement, updating their income, and upgrading their job to a higher position. Some of the difficulties/problems the participants faced while enrolled at their universities included: the difficulty of some courses, time constraints, lack of experience, and tuition. These problems were mostly solved by: cooperating with other students, working with the tutoring center, asking advisers for help, and trying to get a scholarship from the government of Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: retention, student success, Saudi students, higher education.

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Introduction

Individuals need to enhance their professional and personal growth through education (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). It opens the doors to widening one's scope of understanding, which informs the need to ensure lifelong learning and success in colleges. In recent years, the number of international students in the United States has increased. According to *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)* (2012), international students are generally considered to be "students who have crossed borders expressly with the intention to study" (p. 436).

In 2005, the Government in Saudi Arabia established the King Abdullah Scholarship Program to send Saudi students to the United States to continue their education in many fields of study; such as Health Sciences, Pharmacy, Engineering, Computer Sciences, Basic Sciences, Accounting, and E-commerce. In 2018, the number of Saudi students studying abroad reached over 108,000 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2018).

Student success has an immediate influence on a student's academic self-esteem, persistence in elected majors, and perseverance in higher education (Caruth, 2018). Academic achievement can mean a number of things based on the situation in which it is being discussed. Often, grade point average (GPA) is the focus when academic achievement is researched.

According to the ACT policy report student's ability to succeed academically hinges not only on their intellectual faculties, but also on any number of outside factors (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). While some factors may affect all students equally, others only affect a minority group. Success in college is often based on a combination of factors, including family support, academic preparedness, life skills and decision-making abilities of the student.

According to the Saudi government data, over 200,000 students and dependents took advantage of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program to go abroad in 2014, at the cost of around 22.5 billion riyals (\$6 billion U.S.). The scholarship typically covers full academic tuition, medical coverage, a monthly stipend, and round-trip airfare for both scholars and dependents.

In an effort to understand and reduce the high percentage of graduate student dropout and transfer from one University to another, this study aimed to identify the reasons behind students' behavior.

Purpose of the study

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the reasons behind students' retention and the reasons that lead them to dropout their schools, in order to better understand this issue. In this study, the success in United States colleges is defined as students who do not leave their schools until they have graduated. Hence, the main question in this study is: What are the factors that make graduate students successful in United States colleges?

Focus groups would expand on the information gathered in the surveys and engage members to participate in a dynamic conversation about graduate students' perception of success

in United States colleges. The researchers extrapolated information, provided analysis, and created a more in-depth evaluation.

Literature Review

According to Aulck, Velagapudi, Blumenstock, and West (2016), about 30% of first-year students at US baccalaureate institutions, each year, do not return for their second year, and over \$9 billion is spent on educating them. In their study, they describe the initial efforts to model student dropout using the largest known dataset on higher education attrition, which tracks student demographics and transcript records of over 32,500 students at one of the nation's largest public universities.

The study shows the preliminary results for predicting student attrition from a large, heterogeneous dataset of student demographics and transcript records. Predicting eventual student attrition provided promising outcomes from a balanced dataset of over 32,500 students, with the strongest predictions being those presented by regularized logistic regression.

The study results emphasize several early indicators of student attrition, and indicate dropouts can be predicted accurately even with predictions being based solely on transcript data from a single term.

Among the strongest individual predictors of attrition, the study discussed, were:

- GPA in math, English, chemistry, and psychology courses;
- the year of enrollment; and,
- year of birth.

The results, therefore, highlight time effects in the data. Predicting the number of quarters non-completions take before dropout yielded marginal results, as predictions of about five quarters of enrollment.

They also spotlight the potential for machine learning to influence student retention and success, and point to several promising courses of future action. In addition, the authors proposed the following future steps: discussions with university administrators, improving the predictive models, and possibly even expanding the dataset to other universities and community colleges where attrition rates tend to be much higher.

The study of looked into international students' experiences in both academic and sociocultural settings of (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). The qualitative interviews conducted in this study showed that international students dealt with academic difficulties, social separation, and cultural adjustment.

The academic difficulties were more specifically comprised of communication with professors, fellow classmates, and staff. As a result, they have to confront social separation when they take part in different group activities. In addition, Culturally, they have to tackle the different approaches faced in the US. Furthermore, the study revealed that students have adopted certain

resources, most of which have been obtained from the university itself, in order to overcome these obstacles.

Consequently, this study showed that university faculty and staff having a better grasp of international students' academic challenges can help in recognizing their needs and more effectively offering support through campus resources and services. The university has to not only deal with the students' academic difficulties, but also be prepared to meet them socially and culturally.

The study also proposed that the university must make some preparations that will fully welcome international students from their moment of arrival. As well, as proposing several recommendations for higher education institutions in the US, such as:

1. Provide international students with a program to support their English language proficiency. Language barriers can impact the academic process, including their learning, participation in different activities, and cultural awareness. Therefore, universities could host workshops wherein international students can become more familiar with colloquial English, used slang language, and the social and cultural customs and conventions of US society, thus enabling them to better communicate both in academic and nonacademic environments.

2. Domestic students and faculty should acknowledge the value of embracing international students and appreciating each other's' diversity. For instant, holding orientation programs to learn from international students. Faculty should bear in mind the equivalent access and learning opportunities for all students. Domestic students should also develop inter-cultural competence to better interact with international students. For example, training could be provided for staff who will be working with international students.

3. International students require guidance for success in their academic learning, and support for their psychological stress. Therefore, tutoring and counseling should be made available.

4. Offer international students a special orientation program that covers US culture and overall academic culture. Efforts towards this goal could include seminars by professionals, international students sharing their own experience of studying in the US, and founding of organizations where ties of friendship can be developed with local people.

The study of Caruth (2018) was an archival quantitative, data mining research study which used data from the Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) of the National Center for Education Statistics. The purpose of this study was to analyze the academic success of current college students, by examining if students are actually graduating from college. This study pinpoints the numbers of students graduating during the years 2009 to 2014, based on the information available from public, private, and for-profit 2-year and 4-year universities in the United States.

The findings indicated in the years 2009-2014 it was the for-profit 2-year and 4-year academic institutions which displayed the greatest increase and the numbers of students graduating. In spite of student retention being scrutinized for nearly 50 years, the fact remains that in over two decades, college graduation and persistence rates have not increased. Moreover, time to degree rates indicate it is taking longer to earn degrees.

As a result, a significant amount of individual and financial expense is needed to earn a college degree. It is the responsibility of higher education to the society it serves to make postsecondary education a successful experience for students, and to ascertain whether or not colleges and universities are meeting the students' learning needs (Caruth, 2018).

In their study Li, Chen, and Duanmu (2010) examined the learning experience of international students by examining the differences between Chinese and non-Chinese cultural groups and identified the top predictors of academic achievement through multiple regression analysis. More and more international students are traveling to well-developed countries for their higher education, resulting in an increased interest in investigating the factors which influence their academic performance while pursuing their overseas studies.

The results of Li et al. study indicate that the following are the most important predictors for all international students:

- the perceived value of learning success to their families,
- their English writing ability, and
- social communication with their fellow countrymen and women.

As the predominant group, Chinese students exhibit some distinctive features. A less active learning strategy is found among the Chinese compared to other nationalities. However, there is no evidence this has any negative effect on their academic achievement (Li et al, 2010).

In addition, the study of Msengi (2007) aimed to identify the sources of stress on 220 international students studying at a comprehensive Midwestern university, to explore its effects on their health behaviors and academic performance, and to discover the coping strategies they used to manage stress.

The study was a cross-sectional descriptive design, using a quantitative method. Two hundred and twenty international students who enrolled at the university during the Summer and Fall of 2003 took part in this study. Data were gathered using the Sources of Stress, Health Behaviors and Academic Performance Scale for international students. The statistical procedure for data analysis included *t* test, ANOVA, chi-square, and bivariate correlation.

The results found the stress experienced by international students stemmed from:

- alienation/discrimination,
- communication/language difficulties,
- homesickness/loneliness,
- financial hardships, and
- academic pressure.

The most commonly reported best stress coping strategies were: forming friendships, dating U.S. students, and practicing religion. There were significant differences in the level of stress experienced based on gender. Overall, male students reported less stress than their female counterparts.

Academically speaking, international students performed well overall, with a mean GPA of 3.4. The overall health behavior was good among international students. A motivational role of stress was described by international students with regards to academic performance and health behaviors.

Msengi (2007), revealed that orientation programs and cultural competency training for faculty, staff, and students would “increase interaction and understanding among the university community” (p. 1). This facilitates the acculturation process for international students.

Higher Education in Saudi Arabia

According to Albabtin (1997) higher education means all types of education which come after secondary school, such as higher institutions; university colleges; and professional training centers which create national cadres needed for training teachers, engineers, doctors, and a variety of other occupations. Alhoqeel (1994) found there was a strong relation between higher education and the welfare of nations. In other words, higher education is the main source of creating higher skills for human factors as the major element of progress and development throughout the world.

The aim of higher education is to contribute to the development of society, in order to achieve more advanced civilizations. It may be perceived that higher education graduated specialists or professionals can contribute to the development of a country (Albahashi, 2004). Moreover, it provides the educational sector with plans and foundations to drive society in various humanitarian and urban directions. Graduate scientists and researchers can contribute to sciences and progress in both community and humanitarian service to the country (Aldawood,1995).

According to the Ministry of Higher Education (1994) higher education means: "All types of education that follow secondary education, or equivalent, and provided vocational training centers, higher institutes, colleges and universities" (p. 34). The late King Abdullah believed education to be critical to the development of the country. During his 10 years' reign, the number of universities increased from 8 to 35 (Alamri, 2011). Higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has witnessed special attention due to the country's vision toward providing the best level of education, and as a result of the increasing social demand for this type of education.

As stated by Nofal (1999) study in this kind of education is based on the cognitive side only, and the basic role of the university is scientific knowledge. Nofal believes a university where study and research are performed is the most honest, full of value, and the best place to obtain this knowledge.

The post-secondary system of education in Saudi Arabia leads to a specific degree, similar to the educational system of the United States. The patterns and procedures of these educational systems have been adopted in accordance with Islamic systems, traditions, and customs (Abdulateef, 1997). According to Alghamdi (2002), the Higher Education Council is the supreme authority for post-secondary education affairs, with the specific task of supervising and coordinating its institutions--with the sole exception of military education. The main aim of this Council is to manage and monitor the process of education in universities according to policy and to supervise the progress of education in universities regarding all sectors. It also coordinates the

different universities in the field of scientific degrees and departments, in addition to supporting research (Alghamdi, 2002).

Methods

Sample

Participants in the focus groups, the students, had to meet the following criteria:

1. Studying at a university in the United States
2. Graduate level student
3. Country of origin is Saudi Arabia
4. Enrolled in at least one course in the 2016 Spring semester.
5. Received the King Abdullah scholarship.

The number of participants for this study was 15 graduate Saudi students, in which nine were males and seven were females, all enrolled in the graduate level courses. The strategy for selecting participants for this study was nomination. The researcher requested graduate students in United States universities to find any who wished to participate in the study, and some were then nominated to take part.

Focus Group Questions

The focus groups participants were asked the following questions:

- Could you please state your name, age, and how long you have been studying as a graduate student?
- Looking at your University experience, do you see yourself as a successful student? Could you explain what success in college means?
- Can you please describe your decision to begin your postsecondary education? And have you ever left a University before? If so, why?
- Have you ever encountered difficulties/problems while enrolled at University? If so, how did you overcome them? Did the problems make you consider dropping your classes?
- How do you see the courses that are offered? (Match with ability and interest)?
- Is there anything else you think is important for us to know regarding graduate students seeking degrees and college retention in the United States that was not covered today?

Data Collection

In order to collect the data for this study, a recording device was used to capture the focus group meetings, to make sure no information was missed. Ethical research was the essential element in the focus groups; therefore, permission was obtained from all participants.

There were three focus groups. The groups were conducted on January 7th, 19th, and February 2nd of 2016. The meetings were scheduled for 40 minutes, including food and drinks. Focus group participants were asked to first talk about what success in college meant to them, then give their reasons for beginning postgraduate education, and any difficulties/problems faced while enrolled at the University.

Data Analysis

The method to prepare the focus group data for analysis used an abridged transcript. According to Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, and Gorenc (2009) this includes listening to an audio recording of each focus group, and identifying the abridged transcript of the relevant and useful portions of the discussion. The analysis framework in this study was constant comparative, since the main objective was to identify patterns in the data and determine the relationships among ideas or concepts (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). The key task was comparing one segment of data with another to identify similarities and differences. In this case, the data were grouped together based common themes. Next, these patterns were arranged by their relationship to each other.

The data were analyzed using a classic approach, which includes breaking the job down into doable portions. This method of analysis helps make it a visual and concrete process. The researchers focused on identifying themes and categorizing the results. At the end of the analysis, 18 themes were identified. Several methods were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the results; such as working with classmates to conduct a pilot-testing of the questions to ensure that they were understood, listening to the participants' comments to modify any weakness in the questions, and listening carefully and observing their answers

Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine the reasons behind students retention and the reasons that lead them to dropout their schools. Based on the questioning and the frequent areas discussed during the focus group, the following themes were identified by most of the focus groups participants:

Success in college. There are different meanings of success in college among the participants; such as achieving the goals of degree program, passing all courses, graduating on time, implementing the objectives of the learning, and being diligent and persistent. One of the participants shared “Success is having a goal and achieving it, and in my current time of life, success to me is attaining the Ph.D. degree. When I get the Ph.D., that would mean that I have achieved the first goal and my first success”.

Another added “The Saudi student should maintain his academic success by following the academic plan throughout his studying period”. In addition, another participant said “The continuous follow-up from the Saudi scholarship committee, makes us the students more careful to keep up the hard work and to show the vest academic progress”, Another added “The Saudi scholarship committee does not allow for low grades and failure, students should be really hard workers and maintain academic success”.

Postgraduate education. The most frequent factors which led interviewees to begin postgraduate education were: obtaining a high level of education including knowledge and information about a particular subject; improving themselves in various aspects such as life, thinking, and culture; updating their income, upgrading their job to a higher position; and helping their families get a good education.

One of the participants mentioned, “Factors that contribute to success are optimism,

persistence, hard work, and having a specific goal". Another added "The Saudi that has a degree from the U.S will get a better income, which motivates us to stay distinct", another participant shared "The current hard work will payoff upon our return to our country, a better living is awaiting us, one can give a better life to his family as well, be able to pay for improved education systems to his kids", in addition, a participant added "Studying is part of our lives, once one is committed to his academic life and studying, this reflects directly on the other sides of his life, such as his career and development"

Difficulties/problems. The participants faced several difficulties and problems while enrolled at a university: the difficulty of some courses; insufficient time for studying and performing assignments, especially students who work part-time jobs; lack of experience in some skills such as research methods, statistical methods, and time management. Another difficulty was paying graduate school tuition.

One participant added, "The importance of education is to expand knowledge and build an intelligent society. As for life, it ensures a better level of living, for example, better salaries and better jobs". Another added, "Peers are important for students in that they share the same problems and try to help each other". Also, another participant shared

"Using another language in the courses and assignment is challenging, especially at the beginning of the academic process, which requires the students to work even harder to obtain higher results".

Dealing with difficulties and problems. Students can take control or solve these difficulties / problems through ways such as: cooperating with other students, working with the tutoring center, asking advisers for help, and attempting to win a scholarship from United States universities.

One of the participants explained that "The educational level and work position of parents play a significant role in student decisions to complete their degree, as educated parents usually provide advice while the final decision is down to the student." Another said, "Universities neither give the student enough time to pay their tuition nor provide sufficient financial support to help the study toward a better level of achievement. Another added "I will take class notes from any student as one of many forms of cooperation among students. Thanks to us helping each other, the school is a united community".

One participant offered a statement that "When a professor shows respect for the student, the student absolutely feels the desire to complete his degree". Moreover, other participant shared "Persistence usually comes from within a person. Certain events and circumstances could lead a person to seek opportunities for a better life". Also, one of the participants shared "Communication with professors both in class and office hours improves the relationship between them and their students. Therefore, this could affect their achievement and grades, since the professor would be more familiar with the level of the student".

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, there are several recommendations for future research:

- This study investigated graduate students perception of success in United States colleges. Similar studies should be conducted with students from other countries.

- This study focused on graduate students. Similar studies could be conducted with undergraduate students and the results compared with those for graduate students.
- This study relied on a small sample of graduate students in the United States from different institutions. A larger sample or sample from another university might offer different student perceptions.
- This study did not include any demographic variables. A similar study could be conducted adding demographic variables such as gender; marital status; and the number of semesters the student has been enrolled at university.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to clarify the reasons behind students' retention and the reasons that lead them to leave their schools in order to limit the increase in this issue. The questioning route comprises seven questions including opening, introduction, transition, key, and ending questions. The data were gathered based on 15 graduate students in the United States. These graduate students are generally positive about their perception of success in United States colleges. All participants in this study strongly agreed that success is important and that it has several different meanings among students. Participants also agreed that there are some difficulties and problems that face graduate students and impact their success in college. The results in this study show that the university's system and students' advisors influence student success in United States colleges.

Implications

This study contributes to possible improvements to the educational system in Saudi Arabia. It also may help Saudi students to be successful when they travel abroad to perceive their higher education degrees. The Saudi Ministry of Education can also benefit from this study by improving the external scholarship system and by looking at the obstacles students face while enrolled in universities abroad.

About the Authors:

Dr. Mousa Alfaifi is an Assistant Professor of Adult and Continuing Education at King Saud University. He earned Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Adult Education from University of South Florida. He got his Master's degree in Curricula and Teaching Methods from Al-Imam University. He obtained his Master's degree in Adult and Continuing Education from King Saud University. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4021-2038>

Dr. Heba AbuZayyad-Nuseibeh, earned her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instructions with emphasis in Adult Education from the University of South Florida. Heba has over 15 years in teaching experience in both blended learning methods and face-to-face. Heba, is a strong advocate in integrating technology into learning and teaching. Her research interest is in Distance Education and intercultural studies <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2282-4479>

Dr. Nadia Awaida earned her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction with emphasis in Adult and Higher Education from the University of South Florida. She is an Assistant Professor of Education and the Teaching Diploma Coordinator at the University of Balamand Dubai. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0365-1901>

Dr. Wayne James is a professor of Adult Education at University of South Florida. Active in the field of Adult Education for over 50 years. Her research interest adult development and learning, learning styles, history of the field of Adult Education, and global competence. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5057-3216>

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