

## International Students on U.S. College Campuses: Building Up or Tearing Down Cultural Walls?

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### Abstract

This study uses qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the intercultural sensitivity (IS) of international students at an American university—specifically, whether international students' IS improved over the course of a semester on campus. The findings indicate that the participants did not, on average, achieve progress in their levels of IS as measured by the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) during the semester they were surveyed. Per qualitative interviews, the students came to the U.S. full of curiosity, ready to explore the country and make friends. However, they were disappointed to find “intangible walls” separating them from their American classmates. The students felt isolated and disconnected from the domestic student body and described their struggle to connect with American students. Lacking opportunities to engage in deep personal conversations with peers from different backgrounds and cultures, the international students, on average, did not improve their levels of IS and described an unsatisfying experience studying on an American college campus.

*Keywords:* higher education, international students, intercultural sensitivity

### Introduction

In a post-truth world that has witnessed a remarkable increase in hate speech, racial discrimination, political polarization, and intolerance of cultural and human differences, there is an urgent need to improve students' abilities to reconcile such differences. One of the efforts made by universities to fulfill this need is the internationalization of students' higher education experiences

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by encouraging American students to study abroad and recruiting international students to study at U.S. universities (Bloom & Miranda, 2015). This project adds to the discussion of interculturalism by investigating this construct from the perspective of international, degree-seeking students who are in the US temporarily for the purpose of earning a college degree. *How do these students experience their study in American colleges and universities? Do they experience an increase in IS during their time in the United States?* This study addresses the question of whether international students studying at a university in the northeast United States increased their levels of IS as a result of their experience on an American campus.

## **Literature Review**

### **International Students in the United States**

Colleges and universities have been forced to adapt to a new financial reality as a result of neoliberal economic policies (i.e. the focus on capitalism, the spread and expansion of markets, less regulation, and greater corporate autonomy) sweeping the globe over the past 30 years and associated decreases in federal funding for higher education (Altbach, 2013). As universities have been forced to re-think how they operate and consider alternative sources of funding, one such adaptation has made internationalization a strategic priority. Traditional internationalization includes activities such as study abroad programs for domestic students, faculty and scholar exchange programs, recruiting international students, the establishment of area studies programs, curricular enrichment and improving foreign language programs (Altbach & Knight, 2007). International student recruitment has subsequently become a major aspect of many universities today, and these efforts have been fruitful. According to 2019 data from the International Institute of Education's annual Open Doors report, the number of international students studying at American colleges and universities reached the highest it has ever been in the 2018-19 academic year—over one million for the fourth year in a row (IIE, 2019). Yet, as international students flood U.S. campuses, universities are finding that many struggle with the transition into a different educational system (Andrade & Evans, 2015), faculty are often unclear about their roles and

responsibilities regarding this new population (Zamel, 2004; Starfield, 2014), and domestic students are not always welcoming (Gareis, 2012; Marginson & Sawir, 2011).

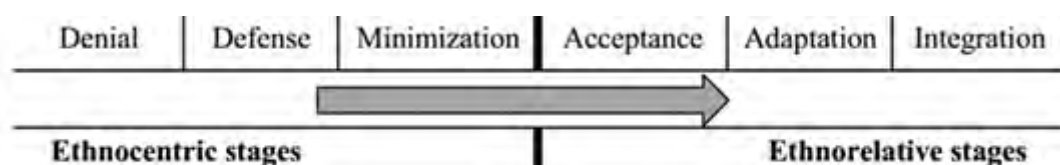
### Intercultural Sensitivity

The challenge with the construct of intercultural sensitivity is that there are many different definitions and terms that refer to the same concept. In order to obtain high construct validity for any study, it is advised to clearly define the construct at the beginning of the study and make sure that the measurement of the construct remains in line with its definition (Shadish et al., 2002). In this study, we use Hammer et al.'s (2003) definition of the construct because it is a measurable one. To explain, Hammer et. al developed a model and a measurement tool to assess IS as they define it. We believe that using a measurement tool that is based on this construct definition will lead to a higher degree of construct validity. Therefore, to conduct this study we use Hammer et al. definitions and the measurement tool that sprang from it. The authors use the term *intercultural competence* to refer to "the ability to think and act in intercultural appropriate ways," while *intercultural sensitivity* is "the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences" (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 422). Related to those definitions, a model was developed, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), to elaborate on the stages of intercultural sensitivity as a personal growth process (Bennett, 1986, 2004; Bennett et al., 2004; Hammer et al., 2003).

The DMIS model is divided into two basic stages: Ethnocentrism and Ethnorelativism. Each of these stages has three phases. Figure 1 illustrates this model.

**Figure 1**

*Development Intercultural Sensitivity Model (Bennett, 2004, p. 63)*



Ethnocentrism is “the experience of one’s own culture as ‘central to reality’” (Bennett, 2004, p. 62).

Ethnocentrism is the stage where people believe that the values, behaviors, and beliefs in their primary socialization are unquestioned; they are experienced as “just the way things are” (Bennett 2004, p. 62). Bennett divides this stage into three phases: denial, defense, and minimization. The main feature of the denial phase is that one tends to deny differences between his/her culture and different cultures. The defense phase includes a tendency of defensiveness, looking down at different cultures and denying other cultures’ rights of being different. Defense is a tendency in which one believes that all other cultures should follow his/her own culture and live their lives in the same way his/her own cultures does. The final phase of the ethnocentrism stage is minimization, which is characterized by the surface recognition of cultural differences and consideration of cultures as fundamentally similar (Bennett, 2004).

The second stage of the DMIS model, as the above figure shows, is ethnorelativism, which refers to “the experience of one’s own beliefs and behaviors as just one organization of reality among many viable possibilities” (Bennett, 2004, p. 62). There are three phases in this stage as well: Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration. The first phase, acceptance, is the tendency when one accepts the fact that people are different. In this phase, an individual’s culture is recognized as one of many different cultures. The second phase is adaptation, as one takes an action based on his/her acceptance of cultural differences. In adaptation, one is able to show empathy to different cultures, and even in some cases behave according to another culture’s criteria for appropriate behavior. Perhaps the most important feature of this phase is the actual practical behavior one takes toward another culture. The difference between acceptance and adaptation is that acceptance is simply recognizing and accepting the other, while adaption goes beyond basic acceptance. Adaptation is an actual behavior that is based on this acceptance. According to Bennett (2004), “people of both dominant and non-dominant groups are equally inclined to adapt their behavior to one another” (p. 71). Finally, integration is a phase in which one becomes so intercultural that they feel that they belong to more than one culture.

### **International and Domestic Students' Intercultural Sensitivity as One Aim of Education**

According to the Delors Report, which was written for United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1996, there are four pillars of education: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. In his commentary of UNESCO's report, Byram (2008) indicates that "living together" is the most important pillar of the four "because it is the means of responding to the tensions of contemporary life, tensions between 'the global and the local,' 'the universal and the individual,' 'tradition and modernity' ..." (pp. 109–110). Coulby (2006) argues that education that does not improve students' intercultural learning is, simply, not education. He states that "if education is not intercultural, it is probably not education, but rather the inculcation of nationalist or religious fundamentalism" (p. 246). In addition, in her profound analysis of modern education, Nussbaum (1998) states that "we may continue to produce narrow citizens who have difficulty understanding people different from themselves, whose imaginations rarely venture beyond their local setting" (p. 14). She adds that, despite the depressing status quo, American educators still have a chance to fix this problem. For Nussbaum, calling for more intercultural education is not just a matter of "political correctness," it is the "cultivation of humanity." Hence, we argue that improving intercultural learning is, and should be, one of the most important aims of education. Teaching diversity and dealing openly with different cultures becomes a demand no educator can ignore. In addition, some scholars argue that interculturalism is not just a simple goal; rather, it is described as a "noble and critical" aim of education. Hammer (2012) believes that "building positive relations among cultures, breaking down walls of prejudice and racism, and fostering international goodwill are noble—and critical—goals for universities and K–12 schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (pp. 115–116). We believe that the existence of international students on U.S. college campuses is important for both American students and international students in order to achieve one of the most important aims of education—improving intercultural sensitivity. If both groups of students, American and international, find a proper environment that facilitates intercultural communication, positive interaction, productive conversation, and human

relationships, this may result in a remarkable increase in both groups' levels of mutual understanding, respect, and intercultural competence.

American universities should facilitate conversation between international students and domestic students. Huebner (1963) stresses the importance of conversation in education. For him, conversation means to be open to the other, to talk to the other, to listen to the other, to understand their background, and even to be willing to be influenced by the other. He distinguishes between conversation and communication: communication is simply the transferring and exchanging of information without taking any action based upon it. Huebner goes on to explain that conversation, meanwhile, "suggests that the recipient act on this information, or reshape it himself, and continue the dialogue at a new level" (Huebner, 1963, p. 78). In his paper, *Classroom Action* (Huebner, 1962), after highlighting the difference between conversation and talking, Huebner confirms the importance of being open to being influenced by the other during a conversation, and how this is vital for promoting coexistence with the other. Indeed, as Huebner (1963) states, "both the speaker and the listener must be disposed to speak, to listen, and to accept the responsibility and opportunity for change" (p. 78). This conversation is the way man can avoid situations of violence and conflict necessary to maintain a love of humanity. Furthermore, he argues that humanity is in real danger if conversation vanishes, as this leads to the absence of love and the promotion of hate and hateful behaviors, including ignoring, controlling, and violence. As evidence of the importance of this type of conversation, Bennett et al. (2013) conducted a case study that found when students "displayed evidence of listening attentively to one another, self-reflexive awareness of their own cultural group, and a keenness to interact with cultural others ... positive relationships that provide students with intercultural learning, and academic, emotional, and behavioral support do occur" (pp. 547-548). However, several studies indicate that this is not always the case. For example, using interviews, Leong (2015) found that international students face considerable social and academic difficulties on American campuses, and that those social difficulties increase among Chinese students compared to international students from other

countries. Lee and Rice (2007), using interviews as well, found that international students struggle with unfairness and inhospitality. Yeh and Inose (2003), using a survey, found similarly to Leong (2015) that international students from Asia, Central/Latin America, and Africa face more acculturative stress than European international students. Our study adds to this conversation about international student experiences by combining qualitative data in the form of interviews with quantitative data from the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). In addition, our study focuses on intercultural learning as an expected outcome of the existence of international students on an American university campus.

In summary, we believe that international students on U.S. college campuses provide a wonderful opportunity for both American and international students to have a Huebnerian conversation—to influence others, to be influenced by others, to learn about each other, to acknowledge differences, and to learn how to reconcile and how to live with cultural differences in acceptance, respect, understanding, and peace.

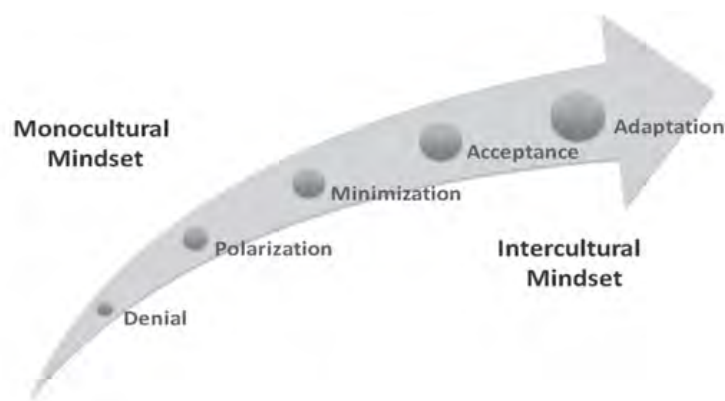
### **Measurement of Intercultural Competence**

To measure students' intercultural sensitivity, we used the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). The IDI is an online 50-item questionnaire based on the Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC), which was adapted from the DMIS discussed above. We chose to use the IDI for two reasons: first, the IDI is a theory-based tool, influenced by Bennett's DMIS. The IDI defines intercultural sensitivity as DMIS defines it, which gives it a high level of construct and face validity. Second, the validity of the IDI has been proven through extensive psychometric testing (Fantin, 2009; Greenholtz, 2003; Hammer, 1999, 2014; Hammer et al., 2003). In his review of all instruments that measure IS, Fantin (2009) describes the IDI as “a statistically reliable and valid measure of intercultural sensitivity, translated into languages and applicable to people from various cultural backgrounds” (p. 471). Additionally, the IDI is described as “a sound instrument, a satisfactory way of measuring intercultural sensitivity as defined by Bennett” (Paige et al., 2003, p. 485). The IDI has five phases of IS derived from the DMIS: Denial, Polarization, Minimization, Acceptance, and

Adaptation (see Figure 2). The IDI is a proprietary instrument, and its 50 questions are not viewable by those who are not licensed to use it. Therefore, we are, unfortunately, not able to disclose the contents of the IDI in this paper.

**Figure 2**

Intercultural Development Inventory Continuum (Hammer & Bennett, 2009, p. 119)



### Methodology

Our research efforts represent a mixed methods project. Specifically, this study poses the following research questions focusing on international students studying at an American university in the northeast United States: 1) What are the levels of intercultural sensitivity among international students at an American university at the beginning of the semester, and, on average, does intercultural sensitivity of those students improve over the course of one semester of study? 2) What experience(s) do international students have that may increase intercultural sensitivity? 3) How does the university encourage international students to engage with the greater campus community, and do such interactions impact levels of intercultural sensitivity?

To answer the first question, which investigates the change in international students' levels of IS over a semester of study on an American college campus, the IDI was administered twice- once at the beginning of the fall semester, and again at the semester's end to beginner level world language classes with both international and domestic students. The time frame of the study was one semester, which was a purposeful decision for many reasons. First, the original data from which this study's data was extracted was collected to examine the influence of world language classes on



college students' intercultural sensitivity as explained in more details in the Participants section below. Second, the semester that students were asked to complete the IDI was the students' first semester studying a world language rather than English. Third, in a study conducted by Rienties et al. (2013), international and domestic students were able to form friendships in an 11-week course of study, which is less than a traditional 16-week college semester; therefore, collecting data over the course of a single semester was deemed sufficient for the purpose of our research.

Furthermore, to develop a better understanding of students' individual IDI score changes, each student was invited to attend personal interviews to discuss their IDI scores and their experiences as international students. In addition, an employee from the university's international students resource center was interviewed to explore the college's efforts to help international students engage with the campus community; we utilize this interview to answer the third research question. The interviews conducted to supplement our research are presented in this paper through a discussion of the most important themes that emerged throughout.

### **Participants**

The study took place at a large, public university in the northeast region of the United States. The international student population at this university is small, representing only 3.0% of total student enrollment at the time of the study. Most students that attend this university are white American students (83.9%).

The IDI was administered to a group of 110 students in five different world language classes at the beginning and end of fall semester 2017; the data collected was for a separate study assessing the link between world language coursework and levels of intercultural sensitivity among American college students. While reviewing the results of the 110 willing participants, it was discovered that 13 individuals were actually undergraduate international students; thus, their IDI results were excluded from the original study. We chose to utilize the data collected from the 13 international students' IDI pretest/posttest participation in order to develop the study described in this paper, which focuses on levels of IS specifically among international students.

The 13 international student participants include seven students from China, as well as two from South Korea and one each from Vietnam, Turkey, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. None of the participants were raised in a house where English was spoken. Seven students were male and six were female. Table 1 presents the students' distribution in terms of class standing.

**Table 1**

*Students' Distribution in terms of Their Class Standing*

Class	# of students	% of participants
Senior	2	15.38%
Junior	5	38.46%
Sophomore	4	30.77%
Freshman	2	15.38%

#### **IDI Coding**

According to the IDI, each phase of the intercultural development model begins and ends with a certain score: Denial ranges from 55 to 66.99, Polarization is between 70 and 84.99, Minimization is from 85 to 114.99, and any score above 115 is in the Ethnorelative stage. Table 2 illustrates where each score belongs on the IDI and on the DMIS.

**Table 2**

*IDI Subcategories Scores*

Ethnocentric Stage				Ethnorelative Stage		
DMIS	Denial	Defense	Minimization	Acceptance	Adaptation	Integration
IDI	Denial	Polarization (Defense/ Reversal)	Minimization	Acceptance	Adaptation	Not Measured
Score Range	55 to 69.99	70 to 84.99	85 to 114.99	115 to 129.99	130 to 145	

#### **Results**

The first question this paper seeks to answer is: What are the levels of intercultural sensitivity among international students, who also study a world language course, at an American university at the beginning of the semester, and, on average, does intercultural sensitivity improve over the course

of one semester of study? To answer this question, IDI pretest scores were compared to IDI posttest scores using t-test and Cohen's D.

### Pretest Data

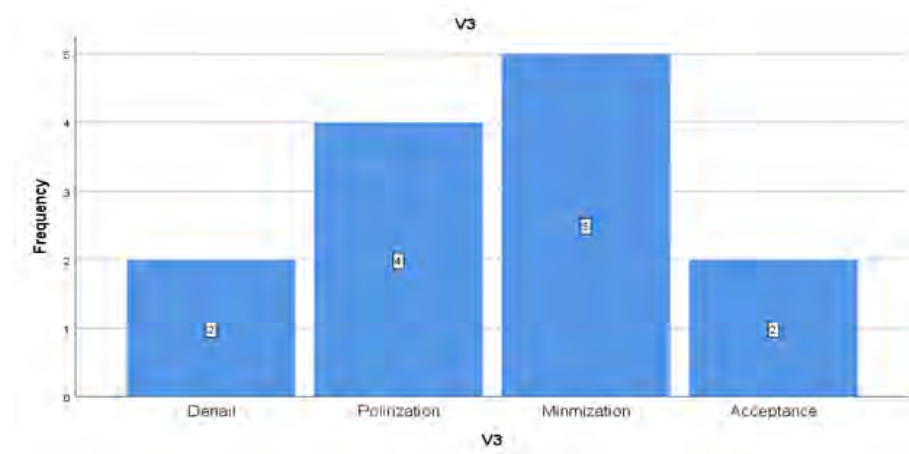
**Table 3**

*IDI Pretest Data*

	# of students	% of participants	Mean Score	Score SD	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Range
Denial	2	15.4	66.58	3.23	64.29	68.87	4.58
Polarization	4	30.8	76.52	4.21	73.13	82.45	9.32
Minimization	5	38.5	92.85	8.05	85.43	105.65	20.22
Acceptance	2	15.4	116.18	0.44	115.87	116.50	.63
Adaptation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
All stages	13	100	87.37	17.00	64.29	116.50	52.21

**Figure 3**

*IDI Pretest Average Score for the Whole Group*



**Figure 4**

*Students' Distribution on the IDI Phrases in the Pretest*



As Figures 3/4 and Table 3 show, the average IDI pretest score was 87.73, which indicates that the group's primary orientation toward cultural differences at the beginning of the fall semester was within the Minimization phase, "reflecting a tendency to highlight commonalities across cultures that can mask important cultural differences in values, perceptions and behaviors" (Hammer, 2011, p. 475). Looking more closely at the group's data, only 15% (2 out of the 13 students) were in the Acceptance phase. Additionally, two students were in the Denial phase, six students were in the Polarization phase, and five students were in the Minimization phase.

#### Posttest Data

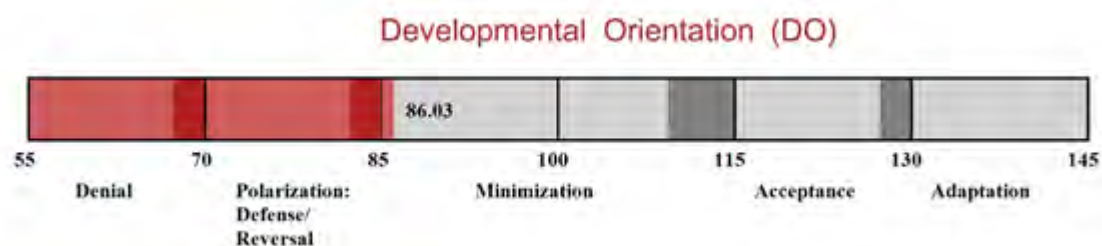
**Table 4**

*Posttest IDI Data*

	# of students	% of participants	Mean Score	Score SD	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Range
Denial	4	30.8	63.73	4.84	58.67	68.34	9.67
Polarization	3	23.1	73.77	0.67	73.14	74.48	1.34
Minimization	4	30.8	96.86	9.44	89.21	109.97	20.76
Acceptance	1	7.7	124.24	-	-	-	-
Adaptation	1	7.7	130.41	-	-	-	-
All stages	13	100	86.03	23.58	130.41	58.67	71.74

**Figure 5**

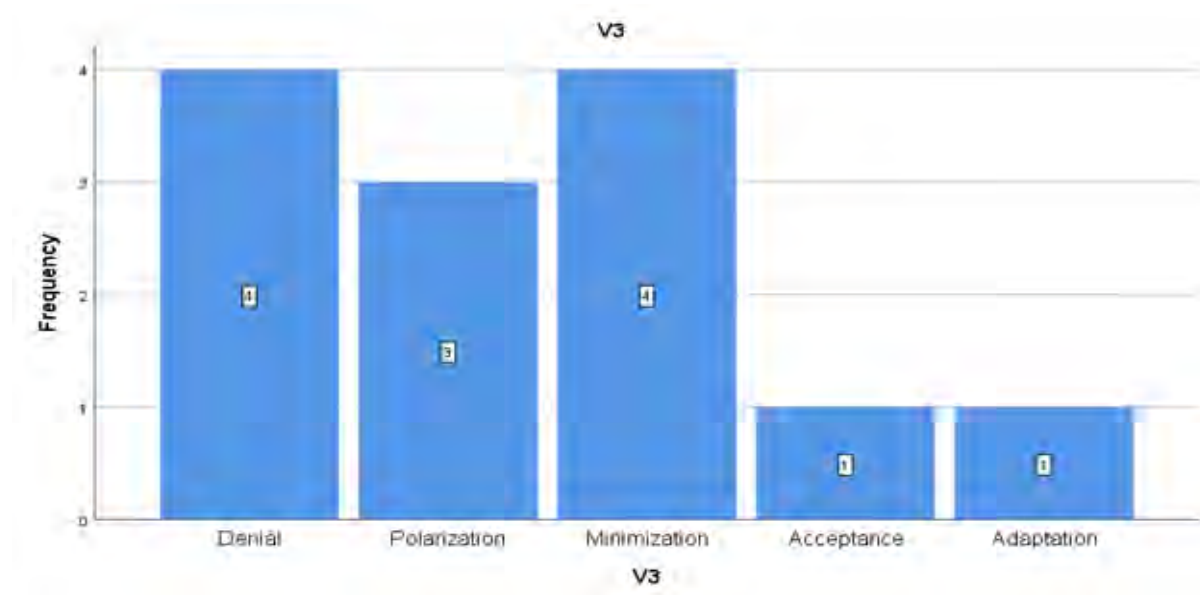
*IDI Posttest Average Score for the Whole Group*



As Figures 5/6 and Table 4 summarize, the average posttest IDI score was 86.03, which locates the group, on average, in the Minimization phase. In the posttest, only one student was in the Adaptation phase, one student was in the Acceptance phase, four were in the Minimization phase, three were in the Polarization phase, and four students were in the Denial phase.

**Figure 6**

*Students' Contribution on the IDI Phrases for the Posttest*



### **Pretest vs Posttest: Addressing the First Research Question**

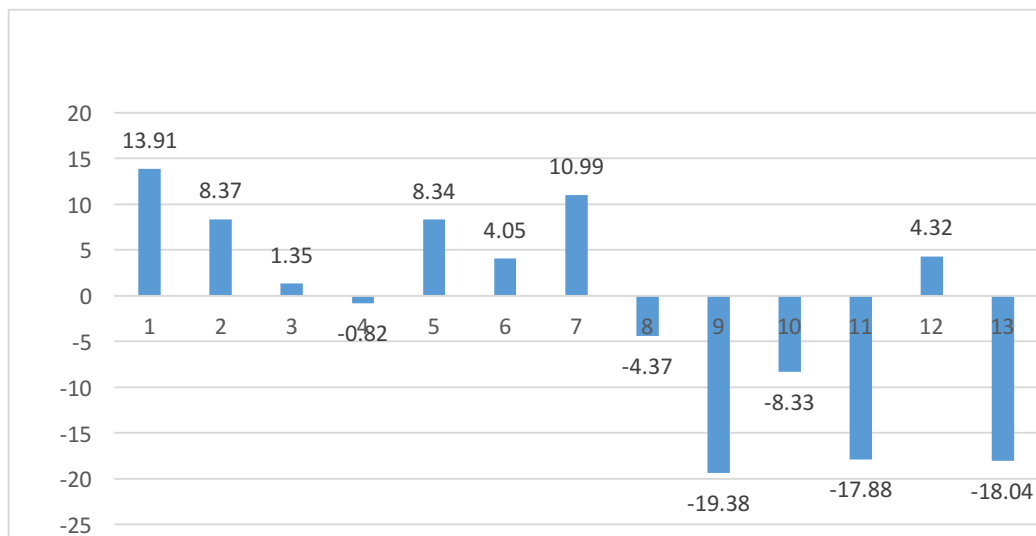
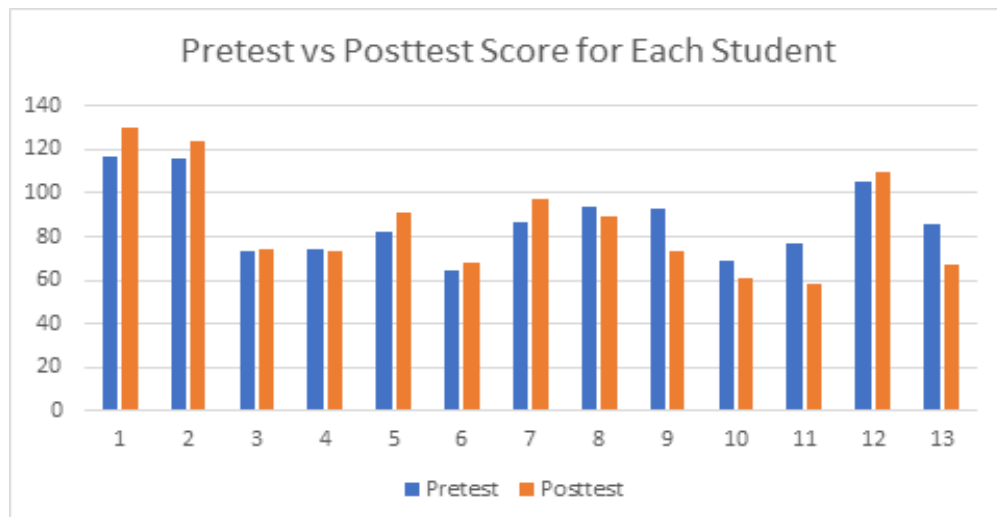
The first research question aims to investigate the levels of intercultural sensitivity of international students who study at an American university at the beginning of an academic semester, and whether IS improves over the course of a semester of study that includes a world language class. Therefore, a paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare pretest to posttest IDI average scores. There is no significant difference in the scores for pretest ( $M=87.37$ ,  $SD=17.00$ ) and

posttest ( $M=86.02$ ,  $SD=23.58$ ) scores;  $t(12) = -4.23$ ,  $p = .000$ . Further, Cohen's effect size value ( $d = -0.11$ ) suggests low practical significance. These results suggest that students' IDI scores, on average, did not develop throughout the semester. Spending a semester on a U.S. college campus did not help international students to develop their intercultural sensitivity as measured by the IDI—even though their semester included a world language course, which could have also encouraged IS development through world language curriculum. In addition, Table 5 and Figures 7/8 summarize the differences on an individual level.

**Table 5**

*Students' Scores on the IDI Pretest and Posttest and the Difference between the Two Tests*

Students	Pretest	Posttest	Differences
Student #1	116.5	130.41	13.91
Student #2	115.87	124.24	8.37
Student #3	73.13	74.48	1.35
Student #4	73.96	73.14	-0.82
Student #5	82.45	90.79	8.34
Student #6	64.29	68.34	4.05
Student #7	86.51	97.5	10.99
Student #8	93.58	89.21	-4.37
Student #9	93.08	73.7	-19.38
Student #10	68.87	60.54	-8.33
Student #11	76.55	58.67	-17.88
Student #12	105.65	109.97	4.32
Student #13	85.43	67.39	-18.04

**Figure 7***Protest VS Posttest for Each Student***Figure 8***Differences between Pretest and Posttest for Each Students (Each Bar Represents a Student)*

As Table 5 and Figures 7/8 show, there is wide variety among the student participants in terms of their IDI scores and score changes. For example, whereas student #1 increased their IDI score by 13.91 (from 116.50 to 130.41; both scores are in the Acceptance phase), student #9 experienced a score decrease of 19.38 (from 93.08 to 73.70; shift from the Minimization phase to the Polarization phase). To understand why this occurred, we conducted a qualitative analysis of the data through participant interviews, which we present in the following section.

## **Qualitative Analysis**

To understand the variability in IDI scores, the 13 international student participants were invited to be interviewed; unfortunately, only six responded to interview requests. Figure 7 above shows the IDI scores of the 13 students. The first six data points in Figure 7 represent the six students who subsequently responded to interview requests; the other seven data points (7-13) represent the students who did not respond to the interview request. The interviews that were conducted were transcribed, coded, and divided by theme, which we have chosen to highlight and discuss in the following section. We use these interviews to answer the second question of this paper, which explores international students' experiences at the university, and if such experiences can be used to explain the change, if any occurred, in the students' levels of IS.

## **Discussion of Themes**

### **Curiosity and Awe**

The desire to explore and engage with American society—in particular American students and the campus of their university—was a common theme among the international students that were interviewed. Curiosity about different people and cultures was a significant motive that drove students to leave their home countries and travel to the United States. For example, Student #4 mentioned that the reason she chose to study in the U.S. was because she saw it as a cultural “melting pot” in which she expected to interact with other people. She was very excited and proud to share a story about communicating with an Uber driver in Spanish; “I talked to him like, ‘oh my god, I’m taking ... Spanish class ... can you talk with me with Spanish?’” Curiosity about snow and living in a colder climate was a motive for Student #3 to choose to study at a northeastern university in the United States.

### **Segregation and Disappointment**

As mentioned above, many international students came to the U.S. full of wonder and awe about the new society they were going to live in. However, the students interviewed expressed a great deal of disappointment when they found themselves segregated and unable to fulfill their



dreams of exploring due to unexpected “intangible walls.” Student #1 stated that he “[felt] like there is an intangible wall between domestic students and international students.” He indicated that students tended to form groups that included students like themselves. When he was asked to talk more about the notion of an intangible wall, he replied “intangible walls ... so they [students] don’t have any ... commonplace or square ... to have a conversation ... or share their thoughts or just simple greetings.”

The concept of segregation was one of the most common themes that appeared in the interviews. Many of the students expressed frustration at not being in classes with American students when they first arrived, and how this led to disappointment and feelings of separation from American students. Five of the six students interviewed gained admission to the university through its pathway-to-college program. The pathway-to-college program is an increasingly common way for international students who lack sufficient proficiency in English to gain college admission in the United States. Students are conditionally admitted to the university and are enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses to develop their English skills before they matriculate. Most students take English classes for one to two years before they matriculate into their academic programs.

China sends the most students to the US to study, accounting for more than one-third of all international college students in the country (IIE, 2016). The proportion of Chinese to other international students at this university at the time of this study reflects this. Among all international undergraduate students at the university in Fall 2017, 255 or 35% were from China. As a result, many international students in the pathway program often spend the first one to two years in classes with several other students from their same home country, all of whom speak the same first language. This structure prevents them from engaging with local students and the greater campus community until they complete the pathway program and are fully matriculated.

The students in this study indicated that after spending one to two years in a pathway program, in classes with other international students instead of primarily domestic students, that they lost some of their curiosity and awe of exploring the domestic culture, and a fear of interacting

with American students when they finally matriculated into mainstream classes. Student #2, for example, mentioned that she felt nervous and uncomfortable talking to American students because she was self-conscious about her English skills.

What makes this experience worse is that domestic students, who make up most of the campus population, make little effort to communicate with international students, according to the participants of this study. The international students interviewed indicated that domestic students did not participate in campus cultural events organized by the international students resource center.

While the students in this study all expressed interest in meeting new people and talking to American students, even the most outgoing international student can struggle to make friends at an American university, as local students are often less interested in forming those connections (Marginson & Sawir, 2011). In fact, after studying at an American university for four years, more than one-third of international students reported having no close American friends (Gareis, 2012). Reasons for this inability to connect include language and cultural barriers, as well as stereotyping and discrimination. This greatly decreases the level of engagement with the culture that international students so eagerly wanted to explore, which can, in turn, influence students' intercultural sensitivity.

### **Absence of Reflections, Critical Thinking, and Huebnerian Conversation in Coursework**

One of the interview questions asked participants about the amount of reflection on cultural differences required from students in their world language classes. Only one student reported that she was assigned once to reflect on the differences between housing in her home culture and housing in the United States.

Bennett (1993) highlights the importance of reflection, critical analysis, and comparison activities in order to promote students' intercultural sensitivity. Therefore, we find that the absence of reflections in the classes the students attended is worth noting, as it might be related to their lack of progress in IS scores as measured by the IDI.

In addition, as mentioned in the literature review, what we call Huebnerian conversation is completely missed in these classes. International students in this study indicated that they did not have a chance to have deeply personal human conversations with their classmates— not in the normal sense of the word, nor in the Huebnerian sense. For instance, Student #1, in his explanation of cultural walls said, “they [students] don’t have any ... commonplace or square ... to have a *conversation* ... or share their thoughts or just simple greetings.” The same theme appeared in other students’ descriptions of their experiences on campus, as mentioned in the ethnographic reviews of their interviews. One student specifically talked about in-class activities not leading to deep connections, only superficial relationships. The absence of the Huebnerian conversation might be the reason many students in this study indicated a sense of loneliness, as “it is through conversation among children that the individual child learns that aloneness is not the same as loneliness” (Huebner, 1962, p. 68).

#### **How Does the University Encourage Students to Engage with the Campus Community?**

Students generally felt that the campus events and activities organized by the international student resource center were helpful but not enough to help them interact with others, especially American students. Participants reported being disappointed to not see more domestic students at various events. They also talked about not hearing about events sponsored by the international student resource center once they left the pathway program, resulting in a disconnect between their experience in the pathway program and their place in the larger university.

However, some students discussed the international student resource center as if it was the only place responsible for helping them to interact with domestic students and to produce a proper form of intercultural communication. Following Bennet et al. (2013) and Huebner (1963), helping international students to communicate and navigate within the host culture, as well as to develop their intercultural competencies, is not only the responsibility of an international student office, such as the resource center on this campus, rather, it is the responsibility of every single course students take at the university. All courses should be designed in a way that improves students’

intercultural sensitivity. As Coulby (2006) argues, “it [interculturalism] is as important in medicine as in civics, in mathematics as in language teaching” (p. 246).

An employee of the international student resource center was interviewed about their goals, the issues they see with students, and the university’s capacity to support international students. The employee indicated that before the university introduced the pathway-to-college program, 75% of the international population was composed of graduate students from many different countries. But, in 2011, after the pathway program was established, the percentage changed dramatically, as did the makeup of the international student body population.

With many responsibilities and a limited staff, the international student resource center tries to focus on the most serious cases of academic, social, and even legal challenges faced by international students. They are keenly tuned in to which students consistently “don’t show up.” Once those students are identified, the staff initiates contact and ensures that students receive the support they need. In this way, the international student resource center performs a critical service.

### **Limitations of this Exploratory Study**

The first languages of student participants in this study were not English. Although the IDI comes with many translations, all students preferred to take the IDI in English. In addition, the interviews with each student participant were conducted in English. This could have affected the students’ responses and limited their ability to reflect on their cultural experiences. It is unfortunate that we could not conduct the interviews in the students’ first languages, but neither researcher spoke the languages that would have been required.

The most significant limitation of this study is the small sample size. While we accepted participants from five world language classes, comprised of more than 130 students, we found only 13 international students who were willing to participate in the research. The small size may affect the statistical results of the t-test to compare the pretest and posttest scores; for this reason, we tracked each student individually and added qualitative aspects to the study. Furthermore, although we invited all 13 student participants to be interviewed, only six responded to such requests. We

believe the argument this paper tries to make would have been stronger if all 13 students were interviewed.

## **Conclusion**

The first question of this paper addressed the levels of international students' intercultural sensitivity and the progress they achieved in this regard throughout a semester of study at an American university, where the majority of students are white American undergraduates. On average, the group of international students in this study did not achieve significant progress in their IS mean scores as measured by the IDI. In fact, the participants' mean scores regressed from pretest to posttest, although not significantly—in spite of the fact that the students are also studying a world language class with American students. As the mean may mask the change in individual scores, we tracked each student individually (see Figure 8). We were planning to interview every student regarding their experiences on campus; however, only six responded to interview requests (Students #1-6 in Figures 7 and 8; Table 4). Based on their interviews, they accounted for quantitative data by describing different forms of isolation and segregation, the structure of the pathway-to-college program, the absence of what we call Huebnerian conversation, and the lack of opportunities to engage with domestic students on campus in and out of the classroom. It is unfortunate that the other students, whose scores dramatically decreased (Students #7-13 in Figures 7 and 8; Table 5), did not respond to interview requests. Interviewing these students might have been revealing, and potentially would have offered an explanation as to why the mean IDI score of the sample decreased.

The aim of the interviews was to explore the experiences that international students had on campus and to learn if these experiences could explain changes in IDI scores. We found that the six students interviewed suffered from different levels of segregation and isolation on campus. They all seemed, however, to suffer from “intangible walls” that separated them from domestic students. They failed to develop meaningful intercultural relationships with domestic students. The reasons for such segregation were:

1) International students in the pathway-to-college program, which included most students in this study, began their university program in classes with only other international students for a year or more before joining mainstream university classes, thereby limiting their interaction with American students. After spending a year or two in these classes, separated from domestic students, they seemed to lose the excitement and curiosity that made them want to travel abroad to study in the first place.

2) The course work, even in foreign language classes, was not targeting a development of intercultural sensitivity. This problem does not only face international students, but all students at colleges and universities. In times of political polarization, growing nationalization, racial tension, wars, violence, and terrorism, there is a desperate need for education that promotes interculturalism, as education can produce individuals who are able to accept, tolerate, and love those who are different. As mentioned earlier, we agree that all subjects and courses can play this role, from natural science to the liberal arts courses.

3) The domestic students were not encouraged to participate in tearing down the perceived “intangible walls.” International students in this study mentioned that domestic students rarely showed up at events organized by the international student resource center. We think it would be helpful if domestic students were encouraged by their professors to attend and reflect on these events. Professors can come up with various assignments that promote American students to interact with international students, which might help in tearing down cultural walls.

The third question of this study was: How does the university encourage international students to engage with the campus community? To answer this question, a member of the international student resource center was interviewed in order to compare their perception with the international students’ perceptions about the university’s efforts to encourage engagement with the campus community.

In general, the students did not perceive any cohesion between their experiences in the pathway-to-college program and mainstream university classes. Many students mentioned that they

did not know about events sponsored by the international student resource center after they left the pathway program. They explained that they used to hear about events when they were in the pathway English classes through their teachers' announcements, but once they moved to freshmen level coursework, their professors no longer announced such events. This indicates a lack of coordination between the pathway program and the university, ultimately resulting in a disconnected and deflating experience for the students.

To summarize, the group of international students in this study did not achieve progress, on average, in their levels of intercultural sensitivity as measured by the IDI. They came to the U.S. full of curiosity and excitement about exploring a new culture and making new friends. However, they were disappointed when they found “intangible walls” separating them from their American classmates. Five out of the six student participants interviewed were brought to the university through the pathway-to-college program. According to those five students, the program left them feeling isolated, learning English in a classroom together, yet separate from the rest of the university. While the international student resource center works to serve those students struggling the most with issues like isolation, it cannot also engage domestic students, which is what the students in this study longed for the most—American friends. The university programs and events did not provide an adequate environment that facilitated and promoted having deeply personal conversations, or what we call a Huebnerian conversation, with those who are different or belonging to a different culture, leading to an unsatisfying study abroad experience for many.

### **Recommendations**

As we found that students mentioned the pathway-to-college program in their interviews as a possible factor that influenced their experience on campus and enforced their segregation, we suggest further research on the influence of such programs on students' engagement and intercultural sensitivity. We also suggest improving the collaboration and connection between the pathway-to-college program and university faculty, which would help raise awareness of the international students who will be entering their classrooms. This would also involve encouraging

domestic students to connect with international students for the benefit of all. Moreover, further research is needed on the influence of pathway programs operating on college campuses nationwide, the impact of segregating students in their first year, and how to integrate international students more effectively by engaging domestic students.

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