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Challenges and Resilience of First-Year Chinese International Students on Academic Probation

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ABSTRACT

A substantial percentage of international students are placed on academic probation each year. This study explored the challenges and resilience characteristics of Chinese international students placed on academic probation in their first year of college. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine probationary Chinese international students, and the data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The results indicated that challenges with daily routine, reduced adult supervision, inadequate academic preparation, and limited participation in the application process were the main factors that contributed to their academic probation. Proactivity, independence, and flexible thinking were important resilience characteristics that may have helped students cope positively with stresses relating to academic probation. Targeted institutional support could be strengthened. Implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: academic probation, Chinese international students, qualitative study, resilience, undergraduate students

International students are individuals who are enrolled at a U.S. higher education institution on a student visa, and who is not an immigrant or a refugee (UNESCO, 2015). According to the 2020 Institute of International Education Open Doors Report, there were over a million international students in the U.S. in the 2019–2020 pre-COVID academic year. Chinese international students comprised the largest international student group, accounting for 35% of the total international student population. Understanding Chinese international students' academic adaptation is very important for researchers and educators to better support this large student group.

Research has identified many factors that affect Chinese international students' academic performance, such as language barriers (Ma, 2020), cultural and educational differences, limited interactions with faculties and peers (Ching et al., 2017; Yan & Berliner, 2009), and psychological challenges (e.g., Han et al., 2013; Liu, 2009). Every year, a portion of students are placed on academic probation because they do not meet the academic requirements of their respective institutions (Fletcher & Tokmouline, 2018). At the research site (a large public, land-grant university in the Midwestern U.S.), 8% of overall first-year undergraduate students and 18% of first-year international undergraduate students were placed on academic probation in 2015 (Institutional Research, 2019). Available data indicated that approximately 19% of Chinese international students were on academic probation in Fall 2014 at this institution (Qin, 2018).

Research showed that first-year students were more likely to be placed on academic probation compared to returning students (Spurling & Gabriner, 2003), possibly due to adaptation challenges at the beginning of their college education. In addition, international students are more likely than their domestic peers to face the risk of academic probation (James & Graham, 2010). At the University of Oregon, freshman international students accounted for the largest proportion (11%) of students whose grade point averages (GPAs) were in the academic probation range, compared to 8% of domestic students (Ward et al., 2016).

Although a substantial percentage of international students are placed on academic probation each year, it is important to note that many of them bounce back successfully and maintain good academic standing after the first year. Ward et al. (2016) showed that the rate of class retained to second year for international students (89%) was higher than their domestic peers (85%). Although international students' four-year graduation rate was lower, their five- and six-year graduation rates were not significantly different from those of their domestic counterparts (Ward et al., 2016). Another study showed that among probationary first-year Chinese international students, about 40% of them return to good academic standing after their first semester (Mei, 2019). Therefore, it is noteworthy that while international students may have greater academic difficulties in the initial stage of their academic journey, they demonstrate significant academic persistence. More research is needed to understand how international students bounce back from a disadvantageous situation despite tremendous initial challenges.

While most studies have focused on international students' challenges (Ching et al., 2017; Han et al., 2013; Liu, 2009; Yan & Berliner, 2009), very few studies

have examined their strengths or resilience during the transition process. The present study aims to fill this gap by exploring how they transform challenging experiences into positive adaptation in their first year. According to Benard (1995), “We are all born with an innate capacity for resilience, by which we are able to develop social competence, problem-solving skills, a critical consciousness, autonomy, and a sense of purpose” (p. 2). Risk and resilience should be discussed together because risks are an essential part of resilience (Eshel et al., 2018). In addition, scholars recommend focusing on specific subgroups within their sociocultural contexts because even within a single nationality, students’ experiences vary greatly (Heng, 2019). Therefore, the purpose of our study is to explore 1) how first-year Chinese international students make sense of their academic probation status and the factors that contributed to this; 2) what resilience characteristics may have helped them in their adjustment after being placed on academic probation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic Probation

Despite the lack of a formal definition, academic probation is a common term used by colleges and universities to describe the academic status when a student is not making the academic progress required by the institution for graduation (James & Graham, 2010). In most institutions, students may be placed on academic probation if their cumulative GPA falls below 2.0. Students on academic probation have the opportunity to improve their grades and remain in their program of study. However, if they fail to improve their grades to a satisfactory threshold, they are likely to face academic dismissals (Sneyers & De Witte, 2017). In other words, academic probation is a transition stage from unsatisfactory performance to either good academic standing or academic dismissal (Arcand & Leblanc, 2011). Therefore, it is vital to understand the experiences of students who are at risk of dismissal and to support them so that they can be successful.

Extant research on academic probation focuses on identifying the causes that lead to academic probation and creating support programs to assist students on probation (Arcand & Leblanc, 2011). For example, research has identified inadequate academic strategies for college-level learning (Ahmed et al., 2014), limited meaningful interactions with academic advisors (Sage, 2010), mental health issues (Beattie et al., 2019), and insufficient information about their academic status (Erazo, 2017) as factors contributing to students’ academic probation placement. Some studies have also focused on developing effective programs that support student success and increase retention rates. Shao et al. (2010) investigated the effectiveness of the Exploration co-curricular, part of a multi-year student success program developed by faculty, staff, and students. The program aimed to improve the retention rates by forming active relationships among students, faculty, and staff as well as engaging them in productive co-curricular activities. This study found that first-year students who completed the

Exploration co-curricular successfully earned a higher number of credit hours; they were more likely to stay for their second year and were less likely to be placed on academic probation or suspension than those who did not complete the co-curricular (Shao et al., 2010).

However, a paucity of work has investigated probationary students' experiences from a resilience perspective. To have a solid understanding of student adjustment, we need to examine both risk and protective factors. In addition, very few studies on academic probation focused on Chinese international students. It has been documented that, in general, international, and first-year students are more likely to be placed on academic probation (James & Graham, 2010). Therefore, further research is needed to understand the experiences of first-year Chinese international students on academic probation.

Chinese International Students on Academic Probation

Although research about Chinese international students' academic adjustment has been increasing in recent years, our search for studies on Chinese students on academic probation has yielded few results. To our knowledge, only one study has focused specifically on this population. Mei's (2019) mixed-method study analyzed educational records of Chinese international students on academic probation, and how students perceived and interpreted their experiences. Specifically, she found that most reasons related to students' academic probation were in the realm of socioemotional engagement rather than academic proficiency. For example, some students reported that their primary goal was to get admission to a U.S. college, and equipping themselves with the learning skills or knowledge essential to their success in college was not prioritized (Mei, 2019).

Resilience Framework

The present study on the first-year Chinese international students on academic probation is guided by the resilience framework proposed by Conner (1993), who defined resilience as "the capacity to absorb high levels of change while displaying minimal dysfunctional behavior" (p. 6). This theoretical framework is appropriate for our study, given that it has been successfully applied to examine the resilience characteristics of international students in their academic adjustment (Wang, 2009). Wang (2009) argued that there was a lack of an overall framework involving change-related variables to study adaptation, and the resilience framework proposed by Conner (1993), which focuses on changes in different environments, can be very informative in understanding international student adaptation.

Conner (1993) suggested seven main characteristics of resilience: positive about the world (e.g., seeing opportunities in challenging situations), positive about themselves (i.e., viewing themselves as "a valuable and capable person"), focused (i.e., "have a strong sense of goals and priorities"), flexible in thoughts (i.e., willingness to look at situations from different perspectives, suspend judgment, and accept inconsistencies), flexible in social relations (i.e., understand

interdependence and have the ability to build social ties), organized (e.g., establish structures and make plans), and proactive (i.e., take initiatives to prepare for possible outcomes and act decisively when experiencing uncertainty) (ODR, 2001). This study drew heavily from this framework to guide the examination of the experiences of first-year Chinese international students on academic probation.

It is worth noting that the concept of resilience is embedded with neoliberal assumptions (Bottrell, 2013), placing the responsibility of successful adjustment to challenging environment on individuals instead of considering the role played by institutions or the larger society. In the context of international students' academic success in higher education, neoliberalism assumes that if students fail academically, it means that they struggle to adjust to the environment and are not resilient. However, it is important to highlight that academic failure may not exist if a better education model is offered to the diverse student population. In our data analysis, we will not only explore individual resilience characteristics but also include our participants' report of perceived institutional support.

METHOD

Procedures

Data for this study was collected as a part of a larger longitudinal, mixed-methods study examining Chinese undergraduate students' academic success and psychosocial adaptation. The university where the study was conducted was among the top 10 U.S. universities enrolling Chinese students. The number of Chinese undergraduates at the institution increased from 44 in 2004 to 3,687 in 2016. In the two years when the study was conducted, 3,857 first-year Chinese undergraduate students enrolled in the university, accounting for 77% of the total undergraduate international student population (OISS, 2021).

A convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants for this study. After obtaining approval from Institutional Review Board, the research team invited first-year Chinese undergraduate students to participate in semi-structured interviews. Through emails, WeChat (i.e., a Chinese social media app), and personal connections, 102 students were interviewed, of which nine were on academic probation at the end of their first semester. Participants were recruited from two cohorts in two consecutive years. For this study, six were from the 1st wave in 2015 and three were from the 2nd wave in 2016.

The interview protocol explored students' 1) pre-departure educational experiences (e.g., When and why did you decide to come to the United States?); 2) family background and relationship with parents (e.g., How involved were parents in supervising your schoolwork growing up?); 3) learning and living experiences post-arrival (e.g., What were the major differences between studying in China and the United States?); and 4) psychological well-being and future goals (e.g., What kind of person do you want to become?). Given the sensitive nature of the topic, interviewers approached the discussion on academic probation with compassion. Questions were framed in a way that students felt respected and

comfortable sharing their experiences. Students were also informed that their anonymity and confidentiality would be protected, and they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Interviews were conducted toward the end of the second semester of the students' first-year study in the United States. The average interview time was approximately one hour. All interviews were semi-structured and audio recorded. Recordings were later transcribed verbatim in Chinese by the research team. All names listed in this paper are pseudonyms.

Participants

Nine participants, six male and three female, enrolled at a large Midwestern university participated in this study. In qualitative research, the goal is not to recruit a large sample. Instead, the focus is to understand the experiences of participants in-depth (Creswell & Poth, 2016). It is challenging to recruit probationary Chinese international students given the sensitivity of the topic, however, data provided by the nine participants were in great depth and detail.

Age was not reported by all participants, but the larger survey data showed that the average age was 19 for first-year Chinese international students. Four participants were the only children in their families. Five of them attended high schools in China and four attended high schools in the United States. Six participants attended boarding schools in high school. All of them had at least one parent working outside of home.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding team included one graduate student (i.e., the first author) and one faculty member (i.e., the second author) specializing in qualitative research methods. Both team members were fluent in Chinese and English. Three cases were coded to develop the initial coding table, and more codes were added to the coding table after a second round of reviewing the interview data. Two team members independently coded half of the interview transcripts based on the coding table. Related codes were categorized into core themes. The first author documented coding memos during analysis to assess the reliability of the coding. Regular meetings were scheduled for cross-check and bias monitoring. Interviews were coded in Chinese, and representative quotations were translated into English to present in this paper. The translation was proofread by a graduate student (i.e., the third author) fluent in Chinese and English and another graduate student (i.e., the fourth author) whose first language is English. A significant amount of verbatim information was given for readers to evaluate their interpretations.

Researcher Positioning

A positionality statement provides an opportunity for researchers to reflect on how their identity and potential biases can influence the qualitative research

process (Merriam, 2009). The transparency of assumptions and experiences also helps readers assess the validity of the research outcomes. As a Chinese international student who has studied in the United States for more than seven years, the lead author considered herself an insider to the Chinese international student community, which may have allowed her to have a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences (Saidin, 2016). Although she has never been placed on academic probation throughout her academic journey, she has previously worked with international students on academic probation as an advocate for more than two years. She hoped that her interest, passion, and experience in supporting international students in disadvantageous positions would help her better understand each student's story in their unique context, thus improving the validity of the data analysis.

The second author grew up in China and came to study in the United States in her mid-20s. She has been a faculty member at the research site for over 15 years and has worked extensively with international students to help promote their positive academic and psychosocial adaptation on campus. The third author is a Chinese international student who came to the United States for graduate study. Similar to the study's participants, she navigated the cultural and contextual differences between the Chinese and U.S. educational systems. The fourth author is a 1.5-generation Korean immigrant who is aware that she cannot fully understand the experiences of Chinese international students put on probation. However, she is able to relate to the struggles of navigating a new education system without parental guidance since her parents do not speak English.

Most of the investigators came from China and are or were international students themselves in the U.S. Their positionality as insiders facilitates the process of data analysis and interpretation from the cultural lens. Yet, there are potential bias associated with being an insider such as neglect of experiences distinct from our expectations or particular attention to experiences conforming to our expectations. We utilized several strategies to ensure a more objective perspective throughout the research process, e.g., ongoing reflections and discussions in research meetings. The last author also served as a balance against any unknown bias that may exist within cultural insiders (Holmes, 2020).

RESULTS

Factors Contributing to Academic Probation

All participants were placed on academic probation after their first semester at the university. Students on academic probation were required to meet with an academic advisor and thoughtfully develop an academic progress plan (NSSC, 2020) by a certain deadline to avoid a hold on their registration. They may seek assistance from mental health services, tutoring of specific subjects, and services for students with disabilities if physical or mental impairment were involved. Students were also required to attend pertinent workshops to build up their academic skills. If students' cumulative GPA is below 2.0 by the end of the second semester, they will be placed on final probation or recess. Our interviews were

conducted toward the end of their second semester. Many students made progress in their academic standing by then, through actively utilizing various resources and drawing upon their individual strengths to overcome the challenges they faced during their first semester.

In alignment with the first research question, participants made sense of their probationary status and identified factors that had major impact in their academic probation: challenges with daily routine, reduced adult supervision, inadequate academic preparation, and limited involvement in the application process.

Daily Routines and Reduced Adult Supervision

Adjusting to the new routines at a U.S. university was not easy for our participants. Not spending enough time on their studies was a major theme that emerged from the participants' reflections on why they did not get passing grades in their first semester of college. Six students reported that they had persistent unhealthy daily routines, such as playing video games all night and sleeping during the daytime. Additionally, students reported that they experienced challenges with maintaining their focus and were easily distracted by other social activities. For example, Hua was a male student from northern part of China. He was the only child in his family and had previously studied at a high school in New York. He mentioned that he flew to New York once every two weeks to see his friends because he felt lonely and did not have a sense of belonging. Frequent travel made it difficult for him to focus on schoolwork. "I spent most of my time hanging out with friends last semester," Hua said. "I would leave for New York on Thursday, skip my class on Friday, and come back on Sunday." He described himself as "not having a right mindset" for college at that time. Feelings of loneliness and not having a sense of belonging contributed to this.

During high school (either in China or the U.S.), students were used to have close adult supervision. Adjusting to the open freedom in college can be very challenging. For example, Hong was a male student from Southeast China majoring in business. He was one of the top students in middle school and started preparing for studying abroad in high school. He commented about how his social life was interfering with his academic commitments without any supervision:

You can stay out all night and nobody cares. Do you think you still feel like going to class the next day when you were partying and drinking all night? CAN you still go?... You are in college now, and nobody is watching you. There are too many temptations!

Similarly, Ming, a male student with undecided major, mentioned that he was struggling to manage his own learning without adult guidance:

Nobody will tell you that there is an exam today, nobody will wake you up and tell you that it's time to hand in the assignment, no one tells you to go to class...All of a sudden you go from someone else arranging your life for you to you arranging your own life. It is like a feeling of letting yourself fly an airplane, and I am about to crash.

Ming described that he indeed realized the serious consequences of not taking responsibility for his own studies. However, he still found it very difficult to manage studying by himself without guidance or adult supervision.

Academic Preparation and Participation in the Application Process

Many did not receive adequate preparation to study in the U.S. Participants mentioned that they spent thousands of dollars and multiple years in English training courses to score high on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) to apply to U.S. colleges. However, the training was only helpful for the TOEFL test but not in terms of studying or language skills for college-level learning. Hong said, “It (TOEFL prep course) was for taking the test only, it does not help our studying now at all.” He specifically mentioned that the writing techniques he learned from TOEFL training were very different from the academic writing required for his courses, which in turn impacted his grades.

In addition, most of the participants reported that they used an agency to apply for U.S. colleges, but they had little participation during the application process, including choosing their major. Sun was a male student majoring in mathematics. He commented that he did not participate in selecting his major, and he was only concerned about whether he would be admitted to any universities or not. When asked why he chose to study math, he responded, “The agent chose math for me, I didn’t know what my major was until I came here.” Students’ reflections indicated that if they did not participate in the application process, they tended to feel disoriented after entering college, where they had to handle everything by themselves.

Moreover, participants reported that inadequate preparation resulted in them having a limited understanding of academic expectations. Hong expressed frustration and confusion about not understanding the concept of GPA, which is a fundamental aspect of academic success. “There was no explanation about GPA during the orientation program. The orientation did not involve this part at all.” Hong said, “Not all international students necessarily had used this grading system before. My country does not use GPA, I didn’t even know what it was...” Other participants also felt that the academic orientation program, which occurred a few weeks before the semester started, was inadequate in preparing them for potential challenges. Many found the content repetitive, overwhelming, and lacking in essential information. In addition, participants expressed concerns regarding course enrollment assistance for first-year international students, citing miscommunications with academic advisors about course requirements. For instance, Liu, a female student majoring in economics, shared that she was not successful in one course because the advisor assigned her a course that did not align with her intended major. “I told him (academic advisor) clearly that I am switching my major, but he still enrolled me in the economics course...I did not enjoy the class and I did not understand the content, so I failed.” While some participants had positive experiences with specific programs on campus, such as the writing center, math learning center, and academic restart program for

probationary students, overall, participants perceived insufficient support from the institution, which contributed to their challenges during the first semester.

Individual Resilience Characteristics

While participants struggled with adjusting to a new academic environment without adequate preparation or support, they also possessed many resilience characteristics that assisted their shift toward improving their academic engagement in the second semester. At the time of our interview, a semester after their academic probation, most participants had made observable changes and were doing much better academically. For instance, they devoted more time and effort in studying and were expecting higher GPA in the second semester. The next section will discuss students' resilience characteristics, including proactivity in making changes, strong independence and agency developed from multiple transitioning experiences, and flexible thinking regarding undesirable situation.

Proactivity

The participants demonstrated resilience by making proactive changes to overcome the challenges that hindered their academic success. Our study found that adjusting the daily routine to refocus on school was a major theme. For example, Ming shared that he studied with a sense of responsibility in the second semester and became more self-disciplined: "I made a schedule this semester. I can't just eat, sleep, and play video games...now I scheduled all my courses in the morning, so my days got longer. I use the afternoon to study."

The students also showed strong agency and resilience in taking initiatives to overcome language barriers. For example, Liu mentioned that she struggled to understand the course materials in English, so she sought help from the Learning Center and received tutoring assistance. Similarly, Ning mentioned that he tried to improve his English by watching American TV shows and imitating how people talked in the shows.

It is noteworthy that the participants recognized the need for change and took actions to improve their situations. The proactiveness of "engaging change instead of evading it" is a significant characteristic of resilience (Conner, 1993).

Independence

Another theme emerged was the strong sense of independence and familiarity with change. The majority of our participants went through multiple precollege transitional experiences, such as attending boarding school away from home at a relatively young age, and these experiences fostered a strong sense of independence.

Ying was a female student majoring in material science and engineering. She was the only child in her family and had started attending boarding school since 4th grade. She commented that she was sad and homesick as she was living far away from home in China. "I cried for a few weeks...I was jealous that some local

kids' parents could come and check on them," she said. However, she learned to adapt to the environment and form new social connections. "I ended up having a great relationship with the teachers at school," she stated. She also made meaning of her boarding school experiences:

I never regretted (going to the boarding school), if I hadn't gone to that school, I probably would not be able to study abroad now. The city where my school is located is relatively big in Northeast China...you see different things when you are in a bigger city.

Ying also spent three years at a high school in New York. She had learned to adapt to a new environment quickly because she was already familiar with changes then. "It only took me two or three weeks to adapt to everything," she said. When asked how the experiences of studying abroad in high school influenced her transition to college, she said, "I think I adapted faster than other students (who did not go to high school in the United States)."

Participants who attended boarding school in high school also shared their experiences. Ning said, "We go home once every two weeks, (students) were not allowed to leave campus during school days...Later I could brush my teeth, clean my face, and even take a shower, got everything done in 20 minutes." He commented that he realized that he had become independent through the experience of living in a boarding school.

In many ways, boarding school experiences promoted the participants' ability to handle problems independently. Without parents' involvement in daily life, they had to learn to seek out other resources. On another level, Chinese international students on academic probation may have developed a strong sense of adaptability from these experiences, which positively contributed to their adjustment to academic and personal challenges in the United States.

Flexible Thinking

Flexible thinking is defined as "the person's ability and willingness to look at situations from multiple points of view, to suspend judgment while considering alternative perspectives, and to accept and live with paradoxes and contradictions" (ODR, 2001, p.5). Participants demonstrated flexibility and positivity when reflecting on their personal experiences and values. Their resilience was demonstrated through a positive interpretation of negative experiences and a willingness to consider alternative perspectives. For instance, Jun was a male student from northern China and majoring computer science. He reflected on his academic probation and commented that he learned a lot from that experience: "I think my failure in the first semester was actually very helpful. I learned all kinds of resources. Now I have a pamphlet that includes all the information about the engagement center, writing center, etc." Interestingly, Jun did not get upset or discouraged from academic probation; instead, he paid attention to what he had learned from that experience. When asked how to interpret their academic probation status, Jun showed positive and forward thinking. Jun said that he realized that he did not struggle alone, and believed that he could overcome the

challenges if he devoted more time and effort. “I am not the only one (on academic probation), I can do it if I work harder,” he said.

Holding flexible thoughts and tolerating ambiguity are essential for positive adjustment. Although it has been demonstrated in various forms, flexible thinking was shown as a common resilience characteristic among many participants.

DISCUSSION

While a large body of research has been conducted in recent years to understand the adjustment experiences of international students, most studies have focused on their struggles and problems. Very few studies have explored international students’ strengths and resilience. A balanced perspective is very important to our in-depth understanding of student experiences. Our study examined both challenges and resilience among a small group of Chinese international students on academic probation. Understanding both the challenges and resilience characteristics can help us determine ways to improve our support programs.

Regarding our first research question on challenges that led to Chinese international students’ academic probation, one of our main findings is the challenge of balancing newfound freedom and the reduced presence of adult supervision in college. This finding is consistent with previous research on academic stressors experienced by Chinese international students, which highlighted the need for developing self-management skills (Yan & Berliner, 2009). In China, it is common for students to be closely supervised by their teachers at school and by their parents at home throughout their school history. High school years, in particular, are heavily dominated by studying and test-preparation. There was little freedom or free time for the students (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). After coming to the U.S. for college, students found themselves in a very different situation: U.S. college professors do not monitor them or motivate them to go to school or complete their homework as their Chinese teachers in middle/high school. Their parents are also not by their side to help them with their daily routines and schedules. As a result, many participants needed time to adjust to the new environment, with much freedom and little guidance.

Another important factor contributing to their academic probation is inadequate academic preparation and limited involvement in the application process. Their preparation for U.S. study in China focused mostly on test preparation, instead of developing essential study skills. They also felt that they did not receive enough support from their U.S. university to successfully navigate the transition. Another issue was that many participants’ college applications were mostly done by adults (e.g., parents, teachers, and agents), and they did not play an active role in this process. One student even reported that he did not know what his college major was until after he arrived in college because the agent chose it for him. This finding is consistent with previous research which found that Chinese international students tended to use agencies to apply for U.S. colleges, and they participated little during the application process (Mei, 2019). As a result of this limited participation and preparation, our participants reported that they did not have adequate information about academic expectations and institutional

policies before college, which may have contributed significantly to their academic difficulties.

Regarding our second research question on resilience characteristics, our findings showed that individual resilience characteristics, including proactivity, independence, and flexible thinking, supported them in coping positively with probationary experiences. First, compared to their first semester, our participants made observable changes in their second semester to remedy the problem and improve their grades. For example, they proactively changed their daily routines to ensure that they attended all classes. They spent more time studying and improving language skills after class. They also actively sought assistance from instructors and classmates.

Second, our finding contributes to the literature by highlighting our participants' strong sense of independence originating from their multiple precollege transitional experiences. Quite a few participants started living in boarding school at a young age. They learned to solve problems independently while being away from home. Their familiarity with changes and transitions may have fostered their capacity to adjust quickly to the new environment. This also explained that although they experienced challenges in their first semester, they had learned to seek solutions and actively make changes to improve their academic performance by the second semester.

Third, we found that participants demonstrated flexible thinking in coping with being placed on academic probation. The participants showed that they were able to make meaning of stressful experiences by looking at the situation from a different point of view. They did not trap themselves in academic failure; instead, they maintained a positive outlook and accepted that certain experiences could be significant for one's development. For example, although academic probation caused frustration, it also served as a great opportunity for them to access more academic resources. This kind of mindset is very important in facilitating the development of resilience (Walsh, 2015).

These findings are important because they highlighted how students were able to respond to ongoing stressors and transform challenging experiences into positive adaptation in their first year. As Heng (2019) argued, the process of academic adaptation is not a simple process from point A to point B; it involves more multifaceted changes. For Chinese international students, the first semester is most challenging because of abrupt changes, such as reduced presence of adult supervision and different academic requirements. By understanding both the factors leading to students' poor academic performance and resilience characteristics, we will be able to identify effective ways of supporting international students and imbed these strategies into our daily interactions with them.

Institutional Role

Although our study focused on individual resilience characteristics, it is important to note that institutions also have the responsibility and obligation to support international students' adjustment. At the research site, the Office for

International Students and Scholars is a main source to assist international students to integrate to the academic and social life at the university. Support services for academic success included academic development workshops and tutoring. Professionals at the counseling center whose work focus on acculturation of international students are also able to meet students in their native languages. However, more targeted support can be offered to prepare and support international students, especially those who may be struggling academically. For instance, a more thoughtful and spread-out orientation program adopting diverse communication platforms can alleviate the issue of cramming all information into the first week after international students arrive in the midst of jet lag and disorientation. For students on academic probation, the requirements of meeting with an academic advisor and developing a progress plan to hold students accountable (NSSC, 2020) do not provide sufficient individualized support to improve their academic performance. It is also important for higher education institutions to improve cultural awareness training of faculty and staff so that they can recognize international students' unique assets and challenges and offer tailored assistance. As Nada & Araújo (2019) contend, a diverse student body requires faculty and staff to be open-minded and capable of welcoming new cultures and perspectives.

Implications

Our study has important implications for both research and practice. First, considering the changing nature of international students' academic adaptation experiences, future research should continue to use a balanced perspective. In other words, we should not only focus on the challenges but also see assets from students' previous experiences and other resilience factors, even for students who experience initial struggle. In addition, future research could explore how each individual resilience characteristic uniquely affects students' abilities to cope with academic stress, such as looking at the links between flexible thinking and academic achievement.

Our study also offers critical practical recommendations, especially for academic preparation and international student support efforts. For example, many students had time after being accepted into a U.S. university. This time could potentially be used to socialize and familiarize them with the U.S. educational system and orientations. Since managing daily routines and issues related to little adult supervision were identified as causes of poor academic performance, these issues should be highlighted in the new international student orientation. More importantly, academic expectations and policies should also be emphasized in orientations. In some institutions, academic probation can lead to academic dismissal, which means that students must remain out of university for at least a few years (Sneyers & De Witte, 2017). Informing students about the consequences of poor grades may help them understand the importance of maintaining a good academic standing. Students may feel overwhelmed when exposed to too much information at the beginning of their first year. In that case, we should look for other ways for students to understand U.S. college educational

policies and requirements, such as through workshops or meetings with academic advisors early in the academic year. It may also be important for institutions to adjust their expectations and provide additional support to international students in the first year given the tremendous cultural, linguistic, and educational navigation they had to negotiate.

Limitations

Although this study offers meaningful insights into the academic adaptation experiences of Chinese international students regarding academic probation, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, our data were collected only from one institution. Chinese international students' experiences at this institution may be different from those of other universities or community colleges. Second, the data were only from the first year; future studies can examine longitudinal trajectories beyond the first year to see if students eventually get back to good academic standings or successfully graduate from their programs.

CONCLUSION

While international students face many challenges in transitioning to study in the United States, they also demonstrate important agency and resilience. This study highlighted the factors contributing to the academic probation of first-year Chinese international students, as well as their resilience characteristics that may help them with adjustment after being placed on academic probation. We hope that this information can be useful for researchers, educators, and administrators in developing effective academic preparation and intervention programs to better support the international student population.

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