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IMPACT OF SELF-EFFICACY ON SAUDI STUDENTS' COLLEGE PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing numbers of Saudi students marching into American colleges, the academic achievement and social integration of this student group is essential for the ultimate goal of their matriculation with their intended college degrees. Building upon the self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1986) as a construct of student academic achievement, the article reports a qualitative study about the case of Saudi students at Riverside State University. After initial site observations and document reviews were conducted, primary data were collected from open ended interviews with students, administrators, and professors at RSU. The findings revealed that various aspects of self-efficacy are either agents or influences given the circumstances of the case. It offers recommendations showing how various aspect of the theory can be utilized to increase Saudi students' self-efficacy and consequently their achievement level.

INTRODUCTION

The vigorous increase in the numbers of a special group of international students enrolled at a Midwestern research university attracted the academic and professional attention of faculty and administrators of the institutions. Available research literature did not provide quick satisfying answers to the questions relevant to the case of this student group. However, a thorough review of the national databases and press releases revealed the noticeable increase of Saudi students in most American colleges and universities. Due to a fully funded Saudi government scholarship program, thousands of Saudi students were able to study at American institutions in various academic levels ranging from the preliminary intensive English courses to doctoral coursework and dissertations (Institute of International Education, 2012). Direct interaction with these students showed a difference as compared to the majority of other international students on campus in goal orientation, motivational drives, and ability beliefs regarding their expectations of degree attainment, and their social integration into college life. In preparation of the current study, an exploratory study was conducted with two Saudi students, a college instructor, and an administrator who was directly involved directly with Saudi students.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

As American colleges and universities have witnessed a continuous increase in Saudi students since 2005 as compared to their numbers in previous decades, a closer look to the general numbers of all international students in the U.S. might be informative as to show the relevance of the issue of Saudi students. During the academic year 2011-2012, international student enrollment numbers at American universities have reached its highest numbers as far back as national data can show (Institute of International Education, 2012). Among the several countries of origin of international students, Saudi Arabia stands out with the most continuously progressing numbers acquiring the fourth rank among the top twenty countries of origin of international students for the first time with 34,139 students studying at American institutions (Open Doors, 2012).

Saudi students share several circumstances with other international students like the cultural adjustment, learning environment shift, and the linguistic barriers. On the other hand, Saudi students have a different set of challenges due to economic, academic, social, psychological, cultural, religious, and political constructs (Miller, 2002; Razek & Coyner, 2013). The peculiarity for the case of Saudi students has its significant implications for the work of college personnel, college instructors and top administrators at RSU where Saudi students represent one fourth of the international student body on campus almost matching the numbers of Chinese and Indian students (Office of International Programs, 2012). Therefore, this study endeavors to examine one aspect of this phenomenon at RSU dealing with the self-efficacy beliefs of a sample of these students and their influence on their academic endeavors and persistence toward accomplishment of stated goals.

Research literature has addressed the issue of foreign college students in the United States from several aspects. Including cultural, psychological, and academic circumstances (Adams, 2004; Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004; McClure, 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Wang, 2004). Some of the aforementioned work addressed international students' adjustment patterns, linguistic problems, campus involvement, and academic achievement (McClure, 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Wang, 2004). Though not fully comprehensive, a small amount of these research studies examined self-efficacy and motivational aspects of international students (Adams, 2004; Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004; Wang, 2004). However, most of these studies addressed international students as one group without differentiation based upon their countries of origins with the exceptions of few studies addressing Chinese or Indian students. Neither of these studies examined Saudi students as an individual group. The current study, therefore, comes as a logical step regarding the scarcity of studies on self-efficacy of international students and the pressing need to study Saudi students as a growing part of the international student body on American campuses. Findings of the study may reveal unknown aspect that can be helpful to stakeholders of higher education in dealing with Saudi students to maximize the outcomes of their learning and to build their self-efficacy beliefs towards academic achievement and goal accomplishment.

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As self-efficacy and its major processes guide the amount of success students expect to achieve as compared to their actual abilities, this study explores the self-efficacy of Saudi students studying for a college degree in the United States in an effort to explore the multifaceted dimensions of their self-efficacy beliefs and the measures that can address their adjustment challenges to maximize their beliefs. The study also offers a deeper understanding of their psychological alienation created by their presence outside their zones of comfort. Related to their academic achievement, the patterns of motivational processes influencing these students while pursuing their degrees will also shed some lights on rarely visited areas of their specific case. We endeavored to answer the following questions: 1) what self-efficacy beliefs Saudi students have when they arrive in the U. S., 2) how their self-efficacy beliefs contribute to their academic choices, and 3) how RSU can introduce support system to help these students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-efficacy is “a belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3) Individuals’ perceived self-efficacy is believed to influence their choices of related tasks, their performance levels on chosen tasks, the amount of effort they put into accomplishment of the tasks, and the amount of perseverance they show on task pursuit (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy functions through four major processes: cognitive, motivational, affective, and selective (Bandura, 1993).

When researchers targeted self-efficacy within the educational settings, it proved to be positively connected to students’ persistence and academic achievement (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Stevens & Gist, 1997; Zimmerman, 1989). Researchers found a positive connection between high self-efficacy and high academic performance and found that students who had high self-efficacy utilize their abilities to overcome challenges and succeed in their current endeavors (Buyukselcuk, 2006; Houston, 1995; Schunk, 1984). Students with high self-efficacy showed stronger beliefs in their abilities in achieving success (Buyukselcuk, 2006; Houston, 1995). Researchers also proved that success in academic tasks is usually connected with high self-efficacy beliefs and vice versa (Camgoz, Tektas, & Metin, 2008). Some researchers have been able to establish a positive relationship between self-efficacy as a psychological factor and students’ college adjustment and achievement (Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007; Rittman, 1999). Psychological factors like self-efficacy are essential to understand student academic achievements and should be utilized as a guide in establishing college programs (Devonport & Lane, 2006; Pajares, 1996). Moreover, the sources of self-efficacy, once identified, could guide planning effective interventions that would improve academic achievement through increasing self-efficacy.

The aspect of self-efficacy is a particularly vital construct as related to the case of international students' acculturation and adjustment experiences in their host countries. Sherer and Adams (1983) found that self-efficacy is exposed to possible threats in the experiences of foreign college students. They found that different cultural frame of values and communication obstacles are the basis of these threats. The fact that the countries of origin of nonwestern foreign students are mainly collectivistic cultures that value interpersonal relationships has its own influence in creating stressors and challenges for achievement (Razek & Coyner, 2013). They are also distinguished for high senses of connectedness to family members. Therefore, it is natural that nonwestern foreign students who experience difficulties interacting with Americans may experience some form of psychological or social distress. Constantine et al. (2004) found that international college students from Africa appeared to be feeling worse with regard to their self-efficacy than international students from Asia and Latin America. Adams (2004) studied the influence of peer modeling on the self-efficacy of international graduate students and found that peer modeling can enhance their perceptions of competence for academic presentations. Moreover, the stress created by high expectations and causal comparative factors may urge international students to unethical academic choices involving cheating or plagiarism to compensate for low self-efficacy beliefs in individual's academic achievement (Razek, 2013). Therefore, a positive relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and high academic performance has been empirically established (Pajares & Schunk, 2001).

METHODS

This study utilized qualitative research tools to explore the self-efficacy and the motivational processes of degree pursuing Saudi students at RSU and how they influence students' academic achievements, college involvement and degree persistence. We used document reviews, field observations, and in-depth interviews. We utilized three sampling strategies to increase the objectivity of research findings: typical case, snowball, and information rich case (Paton, 1987). International students at RSU account for almost four percent of its total student population which provides a variety of circumstances, factors, and issues enriching the case studied. Choice of informants and observation sites were guided by nominations faculty, and staff during the pilot study.

Participants

Key informants in this study fell into three categories: 1) two college professors, 2) two college administrators, and 3) five male and three female Saudi students who were recruited through the professors and administrators recommendations as active and reflective students. Except for the eight Saudi students, other informants were involved directly in teaching or coordinating educational services targeting Saudi students. All Saudi students who participated in the study have spent more than a year in the United States. All of them had to start with English

languages courses to get full admission into their academic programs. Their ages ranged between 20 to 27 years old. We tried to make sure that the various categories of Saudi students are represented in the interviewee list. Participants were allowed to choose the pseudonyms used in this article to keep them anonymous. Salwa studies for a master's degree in educational instructional technology. Feras began the course work for the masters in civil engineering. Jehad is an undergraduate student of business administration. Zeyad is a junior majoring in communication technology. Ahmed is a sophomore majoring in technology. Hanan is a freshman majoring in information technology. Rabie is a doctoral political science student. Fadila, unscarfed, is a graduate student pursuing a master in public administration. John, a full professor in the Department of Communication, teaches cross cultural communication techniques. MaryAnn is a College of Education professor who taught three Saudi students last year. Theresa, a university administrator, is very involved with programming, coordination and advising for international students. Richard works as the English Language Institute director. In addition, various individuals who contributed in to ease adjustment problems of Saudi students at RSU were briefly interviewed usually to clarify a relevant point.

Data Collection and Analysis

After obtaining the Institutional Review Board approval, we conducted field observations of activities for international students and reviewed relevant documents issued from the Office of International Programs. It is also worth mentioning that our current as well as previous roles in different institutions facilitated access and full exposure to the realm of activities and measures targeting Saudi students that might be available on a university setting. The primary data source for this study originated from 12 one-hour open-ended individual interviews with the twelve key informants. These were conducted during the fall of 2009. Participants responded to a topical interview protocol eliciting their social and academic experiences at RSU and their self-efficacy beliefs. The several components of self-efficacy explored by the interview questions included: conception of ability, social comparison influences, framing of feedback, perceived controllability, and motivational processes (See Appendix A for a complete list of interview questions). After transcribing the responses, the data were coded and categorized within an emergent framework of relevant themes.

Trustworthiness and Authenticity of Data

During the data collection, coding, and analysis, trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, contextual completeness and long-term observation. Triangulation was achieved through varying the data collection tools including document reviews, observations and interviews. We endeavored to achieve contextual completeness through full description of the role of the students, faculty, and administrators as key informants of the study and the background of each of them. Done for two consecutive semesters, long-term observation ensured the study's thoroughness as the study lasted for a calendar year that covered the range of introduced activities

that coincided with different occasions and seasons. Open and fair solicitation of informants understanding of their self-efficacy beliefs, roles, and reactions to the case at RSU ensured the authenticity of data. Member validation was employed to ensure the dependability of the data. Participants were emailed a copy of their transcribed interview to check if they wanted to add or modify any of their responses. Member checking asserted the findings are reflective of the real dimensions of the case.

FINDINGS

Saudi students in the U.S. come from a society that praises the collective aspects of individuals. With this knowledge, “administrators at RSU try to involve Saudi students in several activities”, says Theresa. Other than the academic services for international students like international academic advising and Student Success Seminar, RSU offers various social and cultural programs that target international students in general like Around the World Party; International Education Week Showcase with dance, food, and culture; Cross Cultural Dialogue; Conversation Partner Program; Conversation Group for International Women; and Summit International Friendship with the First Weeker Program, Host Families Program, and International Speakers Service. Other programs also target Saudi students either specifically or as part of the larger Muslim students on campus like Saudi Arabia days, collective dinner (Ramadan Iftar), Eid (Feast) Party, and swimming for Muslim women.

The high degree of hierarchical social structure present in Saudi students’ society of origin forms conceptualized images of where individuals can fit. It also shapes aspirations and expectations that are associated with the individual’s expected place in that social order. “I will work as the director of women affairs in my region. The job is waiting for me in Saudi Arabia. ... I already had it because they know I am going to success”, says Fadila. Such hierarchy offers a framework of expected performance no matter how much effort the individual can offer to exert. “My family expects me to go back with my masters. It is already decided. ... There is no possibility I can return without that degree”, says Feras.

Saudi student participants at RSU come to the America with their predetermined conception of ability promoted by a very centralized educational system. The educational system available in Saudi Arabia is constructed about the behavioral school of thought allowing very little space for student autonomy. However, not all Saudi students have the inherent capacity view of their abilities. Some aspire to learn and advance due to social and educational circumstances that are not always available for the majority of students in Saudi Arabia. An investigation of these circumstances and their influences on Saudi students conceptions of ability lead to the following informative results.

Saudi participants usually compare themselves with other students around them. Such a factor might have been contextually acceptable while in their home country. However, when they arrive in the U.S., they compare their performance to the majority of American students to gauge

their success. This can provide a belittling evaluation of their academic achievement when considering their limited proficiency in English, the language of instruction. “My language is not as good as theirs. I cannot even imagine I can speak or understand English like them. I usually hesitate to speak in class although some time I have good ideas. But I feel other students will laugh at me”, says Zeyad.

Saudi student participants are highly motivated by the feedback systems that are practiced at RSU. Their perception of self-efficacy is usually raised through comments that focus on how much progress they made not how many tasks they accomplished successfully. Fadila responds to a question about the feedback provided by instructor saying,

In my college in the Kingdom, I used to get the test at the end of the term. I did not even have access to see my answers. I only knew the results. Here, I have different assignments throughout the term. I get my papers back with comments of the professor. I like this because I improve each time. Some professors offer us resubmit opportunities to correct our assignments for a better grade.

Ahmed reflects on a system offered by some of his instructors who provide students with a progress report and the increase of assignment weights towards the end of the semester. He says,

Three of my professors offer us a personal progress graph on Springboard. It tells you how good you are doing in the class. They always use this graph if we go for an advising meeting with them. They also try to make the grade for the assignments smaller at the beginning of the class this way; I know what the instructor expects from after receiving back my first paper.

Saudi student participants come from a relatively closed conservative society where change is not the responsibility of individuals. They do not look at changing the norms of their society as an easy or even achievable task. They do not usually challenge the established system. Their attitudes towards negotiation of rules and roles are very low. They expect their surroundings to be rigidly fixed and out of control. However, self-efficacious Saudi students usually begin to capture ways they can control their environment through utilizing available resources and development opportunities for them. “I took that as a learning experience. Now, whenever there is something that is against my religion, I go to the professor directly. Some other times, I call two of my American friends and ask them what to do. Another help I usually try is the lady in the international office. It is not her job, but she usually helps me when I go to her for a question about what to do”, says Fadila.

This new attitude towards their ability to change the environment leads to the factor of “causal structure”. After a semester or two in the American higher learning system, Saudi students change their initial conception of their abilities and begin to utilize their experiences to bring about a systematic change in their beliefs about their abilities. “It is very obvious”, says Theresa, “they come to RSU very unconscious of their abilities. They think they will fail. But give them two

semesters or three, and they usually change that attitude. They understand the system. They sometimes try to monopolize it” for their advantage.

Most of Saudi student participants come to the United States with clear goals. They aim at accomplishing their primary task of graduating with a college degree. However, their expectations of the amount of effort required to achieve these goals are usually unrealistic. This is reflected in both in their perseverance to achieve their goals and in their resilience while facing early challenges and failures in their programs. Richard noted,

Many of my Saudi students did not expect the amount of work we expect them to accomplish in the first year while in ELI. When we stated that their academic program will require more work, they were frustrated. Actually, many of them transfer after English studies completion expecting other universities to be easier.

Due to their governmental economic support and their guaranteed employment opportunities in Saudi Arabia, Saudi student participants at RSU enjoy a high level of control in facing threats of failures or academic stressors. However, such control is not usually well structured to yield positive consequences in their academic endeavors. Theresa says:

They are not encouraged by an innate need to excel and find a job in the States like other internationals. They seem fully secure in regard to jobs back in their country. . They do not need to work or get involved in any form of activity other than the classes. This may be the cause of their slow social and academic blending process

Richard supports that declaring, “They mainly interact with other Saudi outside of the classroom which limits the speed of their acquisition of English”.

Saudi participants build their choices depending on goals rather than self-efficacy beliefs. They have the courage to commit to tasks even if they believe they are beyond their believed abilities and skills. “I chose the program because this is the field I work [in] at home. I know it is difficult but I like this field.... the grades are not important. It is the degree that I need”, says Ahmed. However, their skills to obtain external help and change failures into successful learning experiences are usually lacking.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONS

The increasing presence of Saudi students in American colleges and universities warrants consideration beyond the usual issues of linguistic difficulties and adjustment problems to include issues of engagement and academic achievement. Although sharing some common characteristics with other foreign students, Saudi students at RSU demonstrate distinctive traits which make them unique. Although the research findings focused on Saudi students’ self-efficacy beliefs and their

influence on academic and social performance at RSU, they may offer valuable insights for administrators and faculty alike who may find similarities to the Saudi student populations at their institutions.

International program administrators and student affairs administrators bear responsibility to provide co-curricular and social opportunities for students. These opportunities should be structured to help orient Saudi students to their new learning environment. More realistic orientation programs and information sessions may help to positively influence Saudi students' choice of actions and motivational patterns. An effective strategy may be to engage them in activities that activate their analytical thinking skills about their performances, goal setting, goal orientation, and appreciation of the developmental aspect of learning rather than the outcome based perspective. Social activities should be organized in ways to promote student interaction and foster connections with students outside of the Saudi community. Designing engaging activities aimed at pairing Saudi and American students while being respectful of cultural norms provides opportunities for socializing. Another strategy that can be employed is to engage Saudi students on campus in designing and planning events for new students. In addition to building relationships, it may improve their own understanding of available resources and opportunities as they guide others.

It is important for faculty and academic departments to consider the self-efficacy beliefs held by these students. Academic departments can design internships or unpaid work experiences which would require Saudi students to remain on campus and compel them to interact with faculty and students, building confidence and providing opportunities for students to ask for help in a non-class setting. Departments could provide training to educate faculty and staff about the characteristics Saudi students possess. Recognizing that these students may hold unrealistic expectations regarding the amount of effort required for degree attainment, departments should provide opportunities to help students understand requirements and the accompanying effort needed to be successful. Orientation seminars and college success workshops should target this aspect in an effort to change the negative influence of social comparisons to a more "outcome based assessment".

Programs that encourage collaborative and cooperative learning strategies can help them acquire needed learning skills and maximize their learning experiences. Academic experiences may occur in an environment where the Saudi students participate and gauge success based on leader-articulated goals, rather than allowing students to follow their inclination to compare themselves to group norms. Since it appears that self-efficacy is increased by feedback based on progress, classroom assessments should be structured to provide periodic evaluations against predetermined objectives. Creating academic activities within classes which apply critical thinking and encourage setting and achieving goals can provide opportunities for students to appreciate and further develop their personal abilities. Interactive learning environments and utilizing peer modeling may help students be more engaged with their peers (Adams, 2004). Group

work and collaborative learning experiences offer methods to encourage Saudi students to move out of their comfort zones and engage with other learners.

Further, faculty can structure learning activities that allow decision making and student input into the learning process, providing opportunities for students to build on success and gain confidence in their academic abilities. Faculty can cultivate democratic opportunities for individual influence regarding guidelines and roles thereby offering students insight into how they might be empowered to exert influence and elicit change. Free from the economic pressures facing many American students, Saudi students are not motivated by the fear of consequences resulting from academic failure common to many other students. Faculty may need to focus less on learning activities and assessments that are grade-driven and maximize learning opportunities by concentrating academic content and strategies on performance based criteria. Progress reports would be beneficial for their learning experiences in the United States not only because it will deemphasize the competitive approach but also because it will offer them the opportunity to self-compare their progress on the basis of a developmental guideline. Motivation for these students may not be a final grade, so strategies must be utilized to require students to be engaged in the learning process throughout the class, using rewards other than grades to ensure proficiency.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study had three limitations that restricted its findings. First: the small sample size of key informants limited the degree of generalization of the findings. Therefore, they can only be taken into consideration with caution when looking at other institutions. Second, the geographic location of RSU may have had its influence on the case. In other words Saudi students may behave, perform, and react differently if they are at an institution located in another state where the student bodies are more diverse. Third, information about the study participants obtained through this study, though revealing in-depth rich aspects of the case, is very specific to the case studied and cannot be utilized to speak about the whole group of Saudi students even at RSU. However, readers may find similarities between the case at hand and some of the Saudi students at their institutions which may make the implications applicable.

Previous studies which dealt with self-efficacy beliefs of foreign students usually focused on international students as a group. Although the results of these studies cannot be neglected, the case of the noticeable increase of Saudi students in the United States deserved a more focused attention (Adams, 2004; Constantine et al., 2004; Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Sherer & Adams, 1983).

This study showed that, self-efficacy as an agreed upon construct of student academic achievement, can be increased to improve the achievement level of Saudi students at American higher education institutions (Devonport & Lane, 2006; Pajares, 1996). Such increase can be carried out through orientation programs, college success seminars and freshman year programs, student life programs, and multicultural events. An informed decision making process should

guide the design of the aforementioned extracurricular activities. These should be based on engaging activities and socializing opportunities (Wang, 2004). Engaging Saudi students in planning such activities would maximize the benefits. Academically, an awareness of the Saudi students' case and providing employment and internship opportunities on campus may help them increase their persistence and success rates. Interactive and collaborative learning experiences coupled with periodic evaluations against well-articulated objectives can increase their academic performance.

Future studies may target a larger sample size of Saudi students to produce more generalizable results. A quantitative approach may be a suitable technique to studying the characteristics of a larger number of Saudi students. A collaborative multi institutional study would reveal valuable findings about Saudi students as a fast growing group on American campuses.

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