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Nasser Razek
University of Dayton, nrazek1@uakron.edu

Sandra C. Coyner
University of Akron Main Campus

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BEHIND THE VEIL: CULTURAL CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR A NEW INTERNATIONAL STUDENT GROUP

Nasser A. Razek, The University of Akron
Sandra C. Coyner, The University of Akron

ABSTRACT

The number of Saudi students studying in the United States quintupled from 3,035 students in 2005 to 15,810 students in 2010 due to a fully funded Saudi government scholarship (Open Doors, 2010). As students originating in a cultural background differing from the prevailing principles of their higher education institutions, Saudi students face several challenges. The cultural challenges are one of the most frequently apparent among these challenges (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004; Miller, 2002). Building upon the relationship between the cultural beliefs and student academic achievement, this study aimed at examining the cultural aspects of the increased presence of Saudi students enrolled in the various academic programs at a Mid-Western research university, Riverside State University, a pseudonym. The study followed the qualitative method for data collection and analysis. After conducting initial site observations and document reviews, primary data were collected from open ended interviews with students, administrators, and professors at the university. Study findings revealed various cultural implications arising from the continuous increase of Saudi students on American higher education campuses. The cultural construct was shown to have several subsequent aspects including: transition, academic life, and social life. University support systems were explored to demonstrate a replicable model that can be adopted to ease the cultural adjustment of these students. Recommendations demonstrate how various techniques can be utilized to increase Saudi students' engagement for academic success.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural challenges are one of the most frequently researched among these challenges that face students originating in cultural backgrounds different from the prevailing principles of their higher education institutions. A surge in the numbers of graduate and undergraduate Saudi students enrolled at American institutions due to a fully-funded Saudi government scholarship moved Saudi Arabia to the seventh rank among the countries of origin of international students in the United States for the first time with 15,810 students (Open Doors, 2009). The presence of this growing student group on American campuses has significant implications for university administrators. The current study aimed at examining the cultural aspects of the increased presence of Saudi students enrolled in the various academic programs at Riverside State University (RSU), a pseudonym, where they represent one fourth of the international population.

RATIONALE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

The growing presence of Saudi students on American campuses has significant implications for student affairs professionals, college professors and university administrators. Although Saudi students share many aspects with other international students, they experience different circumstances due to distinctive economic, academic, psychological, social, cultural, religious, and political factors (Miller, 2002). This study explored one aspect of this phenomenon at RSU concerning the cultural construct of a sample of these students and its influence on their academic and social performance. International students' adjustment patterns, linguistic problems, campus involvement, and academic achievement were frequently investigated in research. However, there are no recent studies that addressed the cultural construct influence on Saudi students' academic achievement at American institutions. This scarcity warrants the current study exploring the multifaceted dimensions of Saudi students' cultural background and the measures that can address their adjustment challenges to maximize success and benefits from their college experience. Specifically, the research aimed to discover: 1) what challenges face Saudi students as a result of their cultural background, and 2) the effectiveness of support systems available for these students with respect to easing their adjustment and engaging them in the college life at RSU.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Beside the linguistic barriers, international students usually face challenges due to transition when placed in their foreign educational institution. These include: 1) finding accommodations and day to day life necessities, 2) acquiring academic skills and learning techniques, and 3) familiarizing and engaging themselves with college social aspects.

Engagement and Inclusion

According to Keup (2006), the friendliness of campus climate and welcoming gestures to all students with elimination of fear, oppression, and stereotype threats have been established as important factors in easing student adjustment and consequently supporting optimal student development and positive learning outcomes. Gloria and Ho (2003) argued that the strength of the social support elements like comfort in the college environment, social relationships, peer support, and students' self-beliefs are predictors of student success, college satisfaction, and academic persistence.

Collectivistic and Individualistic Cultures

Different cultures were often classified on the collectivistic-individualistic continuum (Triandis, 1994). This continuum was often used to conduct cross-cultural studies focusing on individual perceptions of self, roles in society, importance of goals, individual and collective identity, measures of success, and individual gains. Due to the amount of behavioral pattern

restrictions which the society places on its individuals, learning styles of college students differ according to their culture of origin (Ma & Schoeneman, 1997). In collectivistic societies, the students receive knowledge from the teachers who embody the role of potential sages, while students' individual insights are not valued because learning and teaching is a responsibility for the good of the collective (Pak & Sands, 1996). Students in individualistic societies are responsible for their learning where instructors act as guides rather than experts in the discipline. Institutions in individualistic cultures provide the learning environment where students can self initiate learning and get personally engaged in a self directed quest (Ma & Schoeneman, 1997).

Challenges for Saudi Students

Saudi Arabia ranks high in the collectivistic category as demonstrating adherance to traditional customs and social values (Long, 2005). Therefore, individuals from collectivist societies are expected to demonstrate high collectivistic behaviors that shape their conceptualization of the relationship with others both within their own group and outside of their group (Caldwell-Harris & Aycicegi, 2006). Such a conceptualization influences Saudi students' understanding, feelings, and reactions toward their situation in the United States as highly collectivist individuals placed in a very individualistic society. Possessing an orientation that is incongruent with societal values may represent a risk factor for individuals (Caldwell-Harris & Aycicegi, 2006). Differences between the individuals' type and the society in which they live can produce various influences on those individuals with dependent personalities, especially their behaviors like social anxiety, obsessive–compulsive disorder, and various types of depression (Darwish & Huber, 2003). Moreover, some students from collectivistic cultures may lack the requisite skills to make new friends outside of their group (Pak & Sands, 1996).

METHODS

This study utilized qualitative research tools including document reviews, field observations, and in-depth interviews. Using an information rich case as a sampling strategy increased the objectivity of research findings. International students at RSU account for almost 4% of its student body providing a variety of constructs enriching the circumstances of international students at RSU. Participants included two college professors, two college administrators, five male and three female Saudi students. The students were recruited through recommendations of professors as active and reflective students. Primary data sources were 12 one-hour open-ended individual interviews. Participants responded to a topical interview protocol eliciting their feelings, emotions, and experiences at RSU over an academic year. The components explored by the interview questions included influence of the culture of origin, cultural challenges, transition, social life, and support systems at RSU. After transcription, the data were coded and categorized within an emergent framework of relevant themes.

FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS AND, RECOMMENDATIONS

Culturally, a need to raise the awareness among RSU faculty and administrators of Saudi students' needs has arisen from the study. On the other hand, more programs are needed to inform Saudi students about the cultural norms in place at American colleges and in the American society in general. In this respect, multicultural seminars, workshops, and classes may be helpful if integrated as part of their college programs. Introducing activities that aim at minimizing the stereotype threat may help Saudi students at RSU to understand that their actions are interpreted as representing them as individuals rather than their collective group. College administrators and academic departments usually initiate support systems to help these students adjust to their new context and achieve their desired educational goals. Advisors and orientation leaders can play an essential role in easing many transitional obstacles like social, political, cultural, academic, and linguistic barriers. Several social and community groups can also be supportive for these students upon arrival at the American institution. Utilizing other Saudi students is another successful mechanism that can be effective by building on the fact that they like to offer help to other group members.

Increasing group and pair work in classes is one technique for increasing both linguistic and academic levels. Programs that encourage collaborative and cooperative learning strategies can help them acquire such skills and maximize their learning experiences. Therefore, initiating learning communities and study groups may be other beneficial techniques that can help Saudi students through getting them to practice their language within the jargon of their academic topic. Increasing the effectiveness of orientation programs to address the variety of the aforementioned challenges together with introducing activities that pair Saudi students with other American students or provide them with the opportunity to mix with them in a relaxed environment can help these students cope with the new environment. Departments could provide training to educate faculty and staff about the characteristics Saudi students possess.

CONCLUSION

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. University administrators bear responsibility to provide co-curricular and social opportunities 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' educational choices and engagement patterns. Social activities should be organized in ways to promote student interaction and foster connections with students outside of the Saudi community. It is important for faculty and academic departments to consider the cultural beliefs held by Saudi students.

Programs that encourage collaborative and cooperative learning strategies can help them acquire needed learning skills and maximize their learning experiences. 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. Further, faculty can structure learning activities that provide opportunities for students to build on success and gain confidence in their academic abilities.

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