Supporting Diversity: International Students’ Insights About the First Year

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Maureen Andrade, EdD
Brigham Young University Hawaii
Purpose of Study

- Institutional retention/graduation rates low
  - domestic 42% first year retention; 6% six-year graduation
  - international 64% first year retention; 20% six-year graduation

- Reasons: domestic
  - fun in the sun, limited majors, GE then transfer; community college

- Reasons: international
  - sponsored on a work-study program, low SES, first generation, weak academic backgrounds, low English proficiency, cultural differences

- Previous research: departure due to freedom, relationships, family, focus, and institutional factors; first year the best year

- Current study: persistence – asked seniors to reflect on their first year & adjustment process
International Student Adjustment

- English language
  - comprehension of lectures and readings, writing assignments, unfamiliar vocabulary and idioms, professors’ accents

- Cultural factors
  - unfamiliar pedagogical styles & cultural practices; interaction patterns; limited social interaction- priority on course work; lack of confidence, isolation
Method & Participants

- qualitative interviews & focus groups
- seniors – those who had persisted; what contributed to their success?
- asked to describe their first year, academic & social experiences, support systems & strategies
- 12 total (6 Pacific – Tonga, Fiji, Samoa, Kiribati); (6 Asian – HK, Japan, Taiwan)
- gender equal
- worked PT, same religion, 3 married/6 single, 5 prior HE experience in home countries
In the Classroom - Challenges

- English proficiency
- Student-professor relationships
- Learning styles
- Feeling like a minority
- Poor academic performance
In the Classroom - Solutions

- Passage of time
- Involvement behaviors
- Goal-setting
- Study habits & time management
- Campus support services
Outside the Classroom - Challenges

- English proficiency
- Study demands
- Cultural issues
- Environment
Outside the Classroom - Solutions

- Involvement with peers from their own backgrounds
- Involvement with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds
- Involvement in the religious life of the institution
Summary

- linguistic and cultural adjustment issues
- inhibited by English proficiency
- lacked confidence in navigating in the new environment
- surprised by various cultural differences
- developed strategies for success
- successful due to own efforts; some formal institutional support
Involvement & Integration

- social
  - peers from own countries
  - cross-cultural
- academic
  - goal-oriented behaviors
  - required extra effort due to linguistic, cultural, and educational system differences
  - adjusted to the expectations and requirements of the American university system
- faculty support and encouragement
- religious life
Implications

- English support (course support workshops, tutoring, formal study groups, study partnerships, content-based ESL courses)
- learning communities, extracurricular activities, class projects designed to bring culturally and linguistically diverse students together
- faculty awareness of linguistic and cultural difficulties
- support and encourage students’ involvement in religious activities
First Year Critical

- those who departed saw first year as “best year;” problems in second or third years
- able to succeed the first year, but could not sustain this success; failed to recognize the areas in which they needed to adjust
- dismissed for academic or honor code violations, or left to avoid being dismissed
- suggests need for ongoing support
- those who persisted recognized the adjustments they needed to make and formed habits and attitudes contributing to their future success
- first year was critical to both groups of students but in different ways