

Connecting the Challenges Faced by Foreign-born Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

The unprecedented increase in the foreign-born population in the United States since the 1970s, low post secondary graduation rates, combined with the requirement of a higher education degree in the U.S. labor market precipitated this study. Since foreign-born students are an integral part of the U.S. population, understanding the challenges faced by foreign-born students in higher educational institutions will create an avenue for recommending solutions to many of these challenges, thereby increasing their educational attainment and economic productivity and ultimately preparing more Americans for the competitive 21st century global market. This study investigates the challenges faced by foreign-born students in a state college and solicited suggestions for improvement in foreign-born student achievement.

Keywords: Foreign-born, State College, Success, Challenges

Background

As the American foreign-born population grows and becomes more diverse, so does the proportion of foreign-born students in American higher education institutions. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2014), the enrollment of the foreign-born and their children in the United States higher education system was 34.7% in 2003, compared to 39.6% in 2013. Additionally, the world economy is increasingly more competitive; therefore, America's comparative advantage in the global market depends on the education and skills of its workers. The job opportunities requiring at least an Associate degree are projected to grow twice as fast as those requiring no college experience in the next decade (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). Foreign-born students (FBS), although increasing in numbers in the United States, especially in academia, have faced many challenges in their educational journeys. These challenges have had an impact on their academic success, sometimes deterring their opportunities for graduation. Boosting the success rate of all students should be a national necessity, not only for individuals but for the nation.

In 2014, the United States foreign-born population was more than 42.4 million, representing 13.3% of the total U.S. population of 318.9 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Today, U.S. foreign-born and their U.S. born children number approximately 81 million, representing 26% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). That is, one out of every four Americans is foreign-born or is a child of at least one foreign-born parent. Further, the Pew Research Institute estimated that by 2065 that number will rise to one in three (Cohn, 2015), representing about 33% of United States total population.

Since foreign-born students are an integral part of the United States, it is imperative to educate them for the nation to remain globally competitive. Not only did the researchers in the current study investigate the challenges faced by foreign-born students in higher education, they sought recommendations to remedy these challenges. Therefore, understanding the challenges faced by the foreign-born students at state colleges will create an avenue for recommending solutions to

some or all the challenges. Furthermore, not only will this increase the educational attainment and economic productivity of foreign-born students, but it will prepare more Americans for the competitive 21st century global market.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the essence of, interpret, and describe the challenges faced by foreign-born students (FBS) in a state college that may be preventing and/or prolonging their graduation. In addition, the study solicited recommendations for improvement from the participants.

Definition

In order to emphasize who is considered foreign-born, it will be useful to define who is not. Those who are not foreign-born are considered native born: “The Census Bureau uses the terms native and native born to refer to anyone born in the United States, Puerto Rico, a U.S. Island Area (American Samoa, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, or the U.S. Virgin Islands), or abroad of a U.S. citizen parent or parents” (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). After conducting research on the definition of foreign-born, the simplest definition is the one by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). They defined the foreign-born population of a country as “persons who have that country as the country of usual residence and whose place of birth is located in another country” (OECD, p. 301), excluding those born abroad to a U.S. citizen parent.

Methodology

The researchers conducted a pilot study to help gain insight into the condition of higher education as it pertains to foreign-born students’ success. The pilot study was a pivotal component of the current action research. The study was intentionally conducted by the researchers to improve their practice. According to Herr and Anderson (2014), action research is conducted by an individual or individuals within an organization to study a phenomenon, with the intention to improve outcomes for the organization. An action research approach was appropriate for this study because it directly impacted the researchers’ students and each researcher sought to seek ways to resolve foreign-born students concerns and aid in their overall achievement.

Using a qualitative approach, the challenges faced by foreign-born students (FBS) in a state college (which could prevent or prolong their graduation) were investigated seeking recommendations for improvement. A Qualtrics survey was utilized to gather preliminary demographic information from each student and to solicit participants for focus group discussions. Data collected from focus groups and the survey were analyzed using Moustakas’s (1994) and Creswell’s (2003) methods. The focus group and survey questions were developed using Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) College Impact model and Vygotsky’s (1978) Socio-cultural theory as the foundational framework to guide this study. A thematic approach was used to analyze the information retrieved from the participants in the study, which provided objectivity throughout the process.

Site Selection

The data was collected at Victory State College of Florida (VSC) in Central Florida. During the 2016/2017 academic year, VSC had a total of 29,014 students enrolled, 1,528 faculty and staff, and awarded 5,813 degrees and certificates. The college had no specific data of the FBS population enrolled at the college. However, the Institutional Review and Effectiveness department at the college reported that 1,000 international students from 82 countries were enrolled during the same 2016/2017 academic year (“Victory State College”, 2016).

Participant Selection

According to Hycner (1999), “the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the type of participants” (p. 156). A “purposive” or “convenience” sampling approach was used because it allowed the researchers to select individuals who were qualified to provide the information most necessary to assist with the study. The researchers purposively chose foreign-born students for this study, which was supported by Kruger and Stones (1981) as the most important kind of non-probability sampling to identify those who “have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched” (p. 150).

The participants in this pilot study were foreign-born students intending to complete a certificate, an Associate degree, and/or with an end goal to transfer to a four-year college or to earn a bachelor’s degree. These criteria were selected to focus on individual student goals, rather than institutional goals, and to intentionally exclude students who attended college to learn English only or for recreational purposes. Therefore, this study assumes graduation as the goal to which the students were striving. Hence, any factor which impeded the achievement of this goal was considered a challenge. The participants selected for this study were members of the foreign-born student population of the college. These were “individuals who had no U.S. citizenship at birth” (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Data Collection

Pilot study data were collected from two sources including focus group discussions and survey. A preliminary demographic survey was administered by the Institutional Research and Effectiveness department of the college using Qualtrics software to reach all students enrolled in college credit classes in the Spring of 2017. The survey included a brief description of this study, a questionnaire requesting demographic information, and a request to participate in a focus group. This format was utilized intentionally to collect preliminary data on the FBS at the college and to solicit participants for the focus group discussions.

Discussion

Data Analysis

The survey and focus group discussions were used to explore both the academic and social experiences of FBS at the college, as well as to solicit recommendations for improvement. Once the surveys were returned, the data were retrieved from Qualtrics and exported into an Excel spreadsheet. Then, the researchers grouped similar statements into categories and each category was labelled with the most thematic codes from the group. These categories were formulated based on the most frequently repeated significant statements from each group. These statements later guided the focus group questions.

Two focus groups of three students each were conducted, using open-ended questions as a guide for discussion. The focus groups were recorded using the Audio Note software; recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure an accurate systematic analysis of the discussion and for the researchers to become familiar with the data. Then the researchers focused on identifying significant statements regarding participants' academic and social challenges as they described their lived experiences at the state college. These significant statements were initially sorted for each of the focus group questions. The action of identifying core themes was repeated throughout the transcription process. Finally, the researchers synthesized the meaning and essence of the identified academic and social challenges.

This pilot study revealed the following student challenges: language barriers and insecurities (formal and informal English), erroneous and inaccurate advising/counseling provided by the institution, financial issues, insufficient information, time management issues, deficiency in the knowledge of the education system and requirements, lack of support, cultural differences and unfamiliarity from both natives and FBS, personal characteristics, engagement deficiencies (with both faculty and peers), feelings of isolation, necessity to make new friends, and navigating the system for resources and information (alone). Table 1 lists the challenges and their connection to emergent themes from the pilot study.

Table 1
Emergent themes and sub-themes

<u>Emergent Themes</u>	<u>Sub-themes</u>
Academic Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Language Barriers and Insecurities ● Lack of Faculty Engagement ● Cultural Difficulties and Unfamiliarity ● Lack of Technology Knowledge Requirements
Social Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of Peer Engagement ● Cultural Differences ● Language Barriers
Organizational Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Erroneous & Inaccurate Advising/Counseling ● Insufficient Information ● Financial Issues ● Deficiencies in the Knowledge of the Education System/Requirements ● Navigating the System Alone for Resources and Information
Mentorship Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of Support ● Lack of Extracurricular Activities ● Lack of Diverse Student Organizations
Personal Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Feeling of Isolation ● Time Management Issues ● Setting High Goals

The exploratory question regarding how the college can improve the support offered to FBS was specifically asked of the participants, to understand type of support they feel the college could provide to foster their success. The information gathered was utilized as a standard or benchmark, with which all parties were familiar with the end goal and what might be done to help achieve said goal. Throughout the study, the students involved had shared much input and provided many suggestions. Some of those suggestions included: the college providing more opportunities to engage with both faculty, staff, native students, and other FBS; providing proper advising; providing avenues for cultural engagement for all; providing financial advising; consolidating and publicizing all resources available to support students at the college (such as information regarding the honors society, volunteer society, etc.); offer formal and informal English classes to FBS; hire qualified staff with proper training in each department (for example, placement services, advisors); and hiring bi/tri-lingual staff.

Implications and Conclusions

To effectively serve foreign-born students at the college, professionals may find it helpful to understand and be aware of the challenges these students face. Awareness of their challenges could aid administrators in creating strategic opportunities to solve these challenges. Because “individual effort and engagement are the critical determinants of the impact of college, then it is important to focus on the ways in which an institution can shape its academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings to encourage student engagement” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, p. 602).

Specifically, the researchers believe the following measures should be considered by Victory State College leaders, administrators, students, faculty, and staff to address the challenges of foreign-born students and help them in their social and academic pursuits. The College Board of Governors and administrators should recognize the significant increase of foreign-born students in the community that the college serves; there are challenges faced by foreign-born students and benefits associated with accelerating their academic and social success. Acknowledging these points are critical before administrators can introduce opportunities for improvement which uniquely address each identified challenge faced by FBS. When students’ challenges are addressed, students feel connected to the college, which leads to student persistence, retention, and eventually graduation (Astin, 1984; Mallette & Cabrera, 1991; Nora, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977).

The results of the pilot study indicated that FBS feel uncomfortable communicating because of language barriers and insecurities. It is beneficial to reach out to FBS and provide them with opportunities to engage with faculty, native students, and staff. FBS should also take advantage of college events (structured or unstructured) to increase interaction with other students. Several researchers suggested that when students get help and support, and when they are engaged in the college activities provided, their chances of succeeding will increase (Kuh, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini 1977, 1980, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 1975). The college should facilitate events and opportunities for such interactions and engagements to occur.

Further, the effort to engage FBS could affect the way students, faculty, and staff at Victory State College view cultural diversity. By promoting cultural awareness through activities and events at

the college, mutual tolerance between foreign-born students and natives (Americans) could be inspired. The college's activities should encourage new perspectives and open the eyes of all students which allows for unique bonds among students, faculty, and staff in the college. Ultimately, stereotypes should be reduced while allowing individuality and diversity which leads to peace and a civic community at the college and beyond while allowing for student academic success.

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