Chapter 5
Learning and Academic Self–Concept: Comparing International and American Students

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors provide (a) succinct synopsis of the scholarship on international students’ college learning in the United States, and (b) detailed report of a study comparing international and American students’ learning and academic self-concept. The study reveals greater involvement in college learning among international than American students. Regarding what contributes to academic self-concept, there are more similarities than differences between international and American students. Controlling for academic self-concept at college entry, students who are more involved in learning (e.g., more interactions with faculty, more time spent studying alone or with peers) report higher academic self-concept at graduation. Females, international and American students alike, report lower academic self-concept despite greater involvement in college learning. Institutional selectivity has a negative influence on international students. Implications for research and practice are provided.

INTRODUCTION

American colleges and universities have continued to attract the biggest share of international students (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2013). In 2013/2014, the number of international students in the United States increased to a record high of 886,052, an 8.1% growth over the previous year, a 57% growth since 2004/2005, and a 96% growth since 1994/1995 (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2014a). For example, Arizona State University most recently increased

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9752-2.ch005
its international student enrollment by 30.7% from 6,645 in 2012/2013 to 8,683 in 2013/2014. The international student enrollment at New York University increased by 19.2% during the same time period, reaching 11,164 and making the university the top leading institution of international student enrollment in the United States (see http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students/Leading-Institutions for rapid enrollment growth at other U.S. institutions). In 2013/2014, international students accounted for 4.2% of total higher education enrollment in American colleges and universities, compared with 3.2% in 1994/1995 (IIE, 2014a). Recent enrollment increase has been concentrated more at the undergraduate than the graduate level. For the first time since 2001, the number of international undergraduates surpassed that of graduate students in 2011/2012 and has since remained so, reaching 370,724 undergraduates in 2013/2014 (IIE, 2014b).

Institutions are trying to provide better services to international students. Yet, the lack of empirical understanding has created challenges (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010; Trice, 2003). It is hardly news among higher education scholars and student affairs professionals of calling for more empirical studies on international students (e.g., Glass, Buus, & Braskamp, 2013; Mamiseishvili, 2011). The enrollment growth has brought increasing research attention to international students, albeit slowly. For example, Journal of International Students, the first research journal that solely focuses on international students, was founded in 2010. Journal of College Student Development, the leading research journal in American higher education in the area of how college affects students, recently introduced a section in each issue focusing on international students.

In the following sections, we begin by briefly reviewing the research on international students in American higher education, with the goal of identifying major gaps in the literature as well as providing broad suggestions for further research. Then, we report a study as an example of the many potential fruitful avenues that future research on international students could explore. Overall, central to our arguments and discussions throughout this chapter is the imperative of serving international students from the perspective of student affairs in an age of accountability. Studies, including the one reported in this chapter, provide important empirical evidence to inform institutional policies and practices gearing towards enhancing international students’ learning and academic success.

We emphasize the comparison between international and American students, given the context of how international student services are currently structured on American college campuses. Although an institution usually has an office for international students (usually called Office of International Students or other similar titles), this office is primarily responsible for issuing visa and other legal documents. Student affairs services for international students (including academic, social, and psychological services) are dispersed and fragmented. In general, any student services office serves both American and international students at the same time. While student affairs professionals may have substantive knowledge and life experiences to serve American students, they tend to know much less about the fast growing group of international students. Therefore, comparisons about where international and American students are similar and different help student affairs professionals better understand and serve international students.

BACKGROUND

Research on international students in American higher education has been limited in number and in scope. There are four foci among the limited number of studies: (a) broad mobility trends, (b) the push-pull factors during the time of recruitment and post-graduation, (c) linguistic and sociocultural adjustment
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