Peer Reviewed Article

International Students' Confidence and Academic Success

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Abstract

Research shows that the international student population is showing significant growth. This article deals with issues affecting a growing international student population. Studies show that foreign students are encountering difficulties in social adaptability, language barriers, academic ability, and financial need. There is evidence that a correlation exists among a sense of self-efficacy and each of these four issues. This study includes quantitative analysis of 137 students' responses to a questionnaire addressing each of these issues that constitute their total resources. Data show that international students attending a mid-western university who scored high on confidence levels in completing their programs of study also scored high on their confidence of their resources. Analysis revealed that students who scored low in confidence for completing their programs of study also scored low on their confidence of these four aforementioned issues.

Keywords: international students, confidence, campus resources, academic success

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American research universities establish relationships with academic institutions outside of the U.S., and that brings an international perspective to American academia (Davis-Wiley, Benner, & Rider, 2007). At the same time, there is a significant benefit to increasing domestic students' global competency by promoting familiarity with different world cultures (Pandit, 2007). According to Jenny J. Lee (2007), the academic perspective and the financial benefits that foreign students bring to a university is valuable. Furthermore, the education that international students acquire from the U.S. leads to a constructive and positive attitude toward the U.S. (Lee & Rice, 2007).

In 2011-2012, the number of international students increased 5.7%, reaching a record high of 764,495 (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2012). According to IIE (2012), there were 309,342 international undergraduate students, 300,430 international graduate students, and 69,566 international students not seeking a degree, contributing 22 billion dollars annually to the United States economy. Fischer (2011) writes that colleges and universities are increasing their recruitment process while decreasing their admission criteria in order to attract international students. In addition to the academic expense, international students and their dependents spend over 14 billion dollars a year in goods and services (IIE, 2012).

Because of the academic and economic contributions international students offer, American higher education institutions are expected to maintain an aggressive recruitment program (IIE, 2012). To stay internationally competitive in attracting international students, colleges must adapt a multicultural approach to academics and campus life in general. A guaranteed way to have a constant flow of international students is to meet the needs of the students that are already here (Karuppan & Barari, 2010). The United States learning environments are unique compared to those of other countries; consequently international students are faced with new social and academic conditions (Johnson & Kumar, 2010; Tang, 1993; Volet & Kee, 1993; Ward, 2001). Students experience stress and anxiety when faced with community acceptance/comfort, language mastery, academic preparation, and financial solvency issues.

This article analyzes these four issues that international students may face when studying in the U.S., i.e., to determine if the four issues are sufficient to alter the students' confidence level in successfully completing their studies. While the literature provided the basis for identifying each of the issues and how they affect students' confidence of success, this study provides insight on the impact of these concerns on the current foreign student population.

The key to this research is self-efficacy as that is one of the strongest contributors to one's psychological success when it comes to completing a desired action (Bandura, 1997). Without a sense of self-efficacy, people have little desire to initiate change, and part of self-efficacy is one's belief in the ability to change an outcome. Self-efficacy is "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3).

Studies (Bouffard-Bouchard, Parent, & Larivee, 1991) confirm that students with high levels of self-efficacy outperformed those with low levels of self-efficacy even if those with high levels were less prepared academically (as cited in Bandura, 1997). Studies by Schunk (1989) determined that in academic success, an individual's self–efficacy is a better predictor of intellectual accomplishment than skill alone (as cited in Bandura, 1997).

Hyun, Quinn, Madon, and Lustig (2007) write about multiple factors influencing international graduate students' success and discuss some of the supports available both on university campuses and in the community. Obstacles such as financial need, cultural adaptation, living adjustment, academic adjustment, socio-cultural adjustment, psychological adjustment, language barriers are potential impediments for international students (Hyun et al., 2007). Hyun and her colleagues (2007) write that international students' mental health is related to their academic success. Stress reduction could be the single most important factor in contributing to international students' success. According to Chalungsooth and Schneller (2011), all students encounter some stressful circumstances during college. International students face many special challenges while transitioning into new academic and social roles.

Community Acceptance and Culture

Getting familiar with their new way of life, e.g., new surroundings, food, transportation, customs, and social norms, all become essential tasks for the newcomers (Lee, 2007). Past studies provide data on international students' experiences in the U.S. by measuring students' satisfaction with their housing, personal affairs, and academics (Chow & Putney, 2009; Davis-Wiley et al., 2007; Ebinger, 2011). A study of Korean international students at the University of Tennessee reported concerns with their social adjustments. These concerns included unanticipated expenses such as paying taxes

on purchases, lack of public transportation, and unavailability of Korean cuisine (Davis-Wiley et al., 2007). Academic adjustment was reported to be an additional challenge as students had to learn how to use the library and other university services while trying to deal with a new approach to teaching and learning. Korean students reported that they had no American friends at the beginning of their studies and, since they were away from home, they lacked emotional support (Davis-Wiley et al., 2007).

Lee's (2007) study revealed that students from the Middle East, Africa, East Asia, Latin America, and India are faced with discrimination, making it difficult to adjust to U.S. culture when compared to students from Canada and Europe. Without knowledge of multiculturalism it is difficult for educators to shape or adapt an international curriculum, making it increasingly difficult to understand students from different parts of the world (Keith, 2005). Studies related to community report that international students are often lonely due to missing their families, as well as dealing with social acceptance (Adelman, 1988). International students have the added stress related to living in an unfamiliar cultural environment and studying in a different educational system and language (Campbell, 2012).

The learning environment that both undergraduate and graduate international students experience can be stressful due to the difference between local culture and a student's ethnicity (Tavakoli, Lumley, Hijazi, Slavin-Spenny, & Parris, 2009). One explanation of the accumulated stress among many international students is based on the idea that many international students are coming from nations such as China and India, where members of society are more interdependent on one another. The idea of individualism varies among cultures (Schimmack, Oishi, & Diener, 2005). Individualism and collectivism are used as the focus point in cross-cultural psychology to explain cultural differences and could be regarded as significant obstacles when it comes to a person's ease of acculturation or assimilation. A person's cultural background also dictates the type of communication he or she is comfortable with. Assertive communication may be against some of the values carried by international students and this may cause a cultural conflict (Tavakoli et al., 2009).

When it comes to social acceptance there are multiple approaches that contribute to the way international students are welcomed into their new academic life. Student safety, community acceptance, and universities' and communities' ability to cater to international students by offering multicultural outlets, prayer rooms, a variety of international cuisine, and other welcoming services is exceedingly important in creating a multicultural environment. In order to maintain and benefit from international students' cultural and financial attributes, studies suggest that further efforts should be made to increase diversity awareness on campus as well as in the community (Greene & Greene, 2010).

Language Mastery

Language and academics caused difficulties as students tried to keep up with their English language skills. "Individuals with underdeveloped language skills report lower levels of academic success and social functioning" (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011, p. 180). Research shows that learners with weak English language skills do not only have a limited ability to convey their thoughts in English, but they lack ability to complete tasks such as classroom presentations (Kim, 2011). Language difficulties for non-native English speakers extend further than terminology problems and into listening and comprehension difficulties, as well (Mann, Canny, Lindley, & Rajan, 2010).

Finances

With regard to finding a method to pay for education it could be difficult for domestic students who have better access to student loans and grants. But, the financial course of action becomes extremely stressful for international students because student loans are unavailable and grants are limited. In medical school programs, there is only a 13% rate of matriculation among international students and less than half of U.S. medical schools will entertain international student admission applications due to financial reasons (Datta & Miller, 2012). "Since most state-funded medical schools are mandated to serve the citizens and healthcare needs of the states in which they exist, nearly all refuse foreign applications" (Datta & Miller, 2012, p. 2).

Medical schools are not an exception when it comes to financial guarantees for educational expenses. The U.S. government requires schools to determine whether individuals can meet their expenses without resorting to unlawful employment or public funds (University Office of Global Programs, 2012).

Academic Preparation

In academics U.S. learning environments use a different style of instruction and testing compared to other parts of the world. As a result international students are faced with many questions on how to approach their studies as well as what is expected of them when it comes to learning in a new academic environment (Johnson & Kumar, 2010; Tang, 1993; Volet & Kee, 1993; Ward, 2001). As an example, Asian students typically combine the processes of memorizing and understanding in ways not commonly found among Western students (Watkins, 1996). So the university must be aware of all styles of international approaches to education because the students' success is determined by the nature of the curriculum as well as the environment where the studies take place (Kember & Gow, 1991).

Purpose of the Study

Using international students' confidence towards completing their academic program, this study examines how community acceptance, language ability, academic ability, and financial stability are associated with students' academic success. This study's research questions are as stated above:

1. What is the impact of community acceptance on students' confidence of academic success?
2. What is the impact of language ability on students' confidence of academic success?
3. What is the impact of academic ability on students' confidence of academic success?
4. What is the impact of financial stability on students' confidence of academic success?

Research Method

Participants

International students attending a university with a total enrollment of about 14,000 students were invited to respond to a 20-question quantitative survey that assesses their confidence toward completion of their programs of study. At the time the survey was administered, there were 957 international students (713 males and 244 females) representing 55 countries. Of the 957 international students who received the survey electronically via email, there were 152 respondents for a 16% response rate. The study was approved by the university's institutional review board. Table 1 shows the gender, age, and academic level of the participants who responded to the survey. In the data below the n = 21 for low confidence is a small number of responses in each of the

questions, as compared to an n=129 for high confidence. While it would be desireable to have a great number of respondents in the low confidence category this was what was reported and is an artifact related to the academic conditions. The university in the study focuses strongly on aviation and engineering and has admission criteria that reflect those major areas of study, and that helps to explain the difference in the number of respondents in each category.

Table 1
International Students Demographic Variables

Demographic Variables	*Number*	Percentage
Gender		
Male	94	62
Female	58	38
Age		
18 – 25 years old	73	48
26 – 30 years old	42	28
31 – 35 years old	25	16
36 – 40 years old	4	3
41 and above	8	5
Academic Level		
Undergraduate	58	38
Masters	50	33
PhD	36	24
Professional	8	5

Note: N = 152.

Instrument

The researchers using Bandura's "Guide for Constructing Self Efficacy Scales" developed a quantitative survey. Using community acceptance, language ability, academic ability, and financial stability as the main sources of concern for international students, the survey was tailored toward collecting data on each issue. The study utilized a 6-point Likert-type scale with 6 = strongly agree, 5 = agree, 4 = slightly agree, 3 = slightly disagree, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. The participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agree with each statement. The study has one independent variable and four dependent variables. The independent variable is students' confidence level. The dependent variables are students' community acceptance, academic ability, language ability, and financial stability. The study utilizes four constructs. Construct 1 (C1) consists of four items (questions 1, 2, 3, and 4) and measures community acceptance. Construct 2 (C2) consists of four items (questions 6, 7, 8 and 9) to measure participants' confidence in their language ability. Construct 3 (C3) consists of four items (questions 11, 12, 13, and 14) to measure students' confidence in their academic ability. Construct 4 (C4) consists of four items (questions 16, 17, 18, and 19) and measures participants' confidence in their financial stability.

The level of confidence in completing participants' studies is asked by questions 5, 10, 15, and 20. The independent variable was grouped into two samples. Those who are confident about completing their program of study constitute one group (*high confidence of academic success*), while those who are not confident constitute the second group (*low confidence of academic success*). Based on Hall, Hladkyj, Perry, and Ruthig, this study used a median split point (2004). All respondents scoring 3.5 or below on the 6-point Likert scale were considered and coded *not confident* while the respondents scoring above 3.5 were placed into the *confident* group. The scale

measuring participants' levels of confidence in completing their studies (questions 5, 10, 15, 20) achieved high internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha of .97.

Table 2
Correlation of Subscale Constructs and Measures of Internal Consistency

Construct Number	Subscale Constructs	C1.	C2.	C3.	α
C1.	Community Acceptance Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4				.88
C2.	Language Ability Q6, Q7, Q8, Q9	.67*			.90
C3.	Academic Ability Q11, Q12, Q13, Q14	.25*	.50*		.50
C4.	Financial Stability Q16, Q17, Q18, Q19	.22*	.17*	.09	.60

*$p < .05$

The correlation of subscale constructs in Table 2 shows language ability (C2) and community acceptance (C1) are statistically significant, having the strongest correlation of .67. Financial stability (C4) and academic ability (C3) are not statistically significant and have the weakest correlation of .09. In addition, Table 2 shows the consistency of each construct. The highest internal consistency was achieved by the language ability (C2) with a Cronbach's Alpha of .90 while the lowest internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha of .50 belonged to the academic ability construct (C3).

Analysis

A series of two-tailed independent *t*-tests were calculated to compare responses of low confidence of academic success respondents with responses of those with high confidence of academic success. The *t*-test aimed to determine if there is a relationship between international students with high or low levels of self-efficacy in the study's perceived issues and their implied levels of confidence toward completing their programs of study. Four *t*-tests compared responses for each of the potential impediments–community acceptance, language ability, academic ability, and financial stability.

Results

The results obtained revealed significant statistical differences between participants' confidence levels in each of the perceived issues (community acceptance, language ability, academic ability, and financial stability) and their overall confidence in completing their programs of study. The collective results of confidence for each perceived issue for both groups are discussed.

Research Question 1: What is the impact of community acceptance on students' confidence of academic success?

Table 3 shows the mean and standard deviation for each question measuring community acceptance. There were 141 participants who answered all four questions that measured international students' confidence in their community acceptance. Participants that failed to answer all questions were not included. The internal consistency for the Community Acceptance construct resulted in a Cronbach's Alpha of .882 (high consistency). Community Acceptance (high confidence group; $n = 129$) resulted in a mean of 5.06 with standard deviation of .66, while Community Acceptance (low confidence group, $n = 21$) resulted in a mean of 3.04 with a standard deviation of 1.36.

Group statistics show that when looking at the means, those confident in completing their programs of study (high confidence group) have higher confidence in their community acceptance while those with low confidence in completing their programs of study display lower confidence in their community acceptance. A comparison of perception of community acceptance among participants with high confidence and low confidence revealed statistically significant differences, $t(148) = 10.86$, $p < .05$.

Table 3

Community Acceptance Results: Mean and Standard Deviation

Questions		*M*	*SD*
Q1.	As an international student I feel comfortable the way I was welcomed into my new academic life by the community	4.9	1.2
Q2.	The university makes it comfortable for me to practice my cultural beliefs	4.8	1.2
Q3.	I feel safe in my surroundings.	5.1	1.1
Q4.	There are plenty of social activities I can take part of without feeling out of place.	4.2	1.5

Note: N = 141

Research Question 2: What is the impact of language ability on students' confidence of academic success?

Table 4 shows the mean and standard deviation for each question measuring language ability. There were 150 participants who answered all four questions that measured international students' confidence in their language ability. Participants that failed to answer all questions were not included. The internal consistency for the Language Ability construct (C2) resulted in a Cronbach's Alpha of .900 (high consistency). Language Ability (high confidence group; $n = 129$) resulted in a mean of 5.12 with a standard deviation of .73, while Language Ability (low confidence group; $n = 21$) resulted in a mean of 3.01 with a standard deviation of 1.39.

Group statistics show that when looking at the means, those confident in completing their programs of study (high confidence group) have high confidence in their language ability while those with low confidence in completing their programs of study display low confidence in their language ability. A comparison of perception of language ability among participants with high confidence and low confidence revealed statistically significant differences, $t(148) = 10.61$, $p < .05$.

Table 4

Language Ability Results: Mean and Standard Deviation

Question		*M*	*SD*
Q6.	I feel good about my ability to participate in class discussion.	4.8	1.3
Q7.	I understand my professors in my classes.	5.1	1.1
Q8.	I have good English conversational skills.	4.8	1.4
Q9.	I feel good about my ability to write academic papers.	4.6	1.4

Note: N = 150

Research Question 3: What is the impact of academic ability on students' confidence of academic success?

Table 5 shows the mean and standard deviation for each question measuring academic ability. There were 146 participants who answered all four questions that measured international students' confidence in their academic ability. Participants that failed to answer all questions were not included. The internal consistency for the Academic Ability construct (C3) resulted in a Cronbach's Alpha of .500 (low consistency). Academic Ability (high confidence group; $n = 129$) resulted in a mean of 4.53 with a standard deviation of .81, while Academic Ability (low confidence group; n = 21) has a mean of 3.90 with a standard deviation of 0.57.

Group statistics show that when looking at the means, those confident in completing their programs of study (high confidence group) have higher confidence in their academic ability while those with low confidence in completing their programs of study display lower confidence in their academic ability. A comparison of perception of academic ability among participants with high confidence and low confidence revealed statistically significant differences, $t(148) = 3.43$, $p < .05$.

Table 5
Academic Ability Results: Mean and Standard Deviation

Question	*M*	*SD*
Q11. I feel overwhelmed by my studies.	3.8	1.5
Q12. Based on my academic background I have good understanding of skills and concepts.	5.0	1.1
Q13. I find it difficult to keep up with my academic requirements.	4.4	1.4
Q14. I have access to academic assistance should I need it.	4.6	1.2

Note: N = 146

Research Question 4: What is the impact of financial stability on students' confidence of academic success?

Table 6 shows the mean and standard deviation for each question that measure financial stability. There were 146 participants who answered all four questions that measured international students' confidence in their financial stability. Participants that failed to answer all questions were not included. The internal consistency for the financial stability construct (C4) resulted in a Cronbach's Alpha of .604.

Financial stability (high confidence group; $n = 129$) has a mean of 3.39 with a standard deviation of 1.05, while financial stability (low confidence group; $n = 21$) has a mean of 2.55 with a standard deviation of 0.69. Group statistics show that when looking at the means, those confident in completing their programs of study (high confidence group) have higher confidence in their financial stability while those with low confidence in completing their programs of study display lower confidence in their financial stability. A comparison of perception of financial stability among participants with high confidence and low confidence revealed statistically significant differences, $t(148) = 3.53$, $p < .05$.

Table 6
Financial Stability Results: Mean and Standard Deviation

Question	M	SD
Q16. My financial status is strong and I do not anticipate any future financial need.	3.5	1.6
Q17. I am worried that financially I might not be able to support my future academic progress.	3.9	1.6
Q18. I have the ability to gain access to emergency funds should I need them.	3.4	1.6
Q19. I feel that financial aid will allow me to be more successful.	2.2	1.4

Note: N = 146

Conclusion

Based on the results, multiple conclusions can be drawn. First, the four issues (social adaptability, language barriers, academic ability, and financial need) identified to be main factors of concern have been demonstrated to be valid difficulties for international students at a mid-western university. Second, this study concluded that each of the four issues measured are significant enough to have a negative effect on completion of the studies.

According to Poyrazli and Grahame (2007), there are multiple avenues that can be used to address social support. Student mentoring or peer networking can provide international students with community acceptance and a sense of belonging. The avenues suggested by Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) could be offered before and after the student arrives in the U.S. For example, before arriving, the student could be matched with another international student, preferably from the same country, in order to exchange information on how to handle the stresses of the community. The results of this research affirm that this form of community social modeling could provide the new students with information on living arrangements, transportation, campus life, and other issues associated with the community.

Some ways to improve community support are suggested by prior research. Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) propose that after a student arrives, a peer program that matches international students with American students can assist in narrowing the community stress the newcomers' experience. The social interaction between international and domestic students should provide psychological support for the new students while increasing domestic students' knowledge of other cultures. Based on this study's results, international students may benefit from field trips to surrounding communities and tourist sites. Examples of social events that some universities offer include student cook-outs, coffee shop meetings, and events that promote discussion and interaction within the international community.

Language confidence according to this research is shown to be a problem for international students when it comes to socializing. The issue of language can be addressed by providing language services such as English as a Second Language (ESL) courses that will be offered to international students and their families at low cost.

Finances are the focus of the fourth and final question in this study. We attempted to determine how financial stability impacts students' confidence of academic success. The results obtained were similar to previous research concluding that financial stress can negatively influence academic achievement (Datta & Miller, 2012; Hyun et al., 2007; Sherry et al., 2009). Studies

conclude that one of the main reasons financial stability is an issue among international students is the unavailability of jobs outside the university.

It is the authors' opinions that the most effective solution to the financial crises is making sure that students get detailed information on all of the costs involved for attendance. This information should be provided to the student before they arrive to the U.S. It can be concluded that the issues measured pose significant stress for some international students. Based on this study's analysis, it can be further determined that the stress caused by community, language, academics, and financial factors can alter students' perceptions of completing their programs of study. This study's results are significant because a person's confidence in his or her ability is a clear indicator of success or failure. Research has analyzed the stress caused by community acceptance, language ability, academic ability, and financial stability; however, no studies have been found that try to understand the effect these factors have on students' perceptions of their overall academic success. Based on the results of this research we believe that academic success is greatly dependent on a student's confidence in his or her abilities and resources.

An attempt should be made to motivate international students to attend community events since social modeling and social persuasion play a significant role in increasing a person's confidence. Providing additional community experiences may enhance international students' success. A lack of social events may create a spiral effect that negatively influences international students' ability to get much needed information. The information shared at community events can assist students with their community, language, academic, and financial issues. Language plays a significant role when socializing in the community. Academic issues require significant attention and it could take time for the curriculum to be adjusted in order to bolster international students' preparation, which may also include providing programs for children and spouses too. Schools must provide a more detailed set of information about direct and indirect costs related to studying at a particular school. This information would be of significant values for potential international students when they make their decisions to study in the U.S.

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