International Students' Struggles: Community College to the Rescue

Linda Serra Hagedorn, Shaohua Pei, and Lu Yan

INTRODUCTION

Each year the USA welcomes a large number of international students who enter the country with bright dreams of success and earning an American college degree. Although many will enroll in the country's most prestigious universities with confidence and high expectations of success, some will find the competitive atmosphere of American classrooms a challenging transition (Ramsay et al. 1999; Zhao et al. 2005). Some will be unprepared to live and learn in an all-English language environment, while others may encounter problematic cultural differences that interfere with their success. Some may encounter financial problems stemming in part from the higher cost of living in the USA as compared to their home countries. This chapter explores how international university students who initially started at four-year universities found assistance to these and other problems through the judicious use of community colleges.

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L.S. Hagedorn (✉)
College of Human Sciences and School of Education,
Iowa State University, Ames, IA, USA

S. Pei • L. Yan
School of Education, Iowa State University, Ames, IA, USA

Background and Related Literature

International students suffer heavy pressures to maintain the good academic standing, necessary to keep their legal status as students in the US International students, as required by *the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS)* from the US government; *they* must maintain a cumulative 2.0 or higher grade point average (GPA) to maintain their F-1 student status visa in the USA. If grades fall below the acceptable level, they will be forced to return to their homelands (Hagedorn, 2014).

Some international students struggle with the American style of teaching that often includes critical analyses, working in groups, and independent thought. This style differs from the lecture-dominant and teacher-as-expert style more prevalent in most of their homelands (Poyrazli and Grahame 2007; Tran 2008). Asian students trained in the Confucian tradition that promotes harmony and consensuses often find it difficult to express their individual views, a practice that is typical in an American classroom. Some may be hesitant to ask questions, feeling that doing so will imply that they are inferior or not capable.

Culture

There is evidence that international students may be more stressed, anxious, and thus have a higher likelihood of becoming depressed compared to their native counterparts (Grey 2002). Many students come from cultures rich with shared aspirations with family. Although close familial ties typically bring comfort, they can also bring stress (Smith 1995). Some students may be studying in the USA not of their own choice but to honor family aspirations. This allegiance to family may also infiltrate the choice of major. In many countries especially Eastern Asia countries STEM majors bring more family pride than those in the humanities or arts, causing offspring to major in disciplines promoted by the family rather than to reflect personal desire or talents (Treiman 1977).

International students may encounter problems with social skills that are culturally rooted in their native countries (Ekman et al. 1987; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Russell 1994), and thus feel awkward and confused when trying to perform in group assignments.

Being far from home, international students may become homesick and some are unaccustomed to American food. In many colleges and universities, students cannot select their roommates (Smith-Barrow 2015) and may find themselves with others with very different eating habits and hygiene standards.

In short, many international students underestimate the culture shock that they will encounter when coming to the USA. They may have enjoyed the status of being top performing students in their home county and assume that this favorable status will follow them into their new adventure only to find themselves struggling both academically and culturally (Misara and Castillo 2004).

Language

For most international students language presents the most formidable barrier to academic success (Mori 2000). For this reason, international students may experience high levels of anxiety when facing oral presentations in classes, writing papers, reading articles, or preparing and taking essay tests (Grey 2002). Sandhu and Asrabadi (1991) explained that international students experience anxiety over their speaking accents, enunciation, and concerns regarding discipline-specific language. While there is ample evidence of the positive effects of intercultural friendship on improving international students' language proficiency (Gomez et al. 2014), generally speaking, native students may be unwilling and sometimes even hostile to providing assistance to international students to improve their language acquisition (Yeh and Inose 2003). Unfortunately, it is not just native students that may be less than sympathetic toward their language barriers; sometimes even the staff who work with international students may tire of dealing with students that are not as English proficient as they perceive necessary (Robertson et al. 2000).

Finances

Financial difficulties are often substantial concerns for international students. Although two-thirds of US undergraduate students pay their tuition with the assistance of federal grants (College Board 2014), 64.7 % of the international students rely solely on personal or family funds to pay their tuition costs (IIE 2014a, b), which is usually two-thirds higher than the in-state fee at public institutions. International students have very limited opportunities for scholarships or financial aid, and they are not eligible for any kind of federal student aid (Office of Student Federal Aid 2015). International students may be eligible for some student loans but only if they have a US citizen with an excellent credit history to co-sign; an almost impossible task for most students (International Financial Aid and Scholarship Search 2015). Many international students, like those from

China, come from middle-class families where their parents, grandparents, and other family members have sacrificed and saved to accrue sufficient funds to send their child abroad (Hu and Hagedorn 2013). Unfavorable monetary exchange rates may increase the cost of study even further. In spite of the limited funding resources, international students are required to be enrolled full time during their study (Lin and Yi 1997; Chin and Bhandari 2007), and can work only part time in on-campus authorized jobs (often difficult to get), thus restricting their opportunity to help support themselves while studying. Researchers have noted that some international students find themselves in financial dilemmas and may even be forced to choose between textbooks, food, or utility bills (Koyama 2010; Lee 2013).

Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, we rely on the combination of Face Negotiation Theory and Identity Theory as guiding conceptual frameworks explaining why international university students may turn to community colleges for rescue and relief.

Face Negotiation Theory

The concept of face is related to honor, status, credibility, loyalty, competence, obligation, and respect (Ting-Toomey 1988). According to Ho (1994), face has three layers and they are related to the affective (related to shame and pride), the cognitive, and the behavioral. Although the concept of face is applicable to all cultures due to its universal relationship to self-esteem, pride, and self-worth (André 2013; Bargiela-Chiappini 2003; Mao 1994, Ho 1976; Zhang et al. 2014) people may frame and act upon face differently as determined by their cultures (Ting-toomey and Kurogi 1998).

Confronting academic difficulty or even the threat of academic dismissal can be devastating to international students. Similarly, financial difficulty that may threaten success will also bring the threat of losing face and positive identity. In many cultures, family honor overweighs individual will (Hu and Hagedorn 2013; Qian 2009; Stevenson 1992; Stevenson and Lee 1990). Failures must be borne not only by the student but also result in shame cast upon the entire family.

Identity Theory

Identity is deeply entwined with face (Mao 1994). Stryker and Burke (2000) and Burke & Sets (2009) defined identity as a set of meanings that standardizes individuals into different status and positions in society. Identity is activated through the process of self-verification. International students come to the USA with an emerging new identity as a successful college student working on a bright future. Most particularly for Asian and Hispanic students, identity is tied tightly to families and others who have provided the necessary supports that have allowed the student to come to the USA. Hence, identity is deeply entwined in a collectivist framework of family honor (Jetten et al. 2002) and dovetails tightly with the concept of face.

Dire situations evoke fear and a search for solutions. We propose that for some university students, turning to a community college for a course or for a semester or longer may be a viable option that can contribute to saving face and preserving a positive identity. This chapter will provide context and evidence of how students have utilized community colleges in various ways to respond to challenges and save face.

Methods for Gathering Evidence

We approached this topic using an equal statues sequential mixed method design. Mixed methods, or a combination of both qualitative and quantitative inquiries, are believed to draw strengths and minimize some of the weaknesses of singular qualitative and quantitative methods (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). We first conducted qualitative interviews and used the findings to create a quantitative survey.

Guided by data from the Open Doors Study (Institute of International Education [IIE] 2014a) we began our sampling for the qualitative section by identifying universities with large numbers of international students that were also geographically close to community colleges that also had large numbers of international students. We requested interviews with admission officers in these institutions and were granted eight interviews. During the same time span, we also interviewed 18 international university students who had taken course(s) from the community colleges. This data was analyzed by the three co-authors using investigator triangulation (Denzin 1970).

We used the knowledge gained from our interviews to create a survey to more broadly gather information from university enrolled international students. A brief original online survey was emailed to all international undergraduate students at a large Midwestern University. The survey was designed to better understand the prevalence of their experiences taking courses at a community college as well as their general satisfaction with courses, faculty, and facilities of community colleges. The survey also allowed us to compare the assumptions and attitudes toward community colleges by both students who have taken community college courses and those who have not. Of the 365 usable surveys, 16 % of students had taken at least one community college course.

Descriptive analysis showed that students from over 50 countries took the survey, the top three origin countries were China (113 respondents, taking 33 % of the sample), India (78 respondents, taking 23 % of the sample,), and Malaysia (24 respondents, taking 7 % of the sample), followed by South Korea, Brazil, and Iran. The diversity of our sample mirrored that reflected by the Open Doors Data (International Institute of Education [IIE] 2014a, b).

We conducted a logistic regression to better understand the dichotomous variable of enrolling in a community college course (Agresti 2013). Using the independent variables of country of origin, university GPA, and time (in academic years) enrolled in the university, the equation was statistically significant (Chi-square = 21.76, df = 4, $p < .001$) and correctly sorted 83.7 % of the respondents. The findings indicated that students from China or Malaysia, with a lower university GPA and less time at the university were statistically more likely to enroll in a community college course. Among those who did enroll, the top reasons cited are presented in Table 5.1 (note students could choose more than one reason).

Overall, students reported moderately high levels of satisfaction with their community college enrollment. Table 5.2 provides the means and standard deviations of student ratings of satisfaction (1 = very unsatisfied to 5 = very satisfied).

Table 5.1   Top reasons for enrolling in a community college course

The course was offered during the summer	53.7 %
The course was less expensive than taking it at the university	53.7 %
I wanted to finish my degree earlier	31.5 %
The course was offered at a convenient time	25.9 %
I thought the course would be easier at the community college	24.1 %

Table 5.2 Means and standard deviations of satisfaction with community college enrollment

	Mean (s.d.)
Scheduling of classes	4.23 (0.89)
Course availability	4.18 (0.87)
Course difficulty	4.17 (0.94)
Class size	4.14 (1.02)
Quality of instruction	4.07 (0.91)
Access to computers	4.06 (1.17)
Personal Safety	4.03 (1.18)
Support from teachers	4.02 (1.06)
Costs	4.02 (1.00)
Registration for courses	4.00 (1.16)
Parking	3.79 (1.22)
Library	3.84 (1.14)

We were also interested in the attitudes and assumptions toward community colleges by those international students who had never taken a course at a community college. One out of five (21 %) indicated that they had considered taking a course at a community college. Although the majority of non-enrollers (79 %) acknowledged that the tuition is less at a community college, 45 % indicated that they felt that courses through a community college would be inferior to those offered at a university. In addition, 38.5 % indicated that they believed that community college faculty were less knowledgeable than university faculty.

Rescues

We have identified seven basic issues encountered by international students and the resultant rescues that involved the use of community colleges. We have created vignettes that are representative of the problems cited and the use of the community college that can help alleviate the pressure. Each of these scenarios are based on our interviews with admission advisors and international university students and reinforced through our survey of international students.

Rescue One: Low Grades and the Threat of Academic Dismissal

If academically dismissed, international students will be forced to go back to their home countries and cast as a failure. While academic dismissal is most likely a distressing experience for all students, domestic or interna-

tional, it is especially traumatic for international students. The stress of academic dismissal may be sufficient to evoke extreme depression and in some cases may even lead to suicide (Yang and Clum 1994). Simply put, this is a serious situation and the student who finds him/herself in this situation is in dire need of help (Wong 2013).

Of course, enrollment in a community college will not change grades but the generally smaller classes that may reflect more faculty attention can result in higher grades than those earned at a large university. Many of the university admission counselors indicated that they will recommend and in some cases actually direct students in academic difficulty to transfer to a community college when an international student is having severe academic problems. An academic advisor called it "a way to get back on track." Another advisor indicated that most of the students who transfer to the community college do manage to increase their GPA and ultimately transfer back to the university. An advisor from a university in a southern state indicated:

> These students tend to get more support in community colleges. For some international students this is the best answer. A semester or a year at a community college may allow them to develop academically as well as personally. I find that some students come to us very young. They have never been in a Western culture and just don't fit. They seem to be able to adjust easier at the smaller college.

Rescue Two: The "Bad" Course

It is common for all college students, both international and domestic, to be confronted with one course that seems impossible to pass. It may be that the course is required but the student has no interest in the subject. Or, it may be the method of teaching is one that does not work well for the learner. The course may have what seems to be unreasonable expectations. Or, from the standpoint of the student, the instructor is just not teaching in a way that promotes learning. The "bad" course could also be due to problems understanding the instructor. For example, it is not uncommon for American university students to report difficulties in understanding a professor or teaching assistant who speaks English with an accent. But for international students who struggle with the English language in general, add an unfamiliar accent and the lecture may be completely unintelligible.

Some international students will use the community college course as the rescue for that "bad course." The "bad course" problem was discussed by an admission advisor from a research university:

> Certain majors require international students to take some courses like American history and American government. These students are intimidated by the rigors of the classes at <university> and the content is very different for them. Sometimes students think it would be easier to take it at the community college. Since <college name> offers it regularly, some students will enroll there.

The perspective from a university student was similar. Although this student ultimately decided against taking the course at a community college, she indicated that one course could stand out in memory as being exceptionally difficult and cause extreme stress. She related how she sought relief:

> For me the hard course was Economics 101. There was so much reading. I asked about taking it at the community college, if it would be easier, you know or would the university be OK with it. But I decided to stay here and finish it. But I got a "C" and maybe I should have taken it at the community college. If I knew more about how I could take it at <college name> I would have done it. Now I know that other students have done that.

It is important to note that the authors do not want to indicate that courses at community colleges are less rigorous than the equivalent course at a university. However, these are stereotypes held by many. Key points to counter these stereotypes are to educate students and advisors that smaller classes at community colleges result in more faculty attention. Moreover, in that community colleges serve a more diverse student body, faculty are more accustomed to using a different variety of teaching methods.

Rescue Three: The Fear of Public Speaking (in English)

Fear of public speaking plagues many people (Slater et al. 2006). However, couple the natural reluctance to speak in public with the requirement that it be done in a foreign language in front of an audience of predominantly native speakers and many international students react with fear. Most universities have a public speaking course requirement, international students

fear the course and welcome a rescue from this uncomfortable requirement. We spoke to two creative students who used community college courses to their advantage. In fact, we found that this fear of public speaking led to a network of knowledge of where to go to find relief. A somewhat popular response was to turn to a community college that offers Speech as an online course offering.

We must also say that some universities have reacted to this rescue and have established firm policies regarding the transfer of an online speech course to fulfill the general education requirements. Some universities refuse to accept the transfer credit for speech if it is being applied as a general education requirement and the course was taken online. A university admission advisor reacted to this rescue:

> The online Speech course is problematic for us on a number of levels. We want these students to learn, not just tick off a requirement. We are working with <community college name> about this issue. In their defense the students do have to give speeches, they do it online but it is just not the same.

Rescue Four: The Lure of the Internet

The ubiquity of online courses has impacted virtually all aspects of higher education including international students. Although the F-1 visa regulations allow international students to take online courses they are limited to only one course (3 credit hours) that can be counted toward a full course of study per term. In other words, if an international undergraduate were to enroll for 4 courses (12 credits) in a single academic semester, only one online course could be counted toward full-time enrollment status. In addition, some universities have specific rules on the number of online courses that international students may take. With that said, the online offerings of community colleges offer many advantages for students. As indicated in Rescue Three, taking a course online may be the answer for that "difficult" course. But more often we found that university students signed up for community college online courses for convenience and savings in both costs and times. Especially appealing was summer online courses that could be taken even though the student may be out of the country thus allowing the student to go home for the summer and still be working on credits toward graduation. For international

students, any path to decrease the time to degree yields significant savings. For other students, taking summer courses and those online could translate into enrolling in one less course during the regular academic year and still graduating on time. This was viewed positively as it allowed the student to concentrate more fully on less courses. A junior student told us the following:

> I didn't want to waste the summer and not take some credits. The <university name> didn't have the courses online but <community college name> did. So, yes I did take the course.

The academic advisors rarely advised students to take online courses, but in virtually all cases acknowledged that students often did. In fact, several of the advisors clearly advised international students against online courses offered anywhere. A university advisor indicated, "I never advise international students to take an online course either here or any other college. International students get confused by online courses. They need the structure and the personal contact they get in regular face-to-face courses."

Rescue Five: The Need to Finish Quickly!

Benjamin Franklin is credited with the often-heard quote that "time is money." Indeed, the costs for a degree escalates for international students who find they must remain enrolled in college for longer than anticipated. As indicated earlier, for most international students the cost of an American degree is very high. Moreover, students and their families typically save and plan for the degree to take the traditional four years. International students and their families may not realize that while half of all bachelor's degree programs require the traditional 120 credits that can be completed in four years,[1] the other half of majors require a higher credit count (often 124 or 128 credits[2]); (Douglas-Gabriel, 2014; Johnson et al. 2009). It is a fact that in America many full-time college students take more than four years to complete a degree. This is so common that the US Department of Education tracks six-year graduation rates in addition to the traditional four years. The national non-profit organization Complete College America (2014) reports that only between 19 % and 36 %, depending on the type of institution, of four-year full-time college students will graduate in the traditional four years. For both domestic and international students,

there are many reasons why a degree will take longer than anticipated including but not limited to the following:

- Need for remedial or less than college level courses
- Required course(s) not offered when needed
- Received inaccurate advisement from advisor or others
- Student choice of taking additional courses not required for the degree
- Addition of a study abroad experience or an internship (either required or optional)
- Need to retake failed or low-grade course(s)
- Transfer from another college or university

For international students, the need to take additional coursework in English as a Second Language or in an Intensive English program will add time to degree. Thus, it is not surprising that international students may take courses at a community college while co-enrolled at their university for the purpose of acceleration. Students may take a course at the community college that is not offered that semester at their university. Most universities offer a slim list of course offerings during the summer and hence taking a community college course during the summer term may make sense. Some students with a full load of university courses may add another course at the community college for pure acceleration.

While the advisors never recommended students take courses at a community college for the sole purpose of decreasing the time to degree, they did acknowledge that especially in the summer or in the case of a needed course was not being offered at a time the student needed it the community college presents a good alternative. Hence, this rescue, although not promoted by the university advisors, was important to the students who felt it enabled them to finish their degree before their financial support was depleted.

Rescue Six: Need for Help with English Language

Although all university students from non-English speaking countries have met at least the minimum acceptable score on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), or other required tests, in order to gain admission to the university, many to most students struggle with the English language. Students learn that it is very different to learn English in their home coun-

tries than to sit in class and listen to a college lecture, and to read college level texts and to interact with others solely in English.

Many community colleges have various programs that can assist students in need of assistance with English. While some community colleges offer academic English as a Second Language (ESL) programs that provide academic credit, others offer only an adult education program designed to assist the community who have problems with the English language. Some community colleges offer more extensive intensive English programs and others offer a combination of programs (Hagedorn and Li, in press). Most international university students cannot apply the credits from an ESL program for their degrees, and hence, there is no record of ESL enrollments from the perspective of the university. We were able to interview several university students enrolled in a community non-credit course. They all indicated that their biggest problem was understanding spoken English. They indicated no problems with understanding textbooks but it was lectures that seemed the most difficult. One student indicated:

> I have been in the US for two years and I am a sophomore. I come here to learn to understand English better and to have help. I can read English but it is hard to understand it. I come here for help.

Some of the advisors suggest to those international students having academic problems to take additional English instruction at the community college. Since in most non-credit community college English courses are free of charge, this rescue is one that is truly affordable.

Rescue Seven: Financial Savings

Throughout this chapter, we have identified many reasons why university international students enroll for a course or a full load at a local community college. However, in almost all cases, students had several intersecting reasons that brought advantages to enrolling in a community college. While not always the chief motivator, but typically among the mix of reasons, students and advisors cited financial benefits when referring to community college enrollments. International students understood that there could be significant savings to the bottom line of their degree if they took advantage of community college offerings. As indicated earlier, any process that could accelerate or decrease the time to degree saves money.

When citing the reasons for taking courses with a community college virtually all students indicated that the reason they could do it was the low costs involved. A student from China said it very clearly:

> Yes. I was very happy when I needed to take a government course it was at the community college and at a cheap cost. I told my parents that I needed money for this course so I could graduate and they paid for it.

Conclusion

All over the world, young people and their parents are making plans to attend prestigious US universities. However, not all of these students will be able to attend their "dream universities." In fact, for any number of reasons, a significant number will come to the USA to attend one of the country's community colleges. In addition, many international students who enrolled in universities will find their way to a community college when academic or other problems arise. Most international students do not understand the mission of community colleges when they first come to the USA since there are typically no parallels in their home countries. But through word of mouth and by recommendations of their advisors, some students will find these institutions to seek assistance, save face, and find a welcome rescue.

Notes

1. 120 credits are easily achieved with an average credit load of 15 units each semester for four years. However, most students will enroll for more than 120 hours if they need to take any kind of prerequisite or developmental or remedial course.
2. 2% of the degree programs require 140 credits or more (Johnson et al. 2009).

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