

# International Students Immigrating to the Title IX Environment: A Qualitative Cultural Analysis of Community College International Students

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## INTRODUCTION

International students bring their respective cultures and expectations to the USA; these expectations include their social constructs regarding relationships and the treatment of women. *International Business Times* reported alarming percentages of rape in several foreign countries. In South Africa, 28–37 % of adult men reportedly committed rape (Iaccino 2014). Sweden reported the highest European rape percentage with 63 rape cases per 100,000. In turn, a third of Swedish women endure sexual assault before their 20th birthday. Caribbean countries reported comparable data with approximately 48 % of adolescent girls facing sexual assault (Iaccino 2014). In regard to Asian countries, the United Nations revealed that 10 % of Asian Pacific men reported forced sex with a non-partner and 24 % reported forced sex with a partner.

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In Papua New Guinea, 59 % of men reported raping sexual partners (Fossett 2013). While these statistics may startle the American reader, these incidents are an unfortunate social norm for many global citizens.

Simultaneously, the USA remains a coveted place to seek an education. Given the potential cultural clash between the global mistreatment of women and American federal regulations prohibiting sexual assault, colleges and universities from all sectors have a responsibility to offer education thorough Title IX. Specifically, community colleges within the higher education arena have the responsibility to educate those with different cultural expectations that sexual violence against women is strictly prohibited. Therefore, this study's purpose focused on international students' experience and understanding Title IX at the community college.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Title IX and Sexual Violence*

In 1972, the federal government enacted Title IX, a regulation for federally funded educational programs and activities to protect individuals from discrimination based on sex. During the 40-plus-year period since the legislation was passed, higher education has made inconsistent application of Title IX to campus culture. Typically, articles reflecting on Title IX benchmarks (Boyce 2002; Pauline 2012) focused on women's access to sports. Most researchers who focused on Title IX lawsuits examined the application of Title IX legislation and compliance with Title IX primarily in relation to sports opportunities and the threat to men's sports teams (Greendorfer 1998; Staurowsky 2003; Haglund 2005; Messner 2006; Edwards 2010).

However, MacKinnon's work (1979) explicitly linked sexual harassment to sex discrimination which not only changed the Supreme Court's interpretation of Title VII legislation, as shown in MacKinnon's work (1979), but it also changed the interpretation of Title IX language. If a student faced "unwelcomed conduct of a sexual nature ..." that compromised the student's access to educational opportunities, a Title IX violation potentially existed (US Department of Education 2011). Despite the link between Title IX and sexual harassment, several lawsuits blurred the connection between sexual abuse and Title IX.

For example, in the late 1990s *Wills v. Brown University*, 184 F. 3d 20 – *Court of Appeals*, Wills charged that her tutor, Adesogan, assaulted her. However,

Despite Wills's arguments ... the court took the position that absent a second physical assault by Adesogan on Wills ... Wills had no claim for sex discrimination against Brown occurring after December 9, 1992. In taking that narrow view of hostile environment discrimination, the district court failed to recognize that Wills's educational experiences at Brown could be altered significantly by a hostile educational environment resulting from Adesogan's assault on her and his continuing presence in the classroom (*Wills v. Brown University* 1999, p. 9/17).

In short, while the single assault was undisputed, the court believed that Wills had to endure a second assault to prevail in her Title IX charge. Further, the court denied Wills' motions to appeal the decision.

In *Brzonkala v. VA Polytechnic Institute* 1997, Brzonkala who was raped by two football players during her first semester had to extend her fight by appealing a lower court's decision. In the university's process, the assailants, Morrison and Crawford, were not found responsible for rape. Instead, they were found responsible for abusive language and suspended from the next year. The district court denied Brzonkala's Title IX charge at the appeal where the defendant argued:

[T]he hostile environment that Brzonkala alleged never occurred. Brzonkala left [Virginia Tech] due to her concern of possible future reprisal in reaction to her pressing charges. She did not allege that this future reprisal actually occurred (*Brzonkala v. VA Polytechnic Institute* 1997, p. 7/24).

In the initial trial, VA Polytechnic Institute successfully argued that Brzonkala leaving school nullified her claim of an ongoing problem. The University settled with Brzonkala in 2000 for an undisclosed amount.

In *Williams v. Board of Regents of Univ. System of Ga.*, 477 F. 3d 1282 – Court of Appeals, 11th Circuit 2007, Williams claimed that she was gang raped by three basketball players: Cole, Grant, and Thomas, and a football player: Williams. She appealed the original district court decision that denied her Title IX claims. The University of Georgia stated that student-on-student harassment required for the federally funded institution to have prior knowledge of the assailants' history. The court's opinion stated:

Therefore, we will not hold a funding recipient [the University of Georgia] liable solely because a person affiliated with the funding recipient discriminated against or harassed the plaintiff ... the discrimination must be "so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it effectively bars the vic-

tim's access to an educational benefit" (*Williams v. Board of Regents of Univ. System of Ga.* 2007, p. 5/14).

The appeal upheld the district court's decision that William's case lacked standing, as she no longer attended the University of Georgia. In 2007, five years after the incident, the University of Georgia and Williams settled for an undisclosed six-figure amount.

The aforementioned lawsuits confirmed a history in which a "hostile environment" and institutional culpability presented extensive challenges for Title IX complainants invoking the prohibition for sexual violence language. Cases that ruled that a single instance of sexual assault did not invoke Title IX protections sent a message to institutions and women that prevailing in a Title IX case regarding sexual violence was a Herculean task.

In 2011, the White House issued the "Dear Colleague Letter" which reiterated the Title IX application to sexual assault, violence, abuse, and coercion. Student-on-student, employee-on-student, and third-party-on-student sexual violence were subject to the Office of Civil Rights' investigations. In 2014, the Office of Civil Rights reiterated its commitment to preventing sexual violence and proceeded with unprecedented transparency by providing a list of 55 colleges and universities under investigation for sexual violence.

Regardless of any school's readiness, the Office of Civil Rights required that each campus have a Title IX coordinator. Further, grievance procedures should be published and distributed to the campus community that includes how to report violations, the student's right to file a criminal complaint, possible remedies, support for the student, and potential sanctions for the perpetrator (US Department of Education 2014).

### *International Students Immigrating to Shifting American Culture*

The Institute of International Education in partnership with the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs reported an 8.1 % increase in international students' matriculation to American higher education in 2014 (United States Department of Education 2014). According to Ruiz (2010), more community colleges have turned their attention to the recruitment and retention of international students. While college campuses benefit from the diversity accompanying a student body with a global perspective, international students also bring challenges to the community college that emerge from cultural differences and language barriers.

International students face a convoluted learning curve. While learning their academic discipline, they also must learn the culture to which they have migrated. Within this context, international students face subtle discrimination and harassment (Ee 2013). Due to language barriers and cultural differences, they might not even understand the nuances, threats, or insults levied against them (Ee 2013). Additionally, they may be less likely to fully comprehend a cursory description of policies or procedures on campus.

Further, international students in general focus on their primary goal to stay in the USA. Their privilege to study in the USA is based on remaining in good academic standing. They often do not wish to be dissuaded from this focus, or may not realize that sexual or domestic violence is a reportable crime (Joshi et al. 2013). Some might avoid reporting violence for fear of deportation (Bauer et al. 2000).

Joshi et al. (2013) conducted a study of six international student coordinators who agreed to a 20-minute interview. The qualitative study revealed that international coordinators had little contact with international students regarding domestic or sexual violence. While many coordinators believed proper counseling referrals were important for international students, coordinators also admittedly avoided discussions on domestic violence. They believed that international students would not attend the orientation if programs advertised any sexual violence content. While this was a study of university coordinators, it provides insight to attitudes of the two-year international student coordinator.

Other studies confirm that international students may have substantial difficulty in developing appropriate interpersonal and intimate relationships. Popadiuk and Arthur (2004) specifically considered the experiences of Canadian women in forming intimate relationships. D'Abreu and Krahe chronicled how sexual scripts and aggression influence male Brazilian college students (2014). When international students harbor incomplete or misguided information about interacting with the opposite sex, they may become more vulnerable within intimate relationships. International students, however, found support in clear communication with faculty (Lieberman 1994).

A 2013 doctoral study, Shenoy (2013) examined international students' knowledge regarding community college and their decision making process. In this study, many international students dreamt of earning an American education; they relied on family members community college information. Specifically, Shenoy (2013) confirmed that international

students choose a community college because of a single person's recommendation, "the person whom they trusted and helped them get to the school..." (p. 96).

Another critical finding was that international students trusted the information the community colleges offered online (Shenoy 2013). International students respected official documents with the institutions' seal as a credible source. Further, the Shenoy study revealed that international students "did not understand placement tests, remedial classes, and the transfer processes" (p. 136). Despite their commitment to being informed, international students had inadequate, inaccessible or inaccurate information regarding the community college; in turn, Title IX policies fall in the same scope of compromised information.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Some researchers considered culture as an indication of organizational climate, practice and values (Schein 1997; Deverell and Olsson 2010). Cultural expectations consolidated, confronted, or changed the prevailing wisdom of an organizational community. As a result, individuals developed an environment that reflected the organization's values. Also, these organizational values were pinned to cultural and institutional hierarchy. In turn, the culture and respective values influence organizational efficiency (Schein 1997).

Based on external or internal pressures, such as changing personnel, shifting market conditions or new legislation, leaders may strive to manipulate organizational culture by establishing new traditions (Lucas and Kline 2008). Therefore, the responsibility to embrace Title IX policy and apply to students within the culture emerges from the campus leadership. Cultural changes implemented by leadership can explicitly embrace new policy implementation and weave the new practice into the organizational culture. In converse, leadership can diminish application of such changes to their organizational climate.

Nonetheless, these new obligatory practices will inform the organizational knowledge distribution, interaction, protest, and compliance throughout the institution. Theoretically, when certain practices or policies are implemented and embraced, they will create a cultural code. Any idea, concept, or procedures that leadership deems as "important" would then be woven into the norms and practices. While leadership typically sets

the tone for the culture, the community can decide to accept, reject, or stand apathetic to changes (Addy 1995).

Within an American campus culture, international students grapple with American social norms and its impact on the organizational culture. Further, they strive to learn the application of policy and procedures and learn such from the campus community. Despite their unique position, international students are still expected to acquiesce and understand given their sheer presence in the culture (Hobbes 1982). Leadership sets the tone for when the culture is modified. In this regard, when a college provides only a cursory introduction to important policies, such as Title IX, students struggling to enter the campus culture will experience a limited understanding of emerging cultural changes. If international students are on the periphery and a critical policy is also on the periphery, a reasonable person could surmise that the policy will lack importance. Subsequently, the policy would not be integrated into the social norms for students, especially those on the margins. In short, when leadership is lax about establishing a culture to prohibit sexual violence, the culture often follows the lax norms set by leadership.

### PROBLEM STATEMENT

Since the inception of the 2011 “Dear Colleague Letter,” American higher education has faced increased scrutiny regarding its compliance with the existing language prohibiting sexual violence in the Title IX legislation (US Department of Education 2011). During, May 2014, 55 post-secondary institutions were under federal investigation regarding sexual violence, including one community college. In June 2015, 111 post-secondary institutions were under federal investigation regarding sexual violence; three of which were community colleges (Kingkade 2015).

The general problem is that community colleges are often absent from discussions regarding the impact of Title IX education on the 12.8 million students who were enrolled in community colleges in 2012. Discussions about sexual assault on campus have primarily focused on four-year schools (Anderson 2015). More specifically, 7 % or 896,000 of those community college students are not US citizens (American Association of Community Colleges, [AACC] 2014). However, recent discussions appear to highlight interventions for four-year schools and student-athletes, yet precious little information has emerged about the requirement to provide the

required Title IX education for community college students or its more vulnerable subset of international students. Typically, the discussion on Title IX has been about women's access to educational opportunities in sports. Therefore, given the increase in international student enrollment, as confirmed by the AACCC, and the heightened awareness of sexual assault cases as confirmed by the US Department of Education on account of unprecedented transparency on sexual assault investigations, logically, community colleges should have an enhanced commitment to educating the burgeoning international student population.

### *Purpose Statement*

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of 10 international community college students regarding Title IX education on their respective campuses. This study also explored international students' understanding of Title IX legislation and its language prohibiting sexual violence. Such information may provide insight to community college leadership on best practices for educating international students about Title IX and its language prohibiting sexual assault.

### *Central Research Question*

As the literature review confirmed, international students may experience difficulty in adjusting to American college culture, a culture that has intermittent support for protecting women against sexual violence. Hence, the central research question for this study was:

- How do community colleges educate international students entering American culture about Title IX and sexual violence?

Further, the study utilized the following sub-questions:

- What understanding do international students currently enrolled at community colleges have regarding Title IX's language about sexual violence?
- How does this understanding of Title IX govern their behavior?



## RESEARCH METHODS

### *Research Sample*

The sample for this study comprised a total of 10 international students: three men and seven women. Participants' time in the USA ranged from one academic term to five years. All participants were traditional-aged students born after 1990. They represented a cross-section of the global population representing Vietnam, Jamaica, Brazil, India, Germany, Liberia, Iran, Mexico, and Puerto Rico.

Qualitative research experts have offered guidance regarding sample size in qualitative research data collection. Ritchie et al. (2003) commented that the sample size in any qualitative study ought to be fewer than 50 participants. With regard to phenomenological studies, Creswell (1998) stated that at least five participants are required, while Morse (1994) Morse and Mason argued that at least six participants are required. Despite the range of acceptable sample sizes, the aforementioned qualitative research experts found that a sample size of 10 in a phenomenological study is viable and can support a saturation of data from which salient themes can emerge.

### *Limitations*

Researchers of this study discovered that trust was a major component in recruiting international students. The typical incentives such as gift cards or food violated students' visas and could not be used to encourage student participation. Therefore, researchers were limited to their informal network of community college colleagues to contact international students.

### *Reliability and Validity*

According to Creswell (2014), the researchers' maturity and experience contribute to study method reliability. Both researchers in this study had prior experience conducting qualitative research. Both researchers also serve as doctoral faculty and work directly with doctoral students in developing qualitative primary research.

The researchers worked as a team, coding data separately, then communicated their respective conclusions and emerging common themes. This crosscheck method “compares results that are independently derived” (Creswell 2014, p. 203). Seasoned researchers independently coding and then communicating a result before reporting the findings helps to strengthen validity.

### *Data Collection and Data Analysis*

Researchers of this study designed a qualitative phenomenological method that explored the lived experiences of ten international students from nine different countries in winter of 2015. Researchers interviewed participants individually, in person or via Skype. All participants reviewed and signed an informed consent form prior to the interview. They were also advised verbally that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. For all participants, English was not their primary language. While their English skills were strong, many struggled to translate thoughts specifically about sexual topics from their native language to English. Each interview lasted approximately ten minutes.

Once the researchers completed the data collection process, each researcher, in a separate process, analyzed and coded the notes for keywords and emerging themes. Individually, researchers determined themes and later convened to review notes and discuss their final thoughts regarding the emerging themes. The analysis not only included a review of themes from each question, the researchers also considered participants' awkward body language and drifting eye contact.

## FINDINGS

The research proposed a central research question and two sub-questions. The respective findings from the sample in the form of emerging themes are presented next:

- How do community colleges educate international students entering American culture about Title IX and sexual violence?

Based on the responses of 10 international students, community colleges were not educating international students about Title IX. The central emerging theme from the interviews was that international students did not know about Title IX. They had never seen the policy or talked to anyone at the community college about the policy (see Table 6.1).

The interviewers also considered the following sub-questions

- What understanding do international students currently enrolled at community colleges have regarding Title IX's language about sexual violence?
- How does this understanding of Title IX govern their behavior?

International students revealed that they did not understand Title IX and its protection for students against sexual violence. In addition to not knowing about Title IX, international students' consistent reluctance to discuss relationships, sex, or violence was a second emerging theme. Many students hesitated when researchers introduced the term "sexual violence" in a question at the midpoint of the interview.

Question 5 of the interview asked, "What was your reaction to the news on sexual violence against women?" Students responded with drifting eye contact, fidgeting body language, and denying that they had heard such news reports. Three students were desensitized to the problem and commented sexual violence occurs regularly in their home country. None considered any of the news on sexual violence in relation to their respective community college settings (see Table 6.2).

In addressing the second sub-question, the aforementioned responses revealed a third theme that Title IX did not govern international students' campus behavior. International students in this study were unaware of any policies or procedures regarding sexual violence on the community college campus. In short, beyond lacking understanding, they also did not

**Table 6.1** Question: Are you familiar with Title IX ? If so, how?

Response	"Do you mean I-9?"
Response	"I spent so much time on my visa, I didn't think about anything else..."
Response	"No, never heard of it."

**Table 6.2** Question: What was your reaction to the news on sexual violence against women?

Response	“I don’t watch the news—I don’t see it.”
Response	“I don’t have TV.”
Response	“Sex is on TV shows all the time.”

**Table 6.3** Question: What is your response to sexual violence in your home [native] community?

Response	“It just happens all the time at home.”
Response	“I don’t think about it at home...ah...ah I just don’t think about it.”
Response	“Women don’t have a voice at home.”

know their respective Title IX coordinators, how to report sexual assault, or their rights as students under Title IX.

A fourth theme revealed that students were unfamiliar with such protections for women and unaware of any procedures or processes for them in the event of sexual violence. Cultural nuances appeared to be part of the equation as some were desensitized based on experiences from their home communities (see Table 6.3).

A fifth theme showed that international students’ culturally informed expectations also assigned blame on the victim of sexual assault. Regardless of gender, age, field of study, or country of origin, international students believed that the woman was primarily responsible for avoiding sexual violence. While they did not know about policies or protections, international students did think women needed to avoid situations that lead to sexual violence, or isolate themselves from the possibility of creating a situation that leads to sexual violence (see Table 6.4). Despite their youth, the participants aligned with more traditional beliefs about women and sexual violence. Their comments echoed patriarchal systems in which the women were primarily responsible to avoid sexual abuse. They did not consider a joint responsibility for women and men to avoid sexual violence.

These interviews suggested that international students emerged from patriarchal paradigms, which left women solely responsible for avoiding sexual assault. While all of the participants were in their early 20s, both genders echoed the sexist language heard in the USA during the 1950s and 1960s. In turn, educational leadership is tasked with bridg-

**Table 6.4** Question: What is the responsibility of both men and women to avoid sexual violence?

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Response	“Women need to protect themselves.”
Response	“Women should be careful not to send mixed messages.”
Response	“Can’t avoid the situation, be yourself. It’s someone’s choice if they want to do that. It depends on their mind. I’m just not that kind of person.”

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ing the cultural gap between the social mores from which international students emerge, and the inclusive environments sought for American education.

## DISCUSSION

Burns (1998) suggested that cultural shifts occur over centuries not decades. As applied to Title IX, US legislation on Title IX appeared in 1972. The 40 years since the passage of Title IX shows a painful history where even a single incident of rape or assault did not qualify as creating a hostile environment or jeopardizing the educational environment.

Since the needed clarity in the 2011 Dear Colleague Letter, colleges and universities must reconsider the application of the sexual violence language in the legislation. Hence, the culture is still shifting to fully educate campus citizens regarding the Title IX and its language prohibiting sexual violence. Further, as community college leadership guides the organizational culture of their respective institutions, they also need to spearhead Title IX education for the general population and international students in particular.

While the recruitment of international students continually brings an opportunity to diversify the community college experience, community colleges also need to ensure that international students are educated about Title IX and have access to relevant information online. Further, consistent with the Shenoy (2013) study, international students need a trusted staff member who will not only bring them information, but serve as a confidant to help immigrating students internalize the spirit of the Title IX policy and apply this information to their campus experiences.

Within the global consciousness that often blames women for being the target of sexual violence, America is shifting to empower the community in protecting all citizens from sexual violence. With regard to this task,

community colleges should understand the dynamics facing international students, which include denial, isolation, and desensitization to the topic. With this in mind, leadership at community college campuses needs to develop an institutional culture that highlights the Title IX coordinator as an officer who can educate faculty. This coordinator can educate faculty, administrators, and advisors on best practices to connect with students, gain their trust, and subsequently educate them about Title IX's critical language.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the emerging themes in this study, the researchers offer the following recommendations:

1. Establish mentors who can gain international students' trust. As noted in the Shenoy (2013) study, an anchorperson is a critical figure for international students. Leadership at community colleges can create mentors for international students. These mentors, when charged by leadership, can galvanize campus culture regard the proper application of Title IX in regulation to preventing sexual violence.
2. Establish Title IX as a formal part of orientation for international students. International students from this study did not know about Title IX or where to find Title IX policy and supporting resources Making Title IX training a mandatory segment of orientation for all students, including international students, will begin a thorough Title IX education for international students. The Title IX coordinator could lead this segment and begin establishing trust with the international student population.
3. Provide Title IX information in several languages. While international students had strong English language skills, some also struggled to manage their reactions or communicate about sexual issues in English. Offering Title IX policies in multiple languages, both verbally and in print, can help international students' comprehension.
4. Include Title IX coordinator in mandatory Title IX programming. As students did not understand Title IX, they were also unfamiliar with the Title IX coordinator. Community colleges can develop

short videos that introduce the Title IX coordinator, explain Title IX, and offer relevant information in different languages.

## CONCLUSION

International students bring a compelling diversity to any college community. The globalization of the workforce means that international students learn about American culture. Simultaneously, American students also have the chance to broaden their horizons by learning about other cultures through international students.

According to the US Department of Education's *Open Doors Report*, colleges will continue to recruit international students, as evidenced by the 72 % jump in international student enrollment since 1990. Given the fiscal crisis colleges face, and the fact that 65 % of international students are cash payers (Institute of International Education 2014), colleges will continue to focus on international student recruitment.

Hence, in the process of educating international students, community colleges have the opportunity to create communities in which international students are included, not isolated. University leadership has an opportunity to shift culture through Title IX programming. The opportunity transcends preventing sexual violence, but also includes an opportunity to build collaborative models across culture and gender, without fear of "mixed messages" or desensitized assumptions about women's safety.

While the numbers of international students are increasing, the volume of students still does not discount the trouble international students have adjusting to American culture. In turn, community colleges, like all sectors in higher education, need to make a concerted effort to gain the trust of international students and then educate them comprehensively about their Title IX rights and responsibilities regarding sexual violence.

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