International Students' Lived Experiences with Intercultural Competence in a Southwest Florida University

Clarisse Halpern

Bruno Halpern

Hasan Aydin

Florida Gulf Coast University
U. S. A.

ABSTRACT: Intercultural competence reflects higher education institutions' commitment to the internationalization of campus, programs, and curricula and results in attracting/retaining international students. Numerous studies explore international students' challenges adapting to the receiving country; however, limited research investigates their experiences with intercultural competence. Thus, a phenomenological study was conducted to investigate the lived experiences of 12 international students with intercultural competence at a Southwest Florida university. The constant comparison method identified three dimensions of the participants' lived experiences: institutional, curricular, and interpersonal. The findings indicated a lack of intercultural competence in each dimension, significantly impacting students' academic and social experiences.

KEYWORDS: International students, intercultural competence, internationalization, higher education, phenomenology.

Literature on International Students
Conceptual Framework
Method
Discussion
Conclusion
References

Globalization is manifested in higher education institutions' efforts towards internationalizing their campuses, expanding international recruitment, and fomenting a brain race worldwide (Altback & Knight, 2007; Van Damme, 2001). Borderless higher education is favored by students and scholars seeking their education and conducting research in international receiving countries (Bedenlier, 2017). The internationalization of higher education contributes to student learning outcomes, as well as the institutions' profit, prestige, and visibility in global rankings (Rogers, 2020). This in and outbound mobility results in complex cultural developments that increase diversity in campuses around the world, including in the United States, one of the world's leaders in investing in higher education internationalization and attracting international students and scholars to

its postsecondary institutions, mainly due to the reputation of its universities (Altbach & Yudkevich, 2017; Wildalvsky, 2010).

The Institute of International Education (IIE, 2020) indicates that several international students pursue their education in postsecondary institutions in the United States yearly. The country hosted more than one million international students for the fifth consecutive year in Fall 2020 despite the 16% drop in enrollment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Undoubtedly, the pandemic impacts these projections as new international students face barriers to their visas and travel bans impede them from returning to the United States to complete their studies (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2020). Also, the growing anti-Asian acts of racism and xenophobia in the United States have left Asian international students fearful of returning to face-to-face classes after the pandemic (Fischer, 2021).

Nonetheless, looking to the future, 64% of American higher education institutions fund outreach and recruitment of international students at the same level or higher than before, focusing on those already in the country, such as in high schools and community colleges (IIE, 2020). Furthermore, as a consequence of increased international student enrollment, American higher education has become increasingly diverse, with Asians leading college enrollment (58%), followed by white (42%), Hispanic (39%), Black (36%), Pacific Islander (21%), and American Indian/Alaska Native students (19%) (National Center of Education Statistics, [NCES], 2019). Also, from 2000 to 2018, the total undergraduate enrollment increased by 26%, from over 13 million to 16.6 million students in the U.S. higher education system (NCES, 2020).

Demographic changes in the country and the increased number of international students pursuing degrees in American postsecondary institutions forecast significant challenges in education. The massive influx of international students to the United States calls for strategies to develop global and intercultural competence among all students (Mori & Takeuchi, 2016). Although 74% of Americans claim that higher education must prepare students to tackle global challenges and compete in a globalized economy (Fulbright Commission, 2020), challenges of assimilation exist (Castles, 2017), discriminating and undermining immigrants based on their values and cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

In addition, questions about the readiness of American higher education institutions concerning their commitment to the internationalization of their campuses and the inclusion of intercultural competence arise. In particular, internationalization efforts call for changes in higher education institutions, from structural mindset changes to the inclusion of global perspectives in global curricula and the development of intercultural competence throughout the courses offered at the institution (Rogers, 2020). Intercultural competence requires intentional efforts and policies, institutional support, adequate funding, increased recruitment and retainment of international students and faculty, and international/global curricula (Deardorff, 2006). The goal is to provide students with educational experiences that are inclusive, accessible, and welcoming, thus acknowledging and valuing their cultural differences and increasing their sense of belonging (Banks, 2008). Intercultural competence increases cross-cultural experiences,

promotes global awareness, and is manifested in interactions between international and domestic students on campus (Alghamdi & Otte, 2016).

Previous studies on international students shed light on the numerous challenges they face in the receiving countries, including feelings of isolation, discrimination, and differences in learning styles (Alghamdi & Otte, 2016; Constantine et al., 2004; Olivas & Li, 2006; Perry et al., 2017; Zhai, 2002). Typically, studies that use the intercultural competence framework focus on its application in study abroad programs and as a set of skills that international students develop. Also, most studies have been conducted in Bulgaria, Canada, China, Cyprus, Japan, Mexico, Poland, Turkey, and the Netherlands (Bui, 2021; Georgiou & Savvidou, 2014; Günçavdi, 2016; Hanada, 2019; Hei et al., 2020; Janeiro et al., 2014; Nguyen, 2017; Popova & Bebenova-Nikolova, 2017; Wickline et al., 2020). Limited studies explore the experiences of international students with intercultural competence within the context of American higher education institutions.

Literature on International Students

Yearly, international students worldwide come to the United States to further their education and improve their career prospects (IIE, 2020). Previous studies have examined several aspects of international students' experiences in the receiving country, including in the United States (e.g., Akhtar, 2011; Constantine et al., 2004; Halpern & Aydin, 2020a; Perry et al., 2017; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Urban & Palmer, 2016; Yuan, 2010; Zhai, 2002). For example, inadequacies in the host society can exacerbate student challenges dramatically (Paltridge et al., 2012). Visible cultural, linguistic, and educational differences often contribute to international students' negative social experiences, resulting in exclusion and difficulties in engaging in friendships and relationships with members of the receiving country (Lee & Rice, 2007; Olivas & Li, 2006). Urban and Palmer (2016) found that stronger ties were developed with other international students because students shared experiences of "being treated as a member of an outgroup… [which fosters] a sense of belonging, supportive social and academic networks, and [alleviates] stress related to negative experiences" (p. 168). Therefore, friendship bonds are formed among international students as a coping mechanism to endure academic/educational, sociocultural, and psychological challenges experienced when adapting to the receiving country (James, 2018).

Furthermore, international students, particularly Latinos and Asians, are frequently the target of discrimination, prejudice, and racial/ethnic labeling in the United States (Perry et al., 2017; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). International students' experiences with microaggressions seemed to be significantly higher in predominantly white higher education institutions, with students reporting feelings of otherness and resorting to ways to seek representation of their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identities on campus to overcome these challenges (Halpern & Aydin, 2020a). Consequently, they experience homesickness and depression at higher rates than domestic students (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007).

Besides the social adaptation issues, international students also experience academic challenges, mainly the stress of adapting to an education system with different teaching and learning methods (Tavares, 2021). Generally, in the United States, classes are fast-paced, with heavy academic demands, including intensive reading, writing, and group assignments requiring fluent in-class participation, presentations, and interactions with professors (Wan et al., 1992; Zhai, 2002). Jang et al. (2014) also note that international students are significantly challenged by the absence of class discussions on multicultural and diversity issues and by unsupportive classmates and professors, who are perceived as insensitive to cultural issues.

Nonetheless, international students enhance cultural awareness across American university campuses, bringing diverse cultural, linguistic, religious, curricular, and global perspectives that help prepare American students with skills to be used in their careers and a globalized economy (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). Moreover, the presence of international students brings opportunities for sharing cross-cultural and global viewpoints with all students, enhancing the overall curricula that allow students to reflect and (re)shape their identities (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Leask & Carroll, 2011; Spiro, 2011).

Trice and Yoo (2007) found that higher education curriculum tends to lack an international focus or perspective; changing this absence could significantly improve international students' experiences with program curricula that are more culturally responsive and interculturally sensitive to this student population (Exposito, 2015). The challenge lies in developing an internationalized curriculum, including course content, teaching and learning strategies, activities, and assessments, that incorporate international students' experiences, knowledge, and skills (Tran, 2010). After all, international students are seen as "bridges between Americans and other nationalities [bringing] global perspectives into U.S. classrooms and research labs" (NAFSA, 2014, n. p.).

However, faculty members are often unprepared to deliver global or internationalized curricula, requiring professional development opportunities to help them incorporate intercultural competency in the curriculum to benefit local and international students' learning (Barker & Mak, 2013; Sanderson, 2011). Therefore, universities committed to internationalization must transform their program curricula to benefit the entire campus community with intercultural competence skills while also contributing to international students' sense of belonging (Aktas et al., 2017; Andreotti, 2006; Caruana, 2014).

Conceptual Framework

The previous section on international student experiences in the U.S. indicates that postsecondary institutions are not committed to implementing intercultural competence in their institutional, curricular, and relational practices. Therefore, intercultural competence is used to guide this study as a model for internationalization efforts (Deardorff, 2006). Intercultural competence combines an individual's "knowledge of others; knowledge of

self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self" (Byram, 1997, p. 34). In other words, intercultural competence can be understood in terms of affective, behavioral, and cognitive skills that allow individuals to adapt and adjust their interactions to others in cultural situations (Association of American Colleges and Universities [AACU], 2010).

Lambert (1993) synthesized intercultural competence into five components. The first, knowledge of other cultures, aims to address the ignorance of many Americans regarding world geography, events, and people. Second, transcultural empathy is the component responsible for developing an individual's ability to put themselves into another person's shoes, moving from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelative perspective. The third and fourth components, foreign language competence and approval, comprise the individual's increased interest and investment in learning other languages while also presenting more favorable attitudes towards other languages, cultures, and peoples. Finally, the fifth component, task performance, relates to the ability of the individual to translate their global and intercultural competence into practice, applying their knowledge, attitudes, and skills to their careers, including international jobs.

Deardorff (2006) posited essential indicators of intercultural competence development put in practice. She emphasized the role of institutional support, college leadership, and funding to increase international students and faculty and the number of students studying foreign languages on campus, improving and supporting study abroad programs and faculty international involvement, and international/global curriculum. Measurements of intercultural competence could include, but are not limited to, focus groups and observations of students; assessment of student papers, presentations, portfolios, and extracurricular and co-curricular activities to check for the inclusion of global topics; and institutional and program workshops on international studies (Deardorff, 2006). Thus, higher education institutions committed to internationalization must foster intentional institutional policy and program change that supports strategies to attract and retain international students and faculty, broaden the offer of immersive study abroad programs, and encourage the introduction of international curricula in courses (Som, 2015; Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018; Zenner & Squire, 2020).

Despite knowing that intercultural competence is not learned or established overnight, but in continuous and intentional processes, it was relevant to investigate international students' lived experiences of intercultural competence in a Southwest Florida university that has been implementing internationalization efforts for the past six years. Therefore, we aimed to answer the following research questions: (1) How do international students experience intercultural competence in higher education in this university in United States? (2) What is the essence of international students' lived experiences with intercultural competence in this university?

Method

A qualitative phenomenological research design was applied to delve into the essence of international students' experiences with intercultural competence in higher education in the United States (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). The goal was to explore, interpret, make visible, and understand how the participants constructed their world and the meaning-making process of their experiences as international students at a Southwest Florida university (Merriam & Tisdel, 2016) and how they "transform[ed] experience into consciousness" (Patton, 2015, p. 190). Therefore, the experiences of international students from different countries/continents, cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds were analyzed and compared to identify the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Researchers' Positionalities

Following the process of epoche (Van Manen, 2014), we researchers bracketed our biases to define our positionality and relationship with the phenomenon under investigation. Thus, we conducted this study based on our expertise and research agenda in international students' experiences, immigration issues in education, international curriculum, global education, culturally responsive teaching practices, and multicultural/multilingual education. Moreover, we have had experiences as international students in the United States. At the time of the study, the first two authors were international graduate students from Brazil studying in the United States, and the third author was a Turkish faculty member who had had experiences as an international student in Mongolia during his bachelor's studies and in the United States during his graduate studies. Thus, we shared similar experiences adapting and integrating to the receiving countries and became inspired to engage in a research agenda about international students' experiences in the United States. Although we were aware that our positionalities could insert bias in our interpretation, we found that they brought strength to the study, offering invaluable insights into participants' experiences. In fact, the participants said they felt more comfortable sharing their perspectives with researchers who had also experienced being international students than they would have if we had been Americans.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process comprised in-depth individual interviews with 12 international students and field notes approved by the university's institutional review board (Protocol #2019-24) (Patton, 2015). The interviews were conducted at a Southwest Florida university campus and lasted 30 to 90 minutes. First, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, organized, and grouped using analytical coding that required "interpretation and reflection on meaning" of the participants' experiences (Richards, 2015, p. 112). Then, using the constant comparative method, we compared the data to determine similarities and differences among the international students' lived

experiences, resulting in three dimensions or categories of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We used the strategy of triangulating analysts where each of us analyzed the data separately and later compared our findings to ensure the consistency of the essence of the participants' experiences (Patton, 2015). External audits and member-checking were also used to attest to the accuracy of our findings and ensure the study's trustworthiness and credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participants

A purposeful sample of 12 international students from the Southwest Florida university was selected. Several criteria for selecting the participants were applied. First, the participants had to be degree-seeking. They had to be in the United States to complete an entire program of study, not as exchange students; this ensured that they had extended stay and experience in the country. Second, the participants had to have lived in the United States for at least one year. Finally, because we, the researchers, valued having diverse voices represented in the study, the final criterion consisted of recruiting international students from culturally, linguistically, religiously, and geographically diverse locations and backgrounds. Therefore, with the help of the university's International Services Office (ISO), we recruited students from different continents/countries, languages, genders, and religious backgrounds. No conditions were established concerning the participants' majors or educational level.

The 12 participants were international students from Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Kenya, Tunisia, Pakistan, Finland, Germany, Italy, and Albania. They were undergraduate students in the following majors: Entrepreneurship, Management, Marketing, Finance, Journalism, Legal Studies, Sociology, Software Engineering, Biology, and Biotechnology. Each of the participants spoke two to four languages fluently. The average age was 23 years old; five students were female, and seven were male. Table 1 illustrates the participants' demographic profiles.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of the Participants

Participants	Country	Gender	Age	Major	Race/Ethnicity	Languages
Bertha	Germany	F	35	Marketing	Caucasian African American	German; English
Bento	Brazil	M	28	Journalism	White	Portuguese; English
Edgar	Honduras	M	21	Software Engineering	Latin	Spanish; English
Gilberto	Brazil	M	21	Entrepreneurship	Brazilian	Portuguese; Spanish; English
Hafeez	Pakistan	M	21	Management	Muslim	Punjabi; Urdu; English; Hindi
Marisa	Colombia	F	21	Sociology	Latino	Spanish; English
Mario	Italy	M	24	Legal Studies	Caucasian European Italian	Italian; English
Sara	Tunisia	F	23	Finance	Multicultural	Arabic; French; English; Italian
Leka	Finland	F	26	Biology	White Caucasian	Finnish; Danish; Swedish; English
Rovena	Albania	F	19	Biotechnology	White	Albanian; English
Mauricio	Brazil	M	23	Entrepreneurship	White Brazilian	Portuguese; English; Spanish; French
Semmi	Kenya	M	21	Software Engineering	African	Swahili; English; Kikuyu

Note. The participants were identified by pseudonyms. Race/ethnicity was based on the participants' self-description/self-identification. F= Female, M= Male.

Findings

The data analysis revealed the participants' lived experiences with intercultural competence in three dimensions: (1) Institutional, (2) Curricular, and (3) Interpersonal. Each dimension is described progressively, from the macro institutional-sphere of their lived experiences to the curricular sphere focused on participants' learning experiences to the micro-level of their interpersonal interactions.

Institutional Dimension

The first dimension was identified based on the participants' experiences related to intercultural competence at the institutional level. It is noteworthy that the university where the study was conducted has been going through an internationalization process over the past six years, revising its mission statement and employing strategies to attract more international students and improve services to retain the current students (Halpern, 2018). However, the participants shared experiences that indicated the university's lack of careful consideration of the needs of international students across campus that might have significantly improved their social and academic experiences. For example, Edgar (Honduras) emphasized the unreadiness of university staff concerning basic information for international students: "I asked the university's HR about IRS and taxes, and they had no idea how to help me. I honestly felt like they weren't even interested in helping me whatsoever." Similarly, Semmi (Kenya) talked about the staff's unwillingness to help international students concerning financial aid options: "The financial aid office staff seemed unaware of the restrictions and challenges we go through with tuition payment and didn't care to help me find scholarships."

When confronted with these challenges, the participants sought the university's ISO staff, who typically understood their needs on and off-campus. In addition, the participants highlighted the ISO Associate Director's past experiences as an international student as pivotal to promoting academic, social, and emotional support: "He was one of us. He knows what we need, and goes that extra mile to help us from choosing classes, adapting to U.S. life, or even when we need to vent about anything" (Gilberto, Brazil).

All the participants emphasized the support they found at the ISO. Not only did they describe situations where they needed legal support for their visas and documents, but they also narrated experiences of academic and social help. For example, Rovena (Albania) said, "The [ISO] staff doesn't take us as numbers, but as humans, understanding that our needs go beyond those of American students because of the challenges we have to face adapting to the university and culture here."

Lack of support was also experienced from program chairs, coordinators, and advisors, which prompted participants to seek help with the ISO. Mainly, participants highlighted their difficulties regarding visa compliance requirements, such as the registration in courses/credit hours per semester:

> It's always a struggle to get them to understand that I must complete a certain number of credits to comply with my visa requirement. So, I always need to advocate for myself to get the courses I need. Plus, there's no effort on their part to educate themselves on that, which is frustrating. (Marisa, Colombia)

Other participants asked the researchers whether the university had plans to implement strategies to train staff, faculty, and program leaders on visa compliance requirements, as well as the social and academic needs of international students. Participants also shared episodes of their academic advisors being oblivious to international students' educational backgrounds and academic interests when guiding them through their course choices and plans of studies. For example, Mauricio (Brazil) said, "I wanted to take Spanish classes, but my advisor said, 'you can't take a class in your native language,' never mind that I speak Portuguese." The lack of intercultural competence at the institutional level was attested to by many participants who found comfort and support with the ISO staff to solve issues far beyond their job requirements.

Curricular Dimension

The second dimension illuminates the overall absence of global and intercultural knowledge in international students' courses. Much criticism from the students focused on how their courses' curricula were set up to exclude different perspectives and be much less demanding than in their home countries. While it is expected that an institution in the United States would offer American-focused learning methods, the participants felt ignored. Many students could not help but compare what worked and what did not work in the education systems of their home and host countries. For example, Hafeez (Pakistan) lamented that the American-centered curricula was ultimately most prejudicial to American students: "In Pakistan, we learned business models from American and European brands and how they could be applied to Pakistan's culture. But if U.S. students go anywhere else to work, they'll have no idea what to do."

These students had the unique opportunity to think about curriculum building, exercising their capacity to think about learning critically, expressing their concerns for American students not being sufficiently exposed to international, multicultural, or diverse topics that they believed would significantly benefit their education. Yet, even the differences and analyses they shared in class discussions were not stimulated by the professors, much less the U.S.-born students: "Americans are focused on their country. So, I think they should learn about global issues. It would be a win-win; we learn from them, they from us. Americans have to realize that they are not alone in the world" (Gilberto, Brazil).

Bento (Brazil) was frustrated because, in his view, Journalism was supposed to be a "profession beyond boundaries" where different perspectives were crucial when making sense of information and communicating it to the public. Another participant expressed similar frustration and concern about the lack of a broader global perspective: "I had an International Finance class that only talked about American issues. Not even in a course labeled as 'international' [do] we get to have international conversations" (Sara, Tunisia). Similarly, Bertha (Germany) commented: "I was excited to take an International Marketing course, but all the professor discussed were American brands and businesses. How can anyone learn global topics if faculty don't teach them?"

Consequently, the participants proposed ideas to transform American-focused curricula and content into a global-oriented learning experience, including developing international case study assignments applied to their fields of study. For example, Bento (Brazil) suggested adding an international news course to "prepare journalism students to cover international stories or in a foreign country." Edgar (Honduras) proposed class discussions that encouraged "international students to share how specific scenarios would play in their countries." Despite the lack of intercultural competence applied to curricular experiences, the participants imagined ideal learning experiences that would benefit international and domestic students. However, institutional and curricular support to intercultural competence is not possible if all constituencies on campus are unaware of the role of intercultural competence at the interpersonal level.

Interpersonal Dimension

The third dimension emerged from the participants' description of interpersonal barriers that included communication issues, mainly when interacting with faculty and students on campus. These incidents included challenges engaging with native English speakers, understanding class content, and participating in class activities that resulted in social isolation and difficulties making friends. Language barriers hindered communication and interpersonal interactions. The participants often felt intimidated and self-conscious to speak to native English speakers; afraid of making mistakes, they often become more introverted, different from how they would typically behave in their first languages and cultural settings. For example, Marisa (Colombia) said that she initially expected that interactions with American students would be as easy as in her home country: "I'm one person in English and one person in Spanish. Back home, I am louder, and I approach people easier. However, I'm not so confident here because of this language barrier and people's perceptions about me." Similarly, it was common for participants like Leka (Finland) to feel "shy and afraid to speak English in class," even though he claimed that he "never had a problem with public speaking before coming to the United States."

Participants emphasized the obliviousness of American faculty and students to the English language challenges that affected their learning and social experiences. As a result, the participants avoided class discussions and felt discouraged to inform their professors of their need to access Google Translate and dictionaries to help their understanding of content and in-class discussions. Gilberto (Brazil) explained that, during a guest speaker presentation,

> The professor called my attention, saying I was rude for using my phone in class. I couldn't explain to him that I needed my phone and 'best friend' [Google Translate] to understand the guest speaker because I was afraid to speak English to him.

Google Translate is a valuable resource, but does not fully resolve the many inter-language communication obstacles, especially colloquial speech, where meaning

depends on much more than it might seem. Most importantly, the professors' unawareness of international students' needs contributed to feelings of self-consciousness and shame, impacting students' social and learning experiences.

Furthermore, the participants' experiences evidenced professors' seeming disinterest in promoting activities and classroom engagement that would allow international and domestic students to discover and learn from one another and value their beliefs and background experiences in their cultures, languages, and countries. The participants mentioned that faculty did not encourage students' curiosity in learning other cultures or developing less ethnocentric views. For instance, faculty rarely gave students a voice to share their experiences and prevent negative stereotypes about their cultures and countries. Marisa (Colombia) spoke of misconceptions her peers had about her country, associating it to a Netflix series about drug cartels, *Narcos*, and how faculty did not intervene to deter the stereotypes shared about Latino immigrants that hindered Marisa's class participation and socialization with peers: "Our university is so overwhelmingly white that people disregard the value of others' experiences. It's hurtful, but if faculty don't do their job changing their classes, nothing will change, and everyone loses from this lack of interpersonal interaction."

In the view of participants, professors must harness interpersonal awareness skills to deal better with students, especially international students, and their demands and challenges. Conversely, the participants identified American faculty as "more to themselves" (Mario, Italy) than international faculty, resulting in more positive perceptions of the latter in interpersonal interactions with their students than the former. Mauricio (Brazil) said, "international professors talk more about their culture and country because it's their root, it's who they are. It doesn't seem that American professors like to talk about their backgrounds; it's just not part of their experience."

The participants argued that faculty demonstrated little awareness when dealing with international students and matters. When even minimal evidence of awareness was shown, it was typically shallow. Participants felt that American professors refrained from asking students about their personal stories or opinions, perhaps due to cultural differences regarding personal boundaries: "Professors must try to get to know their students. For example, I had a macroeconomics professor who was talking about Brazil's recession. If she knew I was Brazilian, she could've gone deeper into the discussion" (Gilberto, Brazil).

Other participants interpreted the behavior of American faculty as indicating a lack of interest in understanding their students. They perceived international faculty as more committed to connecting with students: "I had a class heavily rooted in global immigration. It was such a great class because the professor was of Cuban heritage, and that made a difference. If he were American, that wouldn't have happened" (Mario, Italy). Semmi (Kenya) added, "I prefer international faculty because they teach trying to [reach] everyone. They understand us because they've gone through the same things we did. Of course, I had great American professors too. But you can tell there's a difference."

In the participants' views, if an American professor did not have a multicultural or multiethnic background, or had never left the country or lived abroad, global topics and

perspectives were largely ignored. Moreover, the lack of commitment and interaction among international and domestic students was noticed in the absence of an American audience in events planned to promote such integration. For example, Mario (Italy) talked about two initiatives that promoted cross-cultural interactions with international and domestic students on campus: "Only international students and faculty attend these events, no matter how much we advertise them as 'for everyone.'" Bento (Brazil) added, "I think Americans don't go to these events because they're simply not interested in attending or even curious to learn about international issues." Despite initiatives to promote events on campus that are meant to integrate international and domestic students, it appears that challenges exist concerning student and faculty awareness of global issues. They do not seem, to participants, to have curiosity to learn and discover more of other cultures, peoples, and languages or to foster cross-cultural relationships and interactions among students.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate international students' lived experiences with intercultural competence at a Southwest Florida university. The findings indicate the absence of intercultural competence applied to different levels - from the micro, interpersonal to the macro, institutional. At the institutional level, the findings reveal opportunities to increase intercultural competence concerning the knowledge of international students' needs that could be materialized in improved services, including their interactions with staff, program leaders, and academic advisors. As Deardorff (2006) posited, intercultural competence is crucial when it emerges from institutional support and college leadership and is a natural consequence of higher education internationalization efforts.

While the ISO staff was named as crucial to international students' integration, adaptation, and overall social and academic success on campus, little evidence was described of efforts that would improve the experiences of these students at the institutional level. Despite the participants referring to the ISO staff as their advocates to help them overcome a wide range of challenges adapting to the United States' academic, social, and cultural life, several of the tasks performed by these professionals went beyond their job descriptions. Moreover, the institution would significantly benefit from organizing training, events, workshops, and seminars to increase global awareness on campus that would, ultimately, result in a more welcoming campus for international students. The international students' points of view would enrich the college experiences of American students and encourage additional opportunities for dialogue, acceptance, and understanding.

At the curricular level, the findings indicated that participants wished their voices were heard and felt there was a lack of opportunity for exchanging ideas with Americans. In addition, the lack of intercultural competence applied to curricular experiences was noticeable as the participants described classes with an all-American focused curriculum,

even those that should seemingly include international and global perspectives, such as International Finance or International Marketing. These findings reveal the lack of opportunities to increase student knowledge of other cultures, develop transcultural empathy, and apply students' global and international knowledge to class assignments (Lambert, 1993).

Interestingly, some participants commented that the university's College of Education should spearhead efforts to help infuse university curricula with intercultural competence by suggesting instructional strategies, activities, and assessments. The goal would be to help faculty become interculturally competent and culturally sensitive to their diverse students (Banks, 2008; Deardorff, 2006; Halpern & Aydin, 2020b). To participants, faculty expertise in education could create synergy between colleges to align perspectives and strategies that would integrate international students' experiences and intercultural competence into programs and course curricula.

Concerning interpersonal competence, participants recommended that professors harness interpersonal awareness skills to deal better with students, especially international students, and their demands and challenges. The sensibility to notice learning pace differences, language barriers, and different life and educational backgrounds is ever more critical, especially when colleges diversify and seek internationalization, such as the university under investigation. In fact, the need to improve intercultural competence at the interpersonal level requires the development of intercultural sensitivity, an affective disposition that can significantly contribute to the integration and adaptation of international students to campus and, consequently, to the receiving country (Liu, 2019; Moradi & Ghabanchi, 2019). These skills would allow professors to avoid homogenizing and silencing students and to view the experiences of international students as enriching the class learning experience. Ultimately, promoting intercultural competence at the three dimensions observed would improve student, faculty, and staff knowledge of others; encourage the desire to discover and interact with culturally and linguistically diverse students; and prompt the valuing of diverse mores, beliefs, and behaviors (Byram, 1997).

Living abroad and international travel can significantly improve faculty's global awareness and broaden their cultural and social perceptions. However, faculty must invest and become interested in familiarizing themselves with how international students differ regarding learning and educational techniques. Professors do not need to have experienced living abroad to know their students' backgrounds and encourage intercultural competence in their courses. Faculty must be willing and open to learning more about their students' journeys and become catalyzers of change and transformation in the classroom. This recommendation emphasizes the need for both international and American students to be heard; neither must be perceived as a monolith, for each has something to offer about themselves and their origins, tastes, opinions, and experiences. Consequently, intercultural competence is a matter that transcends faculty preparedness and sheds light on foundational frailties of the forces that move student development within a postsecondary institution.

Significant differences were observed concerning the level of intercultural awareness (or lack thereof) among students majoring in humanities programs. Noticeably, these students were more conscious of their challenges, knowing they were rooted in ethnocentric values in American society and the education system. Conversely, participants who majored in technology-related programs narrated experiences that focused on challenges and emphasized their lack of personal abilities (i.e., English proficiency) rather than viewed them as signs of systemic inequality at the university. In addition, no individual differences were noticed comparing participants from different countries of origin, cultures, or linguistic backgrounds. Future studies could approach international students' perceptions of and experiences with intercultural competence, intentionally comparing students of different majors and educational levels. In addition, to understand the limitations and possibilities of implementing intercultural competence at the institutional and curricular levels, future studies could approach American and international faculty and staff perspectives. Finally, others studies could investigate international students of different origins and compare their perspectives on intercultural competence.

Conclusion

Universities committed to internationalization must cultivate intercultural competence at different levels, promoting cross-cultural integration of international and domestic students, faculty, and staff. Such practices would help international students feel included and, at the same time, enrich the education and lives of American students and faculty by promoting diversity across campus. More emphasis should rest on how classes disseminate information and help students notice these differences, deal with them, and exercise their academic and social skills.

Moreover, universities should become more than a place for instruction and focus on self-transformation. When universities decide to welcome international students, they must make sure faculty and administrators are ready to deal with the unique challenges and perspectives these students bring. The institution must prepare employees but not rely on these professionals to handle this task by themselves. University professionals must, above all, become sensitive to embracing differences and learn how to incorporate them into the class environment. Such skills will also help domestic students. By stimulating an institutional internationalization plan, employees may feel prepared to see and understand international students and their struggles, while students themselves will carry the lesson of recognizing that each person has unique stories to tell.

Results from the study should offer insights for administrators, faculty, and policymakers concerning diversity, globalization, and inclusion practices in higher education curricula, shedding light on what aspects support or hinder international students' integration and academic success. Findings from this study will add new data to the field of international students' studies and the intersections of their experiences with intercultural competence. Administrators and faculty can benefit from this study by

understanding and addressing international students' curricular experiences, struggles, and challenges in higher education and getting inspired to become more interculturally competent in their practices.

References

Akhtar, S. (2011). *Immigration and acculturation: Mourning, adaptation, and the next generation*. Jason Aronson.

Aktas, F., Pitts, K., Richards, J. C., & Silova, I. (2017). Institutionalizing global citizenship: A critical analysis of higher education programs and curricula. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *21*(1), 65–80. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315316669815

Alghamdi, H., & Otte, S. (2016). The challenges and benefits of study abroad. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, *6*(5), 16–22.

Altbach, P. G., & Knight, J. (2007). The internationalization of higher education: Motivations and realities. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *11*(3-4), 290–305. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315307303542

Altbach, P. G., & Yudkevich, M. (2017). International faculty in 21-st century universities. In M. Yudkevich, P. G. Altbach, & L. E. Rumbley (Eds.), *International faculty in higher education: Comparative perspectives on recruitment, integration, and impact* (pp. 1–14). Routledge.

Andreotti, V. (2006). Soft versus critical global citizenship education. *Policy & Practice A Development Education Review*, *3*, 40–51.

Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2010). *Intercultural knowledge and competence VALUE Rubric*. http://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/pdf/InterculturalKnowledge.pdf

Banks, J. A. (2008). Diversity, group identity, and citizenship education in a global age. *Educational Researcher*, *37*(3), 129–139. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X08317501

Barker, M. C., & Mak, A. S. (2013). From classroom to boardroom and ward: Developing generic intercultural skills in diverse disciplines. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 17*(5), 573–589. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315313490200

Bedenlier, S. (2017). Internationalization within higher education and its influence on faculty: Experiences of Turkish academic staff. *Journal of Research in International Education*, *16*(2), 185–196. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240917724272

Bui, T. (2021). Becoming an intercultural doctoral student: Negotiating cultural dichotomies. *Journal of International Students*, *11*(1), 257–265. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v11i1.1272

Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.

Caruana, V. (2014). Re-thinking global citizenship in higher education: From cosmopolitanism and international mobility to cosmopolitanisation, resilience and resilient thinking. *Higher Education Quarterly*, *68*(1), 85–104. https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12030

Castles, S. (2017). The challenges of international migration in the 21st century. In J. A. Banks (Ed.), *Citizenship education and global migration: Implications for theory, research, and teaching* (pp. 3–21). American Educational Research Association.

Constantine, M. G., Okazaki, S., & Utsey, S. O. (2004). Self-concealment, social self-efficacy, acculturative stress, and depression in African, Asian, and Latin American international college students. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *74*(3), 230–241. https://doi.org/10.1037/0002-9432.74.3.230

Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *10*(3), 241–266. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306287002

Exposito, J. A. (2015). *A phenomenological study of the international student experience at an American college* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest (10010659).

Fischer, K. (2021, April 9). *After anti-Asian incidents, colleges seek to reassure fearful international students*. https://www.chronicle.com/article/after-anti-asian-incidents-colleges-seek-to-reassure-fearful-international-students?bc_nonce=3li1at1xx1y36di74t3a47&cid=reg_wall_signup

Fulbright Commission. (2020, June). *Universities: Perceptions, impacts and benefits of higher education around the world*. https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/fulbright-survey-2020.pdf

Georgiou, M., & Savvidou, C. (2014). 'Either you know Greek or too bad for you': International students' intercultural experiences in Cyprus. *Intercultural Education*, *25*(1), 41–54. https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2014.883190

Günçavdi, G. (2016). Level of intercultural competence of international students at Kocaeli University. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, *4*(12A), 39–45. https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2016.041306

Halpern, B. (2018, 15 September). *FGCU hosts international reception*. http://eaglenews.org/entertainment-and-lifestyle/fgcu-hosts-international-reception/

Halpern, C., & Aydin, H. (2020a). International students' lived experiences in a predominantly White institution in Southwest Florida. *Multicultural Learning and Teaching*. Advanced online publication. https://doi.org/10.1515/mlt-2020-0005

Halpern, C., & Aydin, H. (2020b). The light in their eyes: Creating a multicultural education course for doctoral-level students. *Journal of Multicultural Education*, *35*(2), 85–100. https://doi.org/10.1108/JME-11-2019-0079

Hanada, S. (2019). A quantitative assessment of Japanese students' intercultural competence developed through study abroad programs. *Journal of International Students*, *9*(4), 1015–1037. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i4.39

Hei, M., Tabacaru, C., Sjoer, E., Rippe, R., & Walenkamp, J. (2020). Developing intercultural competence through collaborative learning in international higher education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *24*(2), 190–211. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315319826226

Institute of International Education. (2020). *Open doors data: Enrollment trends*. https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/enrollment-trends/

James, G. (2018). A narrative inquiry perspective into coping mechanisms of international postgraduate students' transition experiences. *American Journal of Qualitative Research*, *2*(1), 41–56. https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/5793

Janeiro, M. G. F., Fabre, R. L., Parra, J. P. N. (2014). Building intercultural competence through intercultural competency certification of undergraduate students. *Journal of International Education Research*, *10*(1), 15–22.

Jang, Y. J., Woo, H., & Henfield, M. S. (2014). A qualitative study of challenges faced by international doctoral students in counselor education supervision courses. *Asian Pacific Education Review*, *15*(4), 561–572. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-014-9342-9

Lambert, R. D. (Ed.). (1993). *Educational exchange and global competence*. Council on International Educational Exchange.

Leask, B., & Carroll, J. (2011). Moving beyond 'wishing and hoping': Internationalisation and student experiences of inclusion and engagement. *Higher Education Research & Development, 30*(5), 647–659. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2011.598454

Lee, J. J., & Rice, C. (2007). Welcome to America? International student perceptions of discrimination. *Higher Education, 53*(3), 381–409. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-005-4508-3

Liu, M. (2019). Predicting effects of demographic, linguistic and psychological variables on university international students' intercultural communication sensitivity. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, *6*(3), 123–133. https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/277

Luo, J., & Jamieson-Drake, D. (2013). Examining the educational benefits of interacting with international students. *Journal of International Students*, *3*(2) ,85–101.

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Moradi, E., & Ghabanchi, Z. (2019). Intercultural sensitivity: A comparative study among Business English undergraduate learners in two countries of Iran and China. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, *6*(3), 134–146. https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/278

Mori, J., & Takeuchi, J. D. (2016). Campus diversity and global education: A case study of a Japanese program. *Foreign Language Annals*, *49*(1), 146–161. https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12182

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publications.

NAFSA: Association of International Educators. (2014). *Explore international education: International student economic value tool*. https://www.nafsa.org/_/File/_/international_students_fact_sheet.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2019, February). *Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic groups 2017*. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019038.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics (2020, May). *Undergraduate enrollment*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cha.asp

Nguyen, A. (2017). Intercultural competence in short-term study abroad. *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, *29*(2), 109–127.

Olivas, M., & Li, C. (2006). Understanding stressors of international students in higher education: What college counselors and personnel need to know. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, *33*(3), 217–222.

Paltridge, T., Mayson, S., & Schapper, J. (2012). Covering the gap: Social inclusion, international students and the role of local government. *Australian Universities Review*, *54*(2), 29–39.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Perry, C. J., Lausch, D. W., Weatherford, J., Goeken, R., & Almendares, M. (2017). International students' perceptions of university life. *College Student Journal*, *51*(2), 279–290.

Popova, J., & Bebenova-Nikolova, D. (2017). Intercultural competence acquisition of international students educators in two universities in Bulgaria and China. *Journal of Danubian Studies and Research*, *7*(2). 509–523.

Poyrazli, S., & Kavanaugh, P. R. (2006). Marital status, ethnicity, academic achievement, and adjustment strains: The case of graduate international students. *College Student Journal*, *40*(4), 767–780.

Poyrazli, S., & Lopez, M. D. (2007). An exploratory study of perceived discrimination and homesickness: A comparison of international and American students. *Journal of Psychology*, *141*(3), 263–280. https://doi.org/10.3200/JRLP.141.3.263-280.

Richards, L. (2015). *Handling qualitative data: A practical guide* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Rogers, A. (2020, November 1). *Internationalizing the campus at home: Campus globalization in the context of COVID-19.* https://iie.widen.net/s/dgz5cmjb6z/internationalizing-the-campus-at-home-1

Sanderson, G. (2011). Internationalisation and teaching in higher education. *Higher Education Research and Development, 30*(5), 661–676. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2011.598455

Som, I. (2015). Globalizing actors of higher education: "International students." *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, *2*(1), 58–59.

Spiro, J. (2011). Guided interaction as intercultural learning: Designing internationalisation into a mixed delivery teacher education programme. *Higher Education Research and Development, 30*(5), 635–646. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.598453

Tavares, V. (2021). Multlingual international students at a Canadian university: Portraits of agency. *American Journal of Qualitative Research*, *5*(2), 92–107. https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/11135

Tran, L. T. (2010). Embracing prior professional experience in meaning making: Views from international students and academics. *Educational Review*, *63*(2), 157–173. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131910903548669

Trice, A. G., & Yoo, J. E. (2007). International graduate students' perceptions of their academic experience. *Journal of Research in International Education*, *6*(1), 41–66. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240907074788

Urban, E. L., & Palmer, L. B. (2016). International students' perceptions of the value of U.S. higher education. *Journal of International Students*, *6*(1), 153–174.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (2020, July 6). *SEVP modifies temporary exemptions for nonimmigrant students taking online courses during fall 2020 semester*. https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/sevp-modifies-temporary-exemptions-nonimmigrant-students-taking-online-courses-during

Van Damme, D. (2001, September 10-11). *Higher Education in the Age of Globalisation: The need for a new regulatory framework for recognition, quality assurance and accreditation*. Paper presented at the UNESCO Expert Meeting.

Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy.* University of Western Ontario.

Van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Routledge.

Wan, T., Chapman, D. W., & Biggs, D. A. (1992) Academic stress of international students attending U.S. university. *Research in Higher Education*, *33*(5), 607–622. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00973761

Wickline, V. B., Shea, A. M., Young, C. D., & Wiese, D. (2020). Increasing intercultural competence in undergraduate education: Study abroad is a viable way, but not the only way. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, *32*(3), 126–155. https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v32i3.582

Wildalvsky, B. (2010). *The great brain race: How global universities are reshaping the world*. Princeton University Press.

Wilson-Forsberg, S., Power, P., Kilgour, V., & Darling, S. (2018). From class assignment to friendship: Enhancing the intercultural competence of domestic and international students through experiential learning. *Canadian and International Education*, *47*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.5206/cie-eci.v47i1.9322

Yuan, W. (2010). Investigating international student perceptions of adjustment through Q methodology. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, *19*(2), 235–252.

Zenner, K., & Squire, D. (2020). International student success: Exploring the intercultural competence of academic advisors. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *57*(3), 338–351. https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2019.1707092

Zhai, L. (2002). *Studying international students: Adjustment issues and social support*. ERIC Document 474481. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED474481.pdf

Author Contact

Clarisse Halpern, halpern.clarisse@gmail.com
Bruno Halpern, brunohalpern@gmail.com
Hasan Aydin, haydin@fgcu.edu