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International Reverse Transfer Students: A Critical Analysis Based on Field, Habitus, and Social and Cultural Capital

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Abstract

Objective: International reverse transfer students are international students who begin their postsecondary journey at a four-year institution but subsequently transfer to a community college. In this qualitative study, we examine the lived experiences of international reverse transfers to understand the reasons for reverse-transfer and to understand the students' learning experiences. **Methods:** Using a phenomenological approach, we recruited 10 international reverse transfer students attending one four-year university or one of the two community colleges. We conducted individual interviews with all participants and analyzed transcript data through Bourdieu's sociological theory of field, habitus, and social and cultural capital. **Results:** We identified three types of international reverse transfer students: undergraduate reverse transfers, temporary reverse transfers, and postbaccalaureate reverse transfers. Each type reported different reasons for reverse transfer but shared similar influential factors of the reverse transfer process as well as the learning experiences while enrolled at the community colleges. **Contributions:** This study helps to fill an information and research gap regarding international reverse transfer students. We present the academic, social, and cultural challenges faced by international students and offer practical implications for higher education practitioners for improved understandings and better processes to serve international students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Keywords

reverse transfer, international students, social and cultural capital, and field theory

Disciplines

Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Community College Leadership | Curriculum and Social Inquiry | Higher Education | International and Comparative Education

Comments

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International Reverse Transfer Students: A Critical Analysis Based on Field, Habitus, and Social and Cultural Capital

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Abstract

Objective. International reverse transfer students are international students who began as students in a four-year institution and subsequently transferred to a community college. This qualitative study examined the lived experiences of international reverse transfers with the goals of understanding why they reverse-transferred and their learning experiences through the process.

Methods. We adopted a phenomenological approach. Ten international reverse transfers were recruited from one four-year university and two community colleges. We conducted in-depth individual interviews with all participants and analyzed transcript data through Bourdieu's sociological theory of field, habitus, social and cultural capital.

Results. The study identified three types of international reverse transfer students: undergraduate reverse transfers, temporarily reverse transfers, and post-baccalaureate reverse transfers. Each type reports different reasons for reverse transfer while sharing similarities in terms of influencing factors of the reverse transfer process as well as the learning experiences within the community colleges.

Conclusions/Contributions. This study helps to fill an information and research gap regarding international reverse transfer students. The academic, social and cultural challenges faced by international students were analyzed through the unique experiences of the international reverse transfer student group. This study also generated practical implications for higher education practitioners for better understanding and serving international students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: Reverse Transfer, International Students, Social and Cultural Capital, Field Theory

International reverse transfer students: A critical analysis based on field, habitus, social and cultural capital

Currently, more than one million international students are studying at U.S. higher education institutions (Institute of International Education, 2018a); more than double the number from the last decade. Of these international students, about 8.6%, or 94,562 students are attending community colleges (IIE, 2018b). Some of these international students use community colleges as a stepping-stone to four-year universities (Hagedorn & Lee, 2005; Bohman, 2009); but others attend community colleges for other reasons. Although rarely discussed or studied, some international students arrive in the U.S. to study at four-year colleges and universities, but subsequently transfer to a community college (Hagedorn, Pei, & Lu, 2016; Zhang, 2015). Transfers from the four-year sector to the two-year is termed “reverse transfer” (Townsend & Dever, 1999). International reverse transfer students have rarely been identified, counted, or studied.

The reasons for reverse transfer are as diverse as the students themselves. Some students transfer due to significant academic challenges at the four-year institutions; others may earn additional credits during the summer thus expediting academic progress towards a bachelor degree (Townsend & Dever, 1999; Hagedorn & Castro, 1999). Yet another group of students already holding bachelor degrees may subsequently enroll in a community college for additional career or technical education (Quinley & Quinley, 1999; Friedel & Friesleben, 2017). Previous studies have focused on different aspects of reverse transfers and implications to institutions for serving this population (e.g., Townsend & Dever, 1999; Hagedorn & Castro, 1999; Hosseler, et al., 2012). However, with only a few exceptions (i.e., Hagedorn, Pei, & Lu, 2016; Zhang, 2015), studies have been limited to domestic reverse transfers.

Although international reverse transfers may share similarities with their domestic counterparts, they have unique backgrounds and characteristics that raise important questions. For example, do international students reverse transfer for the same reasons as domestic students? Do international reverse transfer students encounter unique academic challenges and/or financial difficulties in their original four-year institutions? What role does culture adjustment play? What should higher education administrators and practitioners understand when serving this population? To fill this gap, this study has collected first-hand, in-depth data from international reverse transfer students to explore their perspectives and lived experiences regarding their reverse transfer.

Literature Review

We collected and analyzed the relevant literature from three perspectives: a) studies on reverse transfer among domestic students, b) studies on international students' adjustment to U.S. colleges, c) international students' learning experiences within community colleges.

Domestic Reverse Transfer Students

National statistics indicate that 10% to 15% of initial four-year students will reverse transfer to community colleges at some point in their educational journey (Hossler, et.al., 2012; Kalogrides & Grodsky, 2011). Townsend and Dever (1999) identified three types of reverse transfers. In particular, the undergraduate reverse transfer student (URTS) who transfers to the two-year college without immediate plans for a bachelor's degree. Temporary reverse transfer students (TRTS) attend community college courses for a short period of time (i.e., summer only) and transfer the credits to the four-year college to be applied towards a bachelor's degree. The post-baccalaureate reverse transfer students (PRTS) attend the community college after earning a bachelor degree (Townsend & Dever, 1999). More recently, some state or regional level

programs have devised a new type of reverse transfer for students who transferred from a community college to a four-year institution prior to earning an associate degree. In these programs, credits earned at the four-year is transferred to the two-year to allow the student to earn an associate degree (Friedel & Wilson, 2015; Taylor, 2016; 2017). These programs contribute to the college completion agenda by providing postsecondary credentials (Taylor, 2016; 2017). In this study, we primarily focus on the three types of reverse transfers as identified by Townsend and Dever (1999): URTS, TRTS, and PRTS.

A variety of previous studies focused on the identified types of reverse transfers. URTS often reverse transfer due to changes in education plans, poor academic performance, social/familial challenges, and/or financial concerns (Hossler, et.al, 2012; Hillman, Lum & Hossler, 2008). Many URTS feel forced to reverse transfer due to failure of maintaining the minimum GPA, academic probation, suspension, or expulsion (Hagedorn & Castro, 1999; Townsend, 2000; Hillman, Lum & Hossler, 2008). National statistics, unfortunately, indicate that approximately 15% of the URTS will return to four-year colleges (Hossler, et. al., 2012). However, although the likelihood of reverse transfers earning a bachelor degree may be small; it provides an opportunity for those otherwise would have no other option than to drop out of the postsecondary system (Kalogrides & Grodsky, 2011).

TRTS present a different picture. TRTS are attracted by lower cost, convenient class locations, smaller classroom sizes, and chances to improve their GPA (Hagedorn & Castro, 1999; Yang, 2006). Due to their unique course-taking patterns (i.e., taking courses during summer months only), they have also been called “summer sessioners” (Hagedorn & Castro, 1999). TRTS will return to their original four-year institution with earned credits and have a

higher completion rate than four-year students who never took any courses from two-year institutions (Hossler, et. al., 2012).

Lastly, PRTS generally enroll in community college courses for professional training requirements and needs. These students may need to earn a particular certificate to fulfill job requirements or are in search of a new career (Friedel & Friesleben, 2017; Quinley & Quinley, 1999). Again, it must be noted that the findings from these studies have been mainly based on domestic students. It is unknown if these findings also hold true for international reverse transfers.

International Students' Adjustment

Responding to the rapid increase of international enrollment during the last decade, previous studies have focused on international students' adjustment and transition to the U.S. postsecondary institutions. Some common topics include a) engagement and campus involvement (e.g., Mamiseishvili, 2012; Glass & Gesing, 2018); b) psychological challenges and adjustment (e.g., Li, Wang & Xiao, 2014; Young, 2011); c) interaction with American and international peers (e.g., Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013; Trice, 2004); and d) academic challenges (e.g., Adhikari, 2018; Durkin, 2008). In this section, we focus on the last topic (i.e., academic challenges) because many international students choose to reverse transfer due to academic challenges (Hagedorn, Pei & Lu, 2016).

One of the most important factors that contributed to academic challenges for international students is the language barrier. Poor English language ability often link to academic difficulties in the classroom, additionally required English remedial classes, and less likelihood to persist (Sato & Hodge, 2009; Hung & Hyun, 2010). Another critical factor of

academic challenges is the cultural adaptation to the western learning-style. This issue has been discussed mainly with the East Asian international students.

The rapid increase of international enrollment was largely contributed by international undergraduate enrollment from East Asian countries. For example, as the top sending country, China is the home country for 33.2% (363,341 students) of international students in 2017/2018 (IIE, 2018c). When aggregating international students from East Asian countries (i.e., China, South Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Hong Kong) the proportion swells to 46% of all international students (IIE, 2018c). The inherited cultural norms of East Asian international students, namely, the cultural norms of Confucianism and collectivism, greatly influence their academic experiences. For example, in Confucian East Asia, entering to a high-prestige university is a family honor and victory (Choi & Nieminen, 2013). Failing to do so may cause the whole family to “lose face”, which should be avoided at any price in a collectivist society (Kirkbride, Tang & Westwood, 1991; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Therefore, East Asian students may strongly feel “the duty to succeed” in a U.S. university (Dundes, Cho, & Kwak, 2009).

With a strong will to be successful, East Asian international students often find themselves challenged by the western learning-style. For example, some students viewed as excessively quiet or not adequately participating in the classroom may be exhibiting behaviors taught in Confucian cultures that stress teachers must always be respected and never challenged (Nguyen, Terlouw & Pilot, 2006; Choi & Nieminen, 2013). Non-participation may also be related to the concept of “face”. Culturally, “face” relates to an individual or a group’s reputation, honor, social standing, and prestige. East Asian students often do not express their

opinions in the classroom to avoid “losing face” of themselves and/or “saving face” to others (Triandis, Bontempo, & Villareal, 1988; Nguyen, Terlouw & Pilot, 2006).

International Students in Community Colleges

In an era where community colleges face underfunding and program reduction, international students can contribute to tuition income and even a higher retention rate (Raby, Budd, Serban, & Hook, 2015). Currently, 17.8 % (or 78,819 students) of international enrollments are within community colleges (IIE, 2018b). Responding to the significant numbers, researchers have started to focus on international students enrolled in community colleges.

First, the current literature discusses about the rationale, historical background, and philosophical premise about including international education into community colleges’ missions (Raby, Budd, Serban, & Hook, 2015; Raby & Valeau, 2007). Other empirical research focused on examining various aspects of the international community college students. For example, previous studies examined the reasons why international students attend community colleges. These reasons include: lower college entry requirements, lower tuition costs, and the opportunity to transfer to a four-year university (Hagedorn & Lee, 2005; Bevis & Lucas, 2007; Bohman, 2009; 2014). In addition, since many foreign countries do not have any higher education institutions that are similar to the community colleges in U.S., prospective international students’ perceptions about community colleges may influence their choices (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014).

The majority of international community college students plan to ultimately transfer to a four-year university (Hagedorn & Lee, 2005; Bevis & Lucas, 2007). Despite the academic and social challenges they face (Mamiseishvili, 2012; Slantcheva-Durst & Knaggs, 2019), international students often display high academic performance (Hagedorn & Lee, 2005; Zhang, 2016a), possibly due to high aspirations for a bachelor degree, less financial concerns, and

mandatory full-time enrollment status (Anayah & Kuk, 2015). After transfer, international students continue to outperform their domestic transfers academically (Zhang, 2016a).

In general, there is a lack of scholarly research focusing on international students attending community colleges (Zhang, 2016a). Even fewer studies have focused on international students who reverse transferred from a four-year university to a community college. As one of the exceptions, Zhang's (2015b) studied Chinese English learners who reverse transferred to a community college for lower tuition rates, better interaction with instructors, and potentials to earn transferrable college-level credits. Hagedorn and colleagues (2016) further identified several ways that international students utilized community colleges in ways they labeled "rescues." For example, some internationals transferred to the community college when their GPAs were low and/or were going on academic probation. Others needed to transfer due to issues of academic misconduct. Lastly, Anayah and Kuk (2015) reported some international students who attended community colleges for maintaining a legal status while waiting for their permanent residency.

Purposes and Research Question

Overall, there is a dearth of studies on international reverse transfer students. To fill this gap, this study seeks to understand the unique experiences of international reverse transfer students. In particular, this study examines why and how international students reverse transferred to a community college. And more importantly, how these students perceive the reverse transfer process as part of their college journey in the U.S. The following research questions guided this study:

- 1) Why did international reverse transfers decide to attend a community college?

- 2) What factors influenced international students' reverse transfer process? From whom and how did international reverse transfers learn the process?
- 3) How do international reverse transfers understand their learning experiences in community colleges? Did the experiences help them to reach their education goals?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was adopted from Pierre Bourdieu's theories of field, habitus, and social and cultural capital. In particular, we utilized Bourdieu's theory as "an analytical approach" rather than "a static formal system" (Martin, 2003). As an analytical framework, Bourdieu's theory can interpret why international students struggle with unexpected challenges and experiences and choose to reverse transfer.

Social and Cultural Capital

Bourdieu identified the critical role of social and cultural capital as the invisible mechanism allowing children from the dominant classes to maintain inherited advantages in the school system (Bourdieu, 1973; 1986). Social capital refers to connections, social networks, circles of friends and group memberships. Cultural capital refers to one's knowledge, credentials and experiences. These two forms of capital, along with economic capital contribute to social reproduction and ultimately inequity within the society. For example, college educated parents who know how postsecondary institutions work, may also have the economic capital to send their offspring to college. On the other hand, children coming from families with "predispositions" not compatible with a college-going culture (e.g., first-generation students, low-income students, etc.) might suffer in this educational, or social classification process and are less likely to succeed (Bourdieu, 1993).

Using the social and cultural capital concepts, previous higher education studies have illustrated how first-generation, low-income, underrepresented racial minority and other disadvantaged students may acquire a limited amount of knowledge about college through families and their nearest social contacts. (McDonough, 1997; Museus & Neville, 2012; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). For international students, previous studies primarily focused on how social networks and social interaction influence their adjustment to a U.S. campus. For example, interacting with American peers and participating in co-curricular activities were helpful in the adjustment process (Glass & Gesing, 2018; Trice, 2004). Interaction with other international students can contribute to creating a sense of belonging for international students (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013).

Nevertheless, none of the above studies utilized social and cultural capital to examine experiences among international reverse transfers. In this study, we aimed at filling this gap by using social and cultural capital theories and two additional concepts: social field and habitus.

Social Field and Habitus

In his theoretical discussions, Bourdieu referenced the role of social and cultural capital within a social field (Bourdieu, 1985). A social field consists of a field of forces in which various agents assume their positions and play (or struggle) with a “game”. Each social field has its own “game” completed with a set of rules. Social and cultural capital play a critical role in conserving an existed structure or the rules of a field (Bourdieu, 1985).

Each social field has distinctive variations. Thus, when entering a different social field, an individual must understand the distinctions and have a compatible “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1985; Reed-Danahay, 2005). Habitus consists of personal tastes, thoughts, beliefs, interests, and understanding of the world. It is created through one’s family, culture, and education background

(Reed-Danahay, 2005); or, it is accumulated through the forms of social and cultural capital. If someone's "habitus" is not recognized by a new "field", they might have difficulty understanding the rules of the "game" and to eventually be successful in that particular "field".

If we perceive higher education institutions as a new "field", the process of understanding the "rules" of the "game" in this new "field" may be more difficult to certain student subgroups than others. For example, first-generation students, low-income students, and underrepresented minority students may be disadvantaged in learning the new "rules". The same for international students. While many international students are from middle-, upper-class families in their home country, their inherited social and cultural capital (or, their habitus) does not directly translate to the appropriate skills and knowledge for success in a *U.S.* postsecondary institution. This may explain why some international students with high academic backgrounds may still encounter academic and social difficulties pushing them toward reverse transfer.

Incorporating Critiques of Bourdieu's Theory

In higher education literature, Yosso (2005) argues that Bourdieu's theory is often utilized to assume a deficit model, in where middle class, White culture are standard and the community of colors are lacking of this standard cultural capital. This deficit model overlooked the valuable capitals that students of color possess and implied that it is the family and community's fault of not preparing a student for the school culture (Yosso, 2005). Through the lens of the critical race theory, Yosso summarized various valuable but yet often neglected capitals nurtured within the community of color. These included aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005).

In this study, we utilized Yosso's theory as a supplement to Bourdieu's theory. We were interested in interpreting the internal drives that help international students consistently pursue their original goals despite various barriers and challenges.

Methodology

The Phenomenology Approach

We adopted a phenomenology approach to examine the lived experiences of international reverse transfers highlighting the reverse transfer behavior as the focused phenomenon. We collected data through individual interviews from international students who participated in the reverse transfer process. Moreover, we adopted a hermeneutical phenomenology approach in order to highlight the interpretation of the reverse transfer phenomenon. In addition to describing "what" the phenomenon is (the textural description) and "how" individuals experienced this phenomenon (the structural description), we also brought an "interpretive process" in which we make an interpretation of "the meaning of the lived experiences" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 78).

Research Sites and Participants

Participants were recruited from one research-intensive public four-year university and two large public community colleges, all located in the state of Iowa. The two public, multi-campus community colleges locate in different cities. Each institution is close to a large public four-year university in the nearby city (only one of the four-year institutions was our research site). According to institutional reports, the community colleges had around 230 and 280 students identified as nonresident alien, respectively. Both of the nearby public four-year universities had around 1,800 international undergraduates.

Through a purposeful sampling process, we recruited international reverse transfers in the following ways. First, as part of a mixed-method research project, all international students

enrolled in the research sites were invited to participate in a survey about community colleges. Survey respondents who had reverse transfer experiences were asked to participate in a follow-up interview. Second, we contacted potential participants based on a student list provided by international advisors at the community colleges. Lastly, we conducted a “snow ball” process to see if participants could identify another international student who had similar experiences. We provided \$15 bookstore gift cards as incentives to all interviewees.

We defined international reverse transfers as international students who transferred from a four-year institution to a two-year community college. Ten international reverse transfers participated in the interviews. All had valid student visas (F1 or J1 visa) and reverse transfer experiences associated with at least one of the research sites. We categorized them into the three groups according to Townsend and Dever’s identification (1999): four participants were URTS who transferred to the two-year college without immediate plans for transferred back; five students were temporarily enrolling in community college and transferred (planned to transfer) earned credit(s) back to the four-year institutions (TRTS); one student attended the community college after earning a bachelor’s degree (PRTS). Eight out of the ten participants were from East Asian countries (five from China and three from Malaysia). The remaining two were Indian students. Detailed background information of all participants is summarized in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

Data Collection

We conducted individual, semi-structured, 45 to 60 minute, face-to-face interviews with each participant using an semi-structured interview protocol. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. To provide a more comfortable environment, some interviews were conducted in Chinese by a native speaker.

Data Analysis

Analysis included open and axial coding of the transcript data (Creswell, 2014). First, we performed an initial open coding process to obtain a general understanding of the reverse transfer phenomenon from the perspectives of the interviewees. Two researchers open-coded the transcripts independently and compared their codes for inter-rater reliability (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Second, we conducted axial coding among different codes. We discovered repeating patterns to form underlying categories. Finally, we adopted both deductive and inductive approaches to generalize themes that present international reverse transfer students' perceptions and experiences.

Trustworthiness

We conducted member checks with interview participants during the study. Two bilingual scholars (Chinese and English native speakers) who were not involved in the interviews reviewed the translation of the data. In addition, we triangulated the data through different sources such as the international student office website, and university/college policies. We also interviewed international student advisors in a community college for triangulation purposes.

Researchers' Role in this study

We advocated the researchers' identification and embrace the subjectivity it brings to this qualitative study (Creswell, 2014). The lead researcher identifies as a Chinese international scholar. She was a graduate international student in a four-year university. Her own experiences shaped how she interpreted participants' stories. The second researcher is also a Chinese international scholar. His research focuses on international comparative higher education. The third researcher is a native English speaker who is a senior administrator and professor in a four-

year university. Her working experiences with international undergraduate students have shaped her perceptions and biases.

Results

This study confirmed that Townsend and Dever's categorization of the three-type reverse transfers (Townsend & Dever, 1999) holds true for international students. We discovered a) international URTS, students who were compelled to leave the original four-year institution and study in a community college; b) international TRTS, students who enrolled in community college courses during the summer and transferred earned credits back to their four-year institution; and c) international PRTS, students who attended a community college despite a previously earned bachelor degree. The three types of international reverse transfers have both similarities and differences in terms of their experiences. Specifically, the three types share similarities in terms of their learning experiences within community colleges as well as influential factors of the reverse transfer processes. However, they also had distinctive reasons for reverse transfer.

Reasons of Reverse Transfer: Differences among the Three Types

URTS: Community college as a safety net. Four international URTSs (Brandon, Chris, Eric, and Terra) had failing experiences in their original four-year institutions and reverse transferred to a nearby community college. For example, Brandon and Terra left the original institution due to academic misconduct. Chris and Eric's GPA were too low for them to continue in their four-year institutions. These four students turned to a community college for a rescue that would hopefully allow them to maintain legal student status and remain in the U.S. while continuing to earn eligible college credits that could ultimately be credited toward a bachelor degree. These students struggled with the concept of reverse transfer and all four URTSs faced

the difficult decision of whether to tell their parents about their predicament. One of the URTSs, Eric chose to tell his parents:

It was needed at that time, I would say, shifting to a community college wasn't as hard as telling someone [my parents] to understand that I am shifting from a four-year to a community college That was more difficult than I actually (transfer) to there.

[Interviewer: So, did you tell your parents?] I did. Eventually, I did...I mean, I took a week to go through myself, but I did.

However, of the four URTS, Eric was the only student who revealed the truth to his parents. For Brandon and Terra, the greatest barrier preventing them from telling their parents was related to the issue of academic misconduct. For example, Terra described her situation as follows:

Terra: They (parents) don't know. I am planning to tell them when I transfer back (to the original four-year university). [Interviewer: so why not tell them the truth?] This will make them worry. It is all my fault. I also do not want them to know that I made such a mistake. Just like when I was little, I don't want my parents know about the mistakes I made.

For Chris, who had to reverse transfer due to failing grades, telling the truth meant that he has to explain to his father who "doesn't know anything about community college". Chris did speak to his mother, but both decided to hide the truth from Chris's father.

No matter what URTSs choose, their parents are far away and could only provide limited support. Friends were relied upon to provide the social and emotional supports needed during difficult times. Brandon described how his best friend helped him through the hardest time.

I had so much pressure and stress... All of my friends knew. One of my good buddy, he was studying in the UK and visited me during the break. I was planning to go to a tour

here and there with him. But then this (academic misconduct and subsequent expelling) happened, he just stayed here... Ten plus days, he was here, drinking beer with me...

With the emotional support from their peers, URTSs in this study were rescued through reverse transfer. Meeting the timeline of the original graduation plan was very critical. They all planned to graduate with a bachelor degree within four years. They did all they could to minimize the damage. For example, Eric took eleven courses from two community colleges within three consecutive semesters. After being accepted by another four-year university in the spring, Brandon took four additional courses in the following summer to expedite obtaining his bachelor degree.

At the time of interview, Eric successfully transferred back to the original four-year university. Brandon and Terra were accepted by another four-year university and were ready for transfer. Chris significantly improved his GPA. For these four URTS, the community college provided a safety net and rescue when they had unexpected failing experiences in their four-year institutions. The community college system and the reverse transfer experiences provided them a second chance to succeed.

TRTS: Community college as a helping tool. Compared to URTSs, the five international TRTSs (Lizy, Shelly, Maddie, Amber, and Olivia) were at a better stance academically. None of them officially left the four-year institution. They chose to take some courses from a community college during the summer semesters or in an on-line format and count these credits into their original bachelor degree programs.

Clearly TRTSs also faced challenges in their four-year institutions, especially during the first year. For example, Lizy recalled that she “blindly picked” the most challenging professor for her first-year English class. She believed that this was the main reason for her low grade in

that class. Lizy wished she had checked “ratemyprofessors.com” before selecting that class, just like many domestic students did. On the other hand, Maddie described challenges caused by language barriers and classroom culture differences.

If you really want to talk about any difficulties, it is in the classroom. ... I can barely understand at the beginning. And, yes, I took four courses in the first semester, so I was stressed, too... It's only get better after the midterm. Because of my major (Education), my language ability was not able to manage the class discussion. Sometime my language ability limited myself from fully presenting my thoughts. When that happens, I feel very awkward.

The main reason for TRTSs to take community college courses is to cope with academic challenges at the four-year institution and improve their overall GPA. In addition, TRTS appreciated the flexible community colleges course schedules. For example, Amber worked from 8 am to 4 pm, Monday to Friday, during the summer and only the community college's on-line courses could be fit into her tight schedule. Similarly, the flexible course schedule helped Maddie to pass multiple prerequisite courses in time to take the required core courses in her program as planned.

The third reason for TRTSs to take community college courses is the lower tuition. All institutions included in this study have a tuition structure that charges international students a higher rate than both Iowa residents and nonresident citizens. For example, Shelley shared her calculation of the tuition differences and reported that she saved about 2,000 dollars by taking nine credits in a community college.

In sum, TRTSs are taking community college courses to help obtain a bachelor degree faster, more economically, and possibly with a better GPA. Community colleges were tools used to help students overcome challenges and reach goals.

PRTS: non-academic purpose. Only one participant (Victor) was classified as a PRTS, as he was a bachelor degree recipient prior to attending the community college. Victor shared that he attended a local community college because he needed legal status to stay in the U.S. while waiting for the approval of his permanent residency (green card). Hence a reason for community college attendance that does not at all fit the domestic PRTS definition. However unusual the reason, again the community college provided a rescue from a situation that would be very detrimental.

Factors Influencing the Reverse Transfer Process: Similarities among the Three Types

Limited resources from family. Before making any decisions related to reverse transfer, international students must understand the community college system and transfer/reverse transfer mechanisms. In most foreign countries, there is no community college system. It is therefore understandable that international students obtain little to no related information from parents, family, or friends in their home country. In fact, it is not uncommon for international student to educate their parents about the U.S. community college system. Brandon shared his experiences of “educating” his parents.

They (parents) both know now: you can come to a community college to take some easier courses and then take the credits back to the four-year university. [Interviewer: they now know this because you educated them?] Yes, I educated them. [Interviewers: so I guess they don’t understand that at the beginning] No, they for sure don’t understand... They will think why you are going to a technical college. Just like back in

China, we have universities and technical colleges. They would feel like why you travel this far to attend a technical college.

Similarly, Terra's mother worried that community colleges would not be considered respectable among higher education institutions. Before Terra came to the U.S., she and her family inquired of an education agency for the U.S college application. One education agency company recommended community colleges in California. But Terra's mom, like many other Chinese parents, felt the community colleges sound "not very trustable".

Not all international parents lack knowledge about community colleges, but our only exception was Olivia's mom, who graduated from a university in Texas. She told Olivia that if the math courses were too overwhelming, she should take them from a local community college.

Roles of academic advisor. Most of the international students in our sample made the reverse transfer decision without the benefit of an academic advisor. It was only after the reverse transfer decision was made that they met with an advisor for specific resources such as course offerings and necessary paperwork. The reason for not seeking advice from an academic advisor varied. For example, Terra, a URTS who had to leave the original university due to academic misconduct, indicated that timing did not allow her to seek help from an advisor.

It was May when I was reported (for academic misconduct). It was almost the end of the semester. I did not meet the advisor or an international advisor. When I finally met one, I already decided to go (to the local community college). I already had my materials ready, like the financial proof, the official transcript... So I just directly told them (what I have decided). I did not ask them for any advice.

Maddie, one of the TRTSs, had neither the timing nor academic misconduct issues. She needed a series of community college courses to fulfill prerequisite requirements. Maddie decided by

herself that she would take the prerequisite courses from a local community college rather than the four-year institution. Amber, another TRTS, also did not seek suggestions from an academic advisor. She learned from information found on-line and figured out the transfer requirement herself.

Roles of peers. Compared to family and academic advisors, the students found friends and peers as more important resources regarding reverse transfers. When asked “where did you learn about community colleges and reverse transfer”, most participants mentioned roommates, friends, and classmates. More specifically, they learned from others who had transfer or reverse transfer experiences. For example, Brandon, one of the URTSs who was expelled from his original university, learned about reverse transfer from a friend.

It was a Chinese friend. He did not study hard enough in the first year and was suspended. He then came to (this community college)... That’s how I got to know this. Then I gradually learned a lot. I even went to the CR [community college]. I don’t want to fail a course anymore so I thought I can take a couple of courses here [community college] and transfer the credits back [to the university]... like some English courses. I was applying to attend here as part-time. I was admitted. Before I start to take course, I was expelled (from the original four-year university). So I decided to become full-time.

Lizy, a TRTSs from Malaysia, also learned the benefits of taking community college courses from a friend.

I have a friend who attended a community college in U.S. after graduating from high school. He studied two years at that community college and then transferred to a very good university. He said that first of all, this is easier; second, if you have a good grade,

you can transfer to a very good university which is much easier than applying for that university directly out of a high school.

In sum, most of the international reverse transfers learned about community colleges and reverse transfer from their peers. Through transfer/reverse transfer examples and personal experiences, international reverse transfers learned the benefits of taking courses in a community college, on-line or on campus, full- or part-time. When there was a need, due to prerequisite requirements, a challenging English course, or academic misconduct, international reverse transfers choose the community college for aid and assistance.

Learning Experiences in Community Colleges: Similarities among the Three Types

Class instruction. Both international URTSs and TRTSs reported positive learning outcomes from community colleges. They benefited from smaller class sizes and in some instances, more attention from instructors. For example, Terra, one of the URTSs, shared her experiences as follow:

One thing that is better than the four-year university is the smaller class size. It is not like the four-year, just lecture and some discussion. I feel we had more interactions with the professor. Because you know, sometimes you cannot concentrate during the big lecture. Many professors (in the four-year university) do not care if you are using cellphones. In small class, the instructors gave lectures better... (it was) just like listening to the teachers back in China.

Eric, a URTS who had already transferred back to his original four-year university, further highlighted the importance of interactions with the instructor.

...here [in the community college] we only have 30 students. So, that makes the difference, because this one-to-one thing that happened, at any time, professor knows

every student and whether you are struggling. It is a better way [for the student] to understand the subject.

Increased knowledge about U.S. higher education system. Through their reverse transfer experiences, the international reverse transfers obtained important knowledge about the American postsecondary system and the important role of community colleges. Both international URTSs and TRTSs indicated their changing perceptions of community colleges. For example, Terra, a Chinese URTSs, described her changing thoughts as follows.

When I first came here I still have the perceptions from my home country. I thought the community college is like the technical college in my home country. Because it is two-year. [I thought] it is for the professional skilled workers, or someone who want to pursue the workmanship. But after I enrolled in one, I realized that it is not the case.

Many people view community college as a bridge to four-year institution.

Shelley, a TRTS, gave a contextual explanation of her perceptions of community colleges.

I feel it [the community college] is the buffer zone between the junior and the senior. It has all the adjusting-to-the-four-year stuff. And it is more like an undeclared major stage; it is more relaxed...like a student only has a general direction, for example, engineering, applied science. He can take some general courses in that broad area. And he does not have to worry about which way to go just yet.

Eric, a URTS who transferred due to a low GPA, felt that the community college is a “really friendly and really nice” institution. He even believes that a community college experience is helpful to anyone who is working on a bachelor degree. He further illustrated his opinion as follows:

It is mostly in the sense of the feedback. It is the first step how to study and when to study, how to make schedule, how to record about it. Because for me, the high school, we didn't have much thing in India, I was 17 when I came to here [U.S.]. So, going to a community college kind of brought me back to high school [but] also offered something for university. I did benefit from it.

In addition, Brandon reported knowledge growth in searching and applying to a four-year institution. For instance, his application to the original four-year university was largely done by an education agency in China. This time, Brandon had to do the entire college application by himself. When he had to find a new four-year transfer institution, he was able to navigate the process himself and to pick an institution that fit his needs.

Discussion

This study applied Bourdieu's theory as a theoretical framework to analyze international students' decision making and experiences regarding their reverse transfer from a four-year university to a community college. Many international reverse transfers in this study came from upper- or middle-class families in their home country. According to Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973; 1986), their parents should understand how college works and provide the economic capital to send their children to study abroad. It would be expected that these international students would have inherited the social and cultural capital to provide a privileged position with respect to college attendance. However, the international reverse transfers in this study, especially the URTSs, experienced unexpected negative experiences in their original four-year universities. Stories from the four URTSs, Brandon, Terra, Chris, and Eric, inferred that they lacked a specific segment of social and cultural capital that is essential to success in a *U.S.* four-year university.

Based on Bourdieu's discussion about social field and habitus (Bourdieu, 1985; Reed-Danahay, 2005), these international students may possess inherited social and cultural capital that can help them adapt to a college life in their home country. But the same social and cultural capital may not be equally valuable in a new "field", namely, a *U.S.* four-year university. Their "habitus", or their beliefs, values, tastes, and cultural preferences that were nurtured back in their home country appear not to be compatible within this new "field". For example, as observed in some of our interviews, many international students (e.g., Brandon and Terra in this study) may be confused about the rules of plagiarism, academic misconduct, and dishonesty. (Bamford & Sergiou, 2005; Bista, 2011). Similarly, many international students (e.g., Lizy and Maddie in this study) face challenges within the classroom due to western-style teaching and learning. Students from Confucian Cultural Heritage countries often see instructors as a guru to respect; and will never challenge or present behaviors that could challenge the instructor (Choi & Nieminen, 2013). Further, students are taught to never present ideas that may oppose the views of others because this may cause others or self to "lose face" and thus harmful to the harmony within the group (Kirkbride, Tang & Westwood, 1991; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). For these reasons, East Asian international students may feel uncomfortable and not know how to respond in a discussion section within the four-year classroom.

While the above discussions refer to the academic challenges international students face at a four-year institution, it also relates to why international students tend not to seek help from institutional agents (i.e., making the reverse transfer decision without consulting with advisors). In particular, institutional agents may be viewed as individuals with higher positions in a structured hierarchical power system by many international students. A student, who is often placed on a lower position in such a system must show respect to the academic advisors,

counselors, administrators, etc. rather than actively seek suggestions and help from them.

Therefore, international students may rely on other resources (i.e., peers, on-line resources) to get the information they need. In sum, the beliefs, cultural preferences and worldviews (or, the “habitus”) might create barriers, both in and outside of classrooms, to international students.

Although some inherited social and cultural capital were not as helpful as expected for international students, other capitals may be critical for them to be resilient and eventually successful in the new “field”. For example, international URTS in this study all had a strong and consistent motivation to improve their situation and transfer back to a four-year institution. They all have high aspirational capital, which refers to “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers.” (Yosso, 2005, p 77-78). This aspirational capital might be rooted in internationals’ cultural norms. For East Asian students, typically the academic success of international students is a victory for the whole family (Dundes, Cho & Kwak, 2009). International students strongly felt that they must keep the promise of earning a U.S. bachelor degree in four years. The cultural norm from Confucianism and collectivism played a role in not telling the truth about the reverse transfer to parents. On the other hand, it also pushed international students to consistently pursue their original goals.

As such, international reverse transfers quickly learned the “rules” in the new “field” and found the helping tool or the safety net, a nearby community college. The reverse transfer experiences was also a learning process. During this process, international students were able to learn essential knowledge and skills to navigate the U.S. higher education system -- a set of new capitals that can help them win in the new “game”. For example, Brandon were able to apply to a new four-year university without the help from an education agency. Eric learned better time

management skills. Other students in this study gained the understanding of the bridge function of a community college.

Implications for Policy, Practice and Further Research

International reverse transfers has been given little attention. This study explored the decision-making process and learning experiences among international reverse transfer students. Findings of this study are particularly important to international programs/offices, instructors, academic advisors, and administrators at both four- and two-year institutions.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study generates direct implications for community college administrators and professionals working with international students. Our findings indicate different experiences and needs of the three types of international reverse transfers. It is very critical that community college professionals understand the nuances among these three types and provide specific services to meet students' needs. For example, many international URTSs come to community college in search of rescue. They encountered challenges in their four-year universities and are in need of increasing knowledge and skills for navigating and eventually succeeding in the U.S. higher education system. They are determined to transfer back to a four-year institution and obtain a bachelor degree within the original four-year time frame. They need information about the transfer process and guidance in course selection. It is extremely important for them to take courses that can count towards the bachelor degree and maintain an improved overall GPA. More critically, these international students may lack general knowledge of the college application process since an educational agency may have helped them in their previous applications. We suggest community college professionals provide official, practical and clear guidance on applying and transferring back to a four-year institution. International URTSs may

also benefit from the growth in non-cognitive skills such as multi-tasking and time management. We suggest community college professionals and/or community college international offices create special orientations and workshops that are intentionally designed to nurture these skills. Lastly, it is very likely that international URTSs recently experienced difficulties with limited family support (i.e., making the reverse transfer decision without telling the truth to their family). Community college professionals should be aware that these students may benefit from counseling services.

Second, it will be beneficial for community college professionals and university international offices to work together to educate new international students about the community college system and the transfer/reverse transfer mechanism. International freshmen often encounter multiple challenges upon their entrance to a U.S. four-year institution. In addition to the transition from high school to college, they must overcome challenges from language barriers, cultural differences, and adjustment to a new learning style. Attending community college in a non-traditional format (i.e., part-time, on-line, during the summer) may be the needed rescue during difficult times. The international TRTS made the intentional and optimized choice to take community college courses and count those courses towards their bachelor degree. This may be a great strategy for many international students who want to ease their stress during the transition period, improve their GPAs, and complete degrees in an effective way. We believe all international students should receive official information and resources about community colleges early during their journey. This can be incorporated in an existing international student event as a pamphlet introducing a local community college, a featured guest speaker from the local community college international office, or a special panel discussion that involves senior international students who have taken community college courses.

Third, student affairs professionals at both community colleges and four-year institutions should be aware of the cultural differences and the subsequent support that international students need. Many international students (especially those from East Asian countries) may be perceived as upper- or middle- class individuals with previous academic success and thus needing minimal support. This study revealed that the educated parents were not able to pass along the appropriate knowledge and skills for achieving academic success in a U.S. four-year institution. Rather than rely on family, these students relied on peers to be the critical tools to access the knowledge and to bridge habitus. They turned to peers for advice, often ignoring advisors, counselors, and instructors. For these reasons, it is critical that both community colleges and four-year institutions arrange workshops for administrators, staff, and instructors who interact with international students to challenge existing stereotypical views about international students and to proactively reach out when help is needed. Finally, professional development about inclusion and diversity should also include international students.

Implications for Future Research

In order to provide implications for future research, several limitations of this study should be considered. First, findings of this study cannot be generalized to colleges and universities outside of the research sites, or other higher education institutions outside of Iowa. Further exploration in other states and geographical locations is necessary. For example, in some locations, a growing number of international spouses may be enrolled in community colleges. Some can be classified as PRTS if they hold a bachelor degree from their home country. But their experiences and stories are largely unknown.

Second, we recognize the presence of selection bias in our study. For the URTS in particular, this study collected data only from those who had successful experiences through

reverse transfer. Those who are less/not successful might be reluctant to share their stories. Therefore, we recommend future studies collect voices from international URTS who are less/not successful. It is equally important to learn from these students in terms of why their situation did not improve through reverse transfer.

Third, it should be noted that all participants who volunteered to be interviewed are from Asian countries (East Asia and India), some students had the advantage to be interviewed in their native language (i.e. Chinese). We recommend future studies to include more international reverse transfers from other Asian and non-Asian countries.

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Tables

Table 1

Background information of participants

Pseudo Name	Age	Gender	Major	Gender	Nationality	Type	Current Enrollment
Terra	21	Female	Liberal Arts and Sciences	Female	China	URTS	Full time 2-year
Brandon	21	Male	Liberal Arts and Sciences	Male	China	URTS	Full time 2-year
Victor	25	Male	Liberal Arts and Sciences	Male	China	PRTS	Full time 2-year
Chris	20	Male	Business	Male	India	URTS	Full time 2-year
Lizy	21	Female	Biology	Female	Malaysia	TRTS	Full time 4-year
Eric	20	Male	Civil Engineering	Male	India	URTS	Full time 4-year
Amber	19	Female	Animal Science	Female	China	TRTS	Full time 4-year
Shelley	22	Female	Industrial Engineering	Female	Malaysia	TRTS	Full time 4-year
Olivia	21	Female	Advertising	Female	Malaysia	TRTS	Full time 4-year
Maddie	28	Female	Accounting	Female	China	TRTS	Full time 4-year

* URTS is Undergraduate Reverse Transfer Student; TRTS is Temporary Reverse Transfer Student; PRTS is Postsecondary Reverse Transfer Student.