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## **“It’s Kinda Weird”: Hybrid Identities in the International Undergraduate Community**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*With benefits international students bring to campus, universities have adopted aggressive recruitment practices and increased institutional support for their retention and positive college engagement (Hegarty, 2014). Due to globalization, increasing numbers of international students enter college with multiple cultural/national affiliations (Gomes, Berry, Alzougool, & Chang, 2014). Yet, little is known about these complex identities and how they shape students’ experiences in U.S. higher education. Using Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, the article leverages interview data to theorize hybrid national/cultural identities of five “international” undergraduate students at a private university on the Eastern seaboard. Although the institution used passport information to categorize student nationality, participants chose to self-identify less categorically. Our discussion recommends dialogue around international students’ identity constructs to thoughtfully affirm hybridity.*

**Keywords:** globalization, hybridity, identities, international students, multiplicity

*I've lived in Venezuela since I was eight until I graduated high school and I came here. But now because of the situation in the country, my parents moved back to Peru. My mom gets transferred a lot, that's why we went to Venezuela. But then she went back – she got promoted and she went back to Peru where the main office of her company is. And my dad just stayed in Venezuela a couple more years until my sister graduated high school. She graduated this past year and he went back to her [in Peru].*

--(Rosalynn, 9/18/14)

*I was born in Ukraine. When I was six, we moved to Ghana so I had to assimilate into the society. I remember that when I arrived it was so hot that I took off my shirt. I was walking in the streets bare-chested until my father told me that people in Ghana would think I could not afford a shirt. So, I first went to a local school where I made some local friends. I also did not know English when I arrived there ... and so that was kind of hard to get me into the school system because they spoke English. I did not know how to read at all.*

--(Jimmy, 10/8/14)

*So, it's kinda weird; because I don't actually know where home is right now. It's still something I wanna work out. In fact, if somebody had to give me a choice between either going to El Salvador or China, I wouldn't know where to go.*

-- (Bill, 10/19/14)

International education has become a valuable resource for many higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States to the extent that international students are regarded as “cash cows” for significantly generating additional revenue for institutions (Cantwell, 2015). According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, international students contributed \$35.8 billion to the national economy in 2015-2016 in forms of tuition and other miscellaneous spending, such as, room and board, and library and technology fees among others (IIE, 2016). While American student population in U.S. HEIs declined slightly, international student population increased to 1,043,839 students in 2015-2016, a 7.1 percent increase over the previous year (IIE, 2016). International students continue to make the United States their destination of choice due to its diversity of people, the

economy and prospects of good paying jobs in many fields after graduation (IIE, 2016).

The number of international undergraduate students (427,313 students) surpassed graduate students due to uptick in enrollment of new undergraduate students from China, India, Saudi Arabia and other emerging economies (IIE, 2016). In an attempt to develop their human capitals, governments of emerging economies, including, Kuwait, Brazil and Saudi Arabia, currently award student scholarships which are used for studies in the United States (IIE, 2016).

The commercialization of international education has increased competition for international students worldwide and in the United States (Cantwell, 2015; Hegarty, 2014). With the revenue generation and other benefits international students bring, HEIs adopted aggressive recruitment practices and increased funding for institutional support for international student retention and positive college experience (Hegarty, 2014). Today, due to rapid cross-border mobility, many international students enter college with multiple cultural or national identities (Gomes, Berry, Alzougool, & Chang, 2014). Yet, to a large extent HEIs have ignored such identity complexities, and, relatively little is known about the lived experiences of international students who do not easily fit into pre-set institutional categories.

This article is grounded in the notion that international students' identities are not static. Rather, they are dynamic and shifting as students adopt new cultural, linguistic, academic and social strategies for survival in new environments (Gautam, Lowery, Mays, & Durant, 2016; Gomes et al., 2014; Lin & Scherz, 2014; Marginson, 2014; Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010). Some changes are permanent, making the global learners different from home-peers who never engaged in overseas study (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). Marginson (2014) stated that international students undergo self-transformation as they seek to adapt and survive in the new environment. According to Gomes et al., (2014), "Identity is individualized and continuously evolving primarily because of the postmodern condition of globalization" (p. 3), meaning that due to international students' transnational mobility, their unique identities will continue to be modified for survival in new environments.

Here we share an analytic narrative around the stories of five undergraduate students. Betty, Bill, Eleanor, Jimmy, and Rosalynn. Our intent is to underscore the possibility that "international" students might

come to the United States with multiple cultural identities essential to their understanding of who they are and who they might become—identities that are not necessarily captured on their passports or passport photos or in institutional data systems. Specifically, we argue that the identities of international students are potentially complex and multi-faceted, as demonstrated in the opening vignettes resulting from interviews from Rosalynn, Jimmy, and Bill. So too their needs, and perhaps the reason HEIs have challenges in meeting international student needs and serving them well is because institutions have not recognized the complexity of international student identities.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Contemporary research for diversity in higher education has highlighted identity construction of LGBTQ students (Cook & Glass, 2008; Goode-Cross & Good, 2009), minoritized community members (Aguayo, Herman, Ojeda, & Flores, 2011; Bourke, 2010), freshmen (Spanierman, Neville, Liao, Hammer, & Wang, 2008), first-generation college goers (Cho, Hudley, Lee, Barry, & Kelley, 2008; Majer, 2009) and others. In their ensemble, these important discussions have forwarded the notion that identity is considered important, in part, because of its relationship to the psychological well-being of group members (Phinney, 1990).

Many researchers who believe ethnic identity and cultural identity are the same, use them interchangeably (Gasser & Tan, 1999; Nichter, n. d.). Self-conceptualization which answers the question Who am I? is influenced by an individual's belongingness to an ethnic/cultural group (Nichter, n. d.). Ethnicity is based on ancestry or racial roots while culture represents learned customs, practices, beliefs and values, passed from one generation to another and shared by groups within an ethnic group (Gasser & Tan, 1999). Culture provides a sense of identification with group members, and is reflected in art and artifacts, language, clothing and other habits of a people.

While some experiences may be common among ethnic minority groups, such as discrimination and minority status, vital uniqueness in cultures and backgrounds create various contexts for identity development (Whitesell, Mitchell, Spicer, & The Voices of Indian Teens Project Team, 2009). In working with international students, we choose to focus on cultural identity rather than ethnic identity. International students, particularly those with the sort of hybrid identities that we will discuss here,

have been somewhat sidelined from the construct of diversity and cultural identity. Rather, they are categorized very broadly as international students.

Extant literature (Cavazos-Regh & DeLucia-Waack, 2009; Lorenzo-Hernandez & Ouellette, 1998; Rust, Jackson, Ponterotto, & Blumberg, 2011) suggest there is a strong link between cultural identity, self-esteem, and academic achievement among minority students. Strong cultural identity boosts self-esteem associated with confidence, perseverance even when confronted with difficulties, coping mechanisms, social support, and a host of other attributes that keep students grounded and successful in college (Whitesell et al., 2009). It is important for HEIs to increase global awareness (or understanding of other cultures) on campuses as a way of celebrating and strengthening students' cultural identities.

Edward Hall's (1976) iceberg analogy of culture show that only 10 percent of one's cultural identity is obvious, while the remaining 90 percent, including, values, beliefs and thought patterns, is hidden. A student who looks African or Chinese may identify with other cultures unknown to others. Stuart Hall (1996) argues that identities are not merely outside portrayals but are conceptualized within by experiences and culture. Identities use "history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: ... what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves" (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Internal beliefs, myths, and values drive international student day-to-day decisions (Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013).

Within the framework of Schlosberg's Transition Theory, it is understood that when international students engage in the process of transition through diverse cultures, they change over time, and their experiences connect them with needed support to cope with challenges (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn, 2010). A transition is any event or a non-event that results in change temporarily or permanently (Evans et al., 2010).

International students engage in self-formation as they reinvent themselves between home country identity, host country dominant identity, and other experienced preferences through multiplicity or hybridity (Marginson, 2014). Multiplicity is where two or more identities coexist with emphasis on one or the other at different times as in a bicultural self, and hybridity occurs when two or more identities are synthesized in a newly formed self as in hybrid identities. Both multiplicity and hybridity are two sides of the self-formation coin (Marginson, 2014). According to

Schlossberg's Transition Theory, the evolution of a new self happens over time after going through the phases of moving in, moving through, and moving out of a culture (Evans et al., 2010).

In recent past international students were perceived to be monocultural (that they lived in only one culture) prior to living in the United States and became bicultural in the new environment after accommodating aspects of the dominant culture (Andrade, 2007, 2008). While multiplicity is a temporary accommodation, hybridity is long-lasting and represents a new mindset that endures even after the individual may have moved out of one culture and transitioned to another.

Today, international students are regarded as global citizens due to their transnational mobility and immersion in different cultures but the issues of identity or "who I am" and agency or "what I can" are essential in their development as global citizens (Killick, 2012). As international students reinvent their behaviors for survival in new environments, identities are gradually altered, and from the reinvention, a new self emerges (Adler, 1977; Marginson, 2014; Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013). The new identity is the transformed self a student returns home with which is different from the original cultural identity. Perhaps, the state of "maturity" international students reported to have attained during integration in Andrade (2007, 2008) was the new hybrid identity.

Cannon's (2010) and Gill's (2010) studies of Indonesian and Chinese graduate returnees showed that re-entry, work relationships, and professional networks were hard because they had changed over time during their transitions. They were more open-minded and accepting of different views when compared to peers who never traveled. Gu and Schweisfurth (2015) showed that Chinese returnees "demonstrated a reflexive awareness of this change, which included a sense of being distinctly and permanently different from others around them in the workplace and their local networks" (p. 965).

From Marginson's (2014) study, the deduction is that the permanent identity changes observed in international returnees were due to hybridity. Only few studies have delved into the complexities of cultural identities (Killick, 2012; Marginson, 2014; Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013), but from observations in recent times, international students' passport information does not completely capture who they are, why they self-identify differently, or how changes in student identities happen.

Based on previous literature and the need to better contextualize the international student experience, the focus of the study is to understand the complexities of international student identities, including ethnic, linguistic, and cultural positionalities in an undergraduate institution in the United States. Using case study method, we examined their cultural identities prior to arrival in the United States, their integration and how they self-identified within the university community. This research is exploratory and intended to offer implications for educators to reflect on how to better meet international students' needs. The research questions addressed through this study were:

- How did international college students negotiate their identity options prior to their studies in the United States?
- How do international college students negotiate their identity options while studying in the United States?

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

Our analysis focused on five non-Western undergraduate international students in a private U.S. four-year institution whose multiple cultural identities pointed to the subtle trend in the changing demographics of international students in the globalized economy. Passports and institutional data do not seem to adequately capture international students' identities, and how they self-identify as they transition towards self-formation is important for educators to understand as a way of showing the students that they matter to the institution.

The institution under study was Falcon University (pseudonym) located in the northeastern United States. There, international students from over 90 countries constituted over 20 percent of the student population. Falcon University is a prestigious and expensive institution, with annual tuition plus room and board charges totaling over \$63,000. The admissions office engages in aggressive recruiting practices in search for the best and brightest students.

Immediately after fall semester orientation, admissions officers travel and live in assigned regions of the world. They build lasting relationships with high school guidance counselors who assist them in their recruiting efforts by liaising between Falcon officers and parents whose students are searching for schools in the United States.

Admissions officers return to these regions annually making efforts to consolidate their relationships at familiar high schools while searching for new ones. They live abroad between two and three months each year recruiting students.

### **Participants**

Participants were four juniors and one senior undergraduate international students on F-1 visa status (Table 1). Of these, three self-identified as foreign-born; four were trilingual and one was bilingual; each one had multiple cultural identities and happened to be the firstborn in the family. Foreign-born meant they were born outside of their home-countries. Therefore, they had emotional attachments to their countries of birth and origin simultaneously. They were assigned pseudonyms to conceal their identities, however references were made to their countries of origin and native languages.

Table 1. Student Participant Profile

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Academic Status	Age	Campus Living	Country of Origin	Country of Birth/Residence	Education Finance Option
Rosalynn	F	Junior	19	NR	China	Peru/ Venezuela	Parents
Eleanor	F	Junior	20	R	Jamaica	Jamaica	Parents
Betty	F	Senior	21	R	Colombia	Colombia	Parents/ Merit Scholarship
Bill	M	Junior	21	R	China	El Salvador	Parents/ RA
Jimmy	M	Junior	21	R	Ghana	Ukraine/ Ghana	Parents/ Honors Program Award

### **Data Collection**

Data collection began after appropriate IRB approvals were obtained, and it lasted three months. International students were observed and notes on them were kept. International students were observed in a place where they relaxed and played games in between and after classes, to better understand students in relaxed moods, equating this to their “culture” or “ways of doing things” on campus.

The institutional website was reviewed for indicators of internationalization initiatives. The International Office sent introductory email inviting international students to participate in the study, and some demographic information on participants was obtained from the office.

Also, two-to-three 45 to 60-minute in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual participants. The interview questions were reviewed earlier during pilot study testing the language of interview questions for international students to understand. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Member checks were employed, where transcripts were reviewed by participants to ascertain accuracy. All transcripts were presented in English.

### **Analysis**

Data analysis followed Wolcott's (2009) strategies, a combination of description, analysis, and interpretation in accordance with the principles of qualitative exploratory inquiry. The data collected from different sources (i.e., observations, in-depth interviews, website and International Office information) were analyzed and triangulated to answer the research questions. In trying to make meaning of the qualitative data collected, the content analysis of the data was guided by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's (1995) principles of ethnographic fieldwork.

Using Microsoft Word, interview transcripts were analyzed by identifying recurring sentences, phrases, and words that showed the essence of the participant's experiences from the interviews. The significant sentences, phrases, and words were then categorized in search of recurring themes in the interview transcripts and then coded. To place participants' stories in the right context, profiles in form of stories (narratives), sometimes with their quotes were developed (Seidman, 2013). For the purpose of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities.

## **RESULTS**

From the analysis of participants' responses, six themes related to student experiences prior to and during sojourn in the United States emerged, namely: origins (student background), college choice, pre-college cross-cultural experiences, social integration and social networks, hybrid national identity, and identity transformation.

## **Origins**

Participants were millennials, between ages 19 and 21, with multiple cultural and linguistic identities. Four of them--Rosalynn, Eleanor, Bill and Jimmy--were college juniors, though Rosalynn was due to graduate a semester earlier than normal, and Betty was a senior. Rosalynn, Bill, and Jimmy were foreign-born, Jimmy and Eleanor were multiracial with two or more cultural identities at home, and all were trilingual except Eleanor, who was bilingual.

The demographic information collected from the International Office indicated Jimmy's country of citizenship as Ghana, Rosalynn's was Peru, Bill's El Salvador, Eleanor's Jamaica and Betty's was Colombia. Both Rosalynn and Bill were born outside of China to Chinese parents, each with one sibling. Bill stated, "I was actually born in El Salvador. And it was a totally different experience ..." Bill's first and yearlong visit to China after high school was eye-opening, "When I went to China to visit my cousins and my family members ... there was a big cultural gap ..."

Rosalynn introduced herself as,

*Well, I'm Chinese; my parents are both 100 percent Chinese. But I was born in Peru; that's in Latin America. And I've lived in Venezuela since I was 8 until I graduated high school and I came here. But now because of the situation in the country, my parents moved back to Peru.*

Bill and Rosalynn were speakers of English, Spanish, and Chinese Mandarin but Rosalynn said she initially struggled with English language at Falcon. Jimmy reported being firstborn and first son in the family with Ghanaian father and Ukrainian mother. Jimmy spoke impeccable English, Akan and Russian languages.

*I was born in Ukraine. When I was six we moved to Ghana so I had to assimilate into the society... It was hot [weather]... I did not know English when I arrived there ... and so that was kind of hard to get me into the school ... I could only communicate in Russian to my parents. I got a home teacher who ... taught me how to read English language and faster.*

Although Betty and Eleanor were not foreign-born, their families were multicultural. Betty spoke Arabic, Spanish, and English. Her family frequently traveled on vacations outside of Colombia. She said, "I'm an only

child, but in a very big, big family. My family is all Colombian, but both my mom and my dad are Palestinian descent, so my family's very Arab."

Eleanor was born and raised in Jamaica. She spoke fluent English and Jamaican Creole. She said her father was a mixture of Costa Rican, Panamanian, and Lebanese cultures; her mother was "completely culturally mixed, not sure of the breakdown."

### **The College Choice**

All participants except Jimmy were directly recruited by Falcon Admissions officers who visited their high schools. As reported by participants, Falcon recruiters were vivacious, knowledgeable, and patient. The students were impressed with the demeanors of their recruiter and consequently chose Falcon University. They also reported that their parents' desires to have them study in the United States, further influenced their choices. Rosalynn said,

*Well honestly, my parents always thought that education in the U.S. is the best in the world ... Europe was a little bit outdated ... and Asia, they were like – you can't go there because I'm from there, right? You can go there to work afterwards ... but if you're gonna study, study in the United States ... they give you the best opportunities.*

Rosalynn reported studying in a prestigious Venezuelan high school where instructions were in Spanish. Her parents hired an advisor to assist her with college applications.

Jimmy said he heard of Falcon University from an alumnus of his high school and knew he wanted to study there. Initially, his parents discouraged him from studying in the United States. But after Falcon merit scholarship award and invitation to the Honors Program, they agreed.

Eleanor, Bill, and Jimmy reported studying at British schools in their home countries. Bill explained, "I actually studied in a British school in my native country of El Salvador ... Falcon came to my school ... I really liked how Falcon ... marketed their university." Bill and Eleanor took pre-college International Baccalaureate (IB) examinations while Jimmy sat for the West African School Certificate examinations at the end of high school. While classmates chose United Kingdom, the three wanted to study in the United States. Bill and Eleanor said parents wanted them to study in the

United States due to proximity to home. Bill also had relatives in Miami and New York, he said.

Betty attended American high school in Colombia where instruction was in English. So naturally, she and peers wanted to study in the United States. Her parents being in agreement, hired an advisor to assist her with college applications. Although Betty could speak in English, writing proved initially difficult at Falcon.

The students' pre-travel experiences of the American culture were through travels, television shows, books and movies, and their perceptions of the culture were positive. Betty and family visited the United States on family vacations prior to her enrollment. In spite of their pre-arrival information about the American culture, all but Bill expressed apprehension about the new environment. Rosalynn seemed most nervous.

### **Cross-Cultural Experiences Prior to College**

All the participants spoke of their cross-cultural experiences prior to studying and living in the United States. Rosalynn experienced integration into Latin American culture as Chinese.

*I was worried because I'm Chinese ... living in Latin-American country. And they aren't especially open like to other cultures either ... and so it was a bit hard; like the adjustment from Peru to Venezuela... It was like more Asians in Peru. And sometimes like you stick out a little bit 'cause there's not that much of a big Asian population, so I was a bit worried about that ...*

Bill's experience was different. He said he experienced China in a different way during his one-year visit after high school graduation.

*... I was brought up in the Salvadoran culture. When I went to China to visit my family members ..., there was a big cultural gap ... I actually liked China – the people, their culture, their mannerisms, their traditions. And it just felt like it was home for me even though I didn't experience it all my life. ... it was totally different.*

Jimmy on the other hand had to integrate into the Ghanaian culture after being born and raised in Ukraine for six years. His lack of understanding of the English language and reaction to the hot weather gave him culture shock.

Though Betty said her family was very much “Arab” at home, she operated in the Colombian culture at school and among friends. Her dominant Arab identity at home was usually shelved for the Colombian identity for survival outside. Eleanor too said she experienced a variety of cultures at home, which were different from the cultures within the Jamaican society.

### **Social Integration and Social Networks**

The students highlighted making friends, open mind/willingness to adapt and institutional support as factors that facilitated their social integration. When asked if they ever felt they did not belong on campus, they could not recall feeling that way at Falcon, even as freshmen. However, they admitted feeling anxious about making friends in the first semester. Rosalynn later said, “... my friends are my support base, and they are international students from different countries ... I love Falcon because of my friends ... they make Falcon a happy place.”

Bill said he adapted easily to Falcon without his parents, after all, he lived in China without them for one year. He was active in the International Student Association (ISA) where he hung around international students from different countries, not necessarily his co-nationals. Bill said,

*Well, my freshman year, most of my friends were international. So whenever I knew that I wouldn't be fitting in the American culture style, I'd just go with them, and we would just hang out. And it would just feel like I'm home, like I'm with people that understand me better.*

Bill continued that one of those international students was:

*... the president of ISA last year ... a good support system ... born in Singapore, raised in Hong Kong ... has Indian heritage. We just have similar experiences ... And that's what actually helped me become who I am right now ... our cultural backgrounds ..., our way of seeing the world were pretty similar.*

Although Bill had many American acquaintances, he said he had few close friends because, “domestic students here are not acquainted to international students ... they're not culturally sensitive at all.”

Jimmy said he made friends quickly in the first semester among the ‘group of smart kids’ from the Honors Program, and from the fraternity he pledged to. He said, “I mean in freshman year I rushed a fraternity ... I made friends ...” When asked if he was still in the fraternity he said, “Nope, I quit; ... my dad actually did not want me to be a part of it ... he thought there was a bit too much concentration on drinking and partying.”

Eleanor attributed her quickness in making friends to her linguistic identity. Her fluency in English language, self-confidence, and outgoing personality helped her to make friends, she said. In addition, her membership in the African, Latino, Asian, and Native American (ALANA) group brought her in contact with many more students.

Betty said, “Everyone is – I’ve found everyone is very nice, but to find good friends was very hard.” She continued,

*It’s not a criticism ... to American culture ... Even simple stuff, like the ways to say hi, were very different ... That’s why after three years, I don’t have any American friends, which is kind of sad, I feel. I did try, but maybe not hard enough, I would say.*

Each of them had many international student friends from different countries. Eleanor and Jimmy had many American student friends, Bill had a few, but Rosalynn and Betty had none.

### **Hybrid National Identity**

Rosalynn tendered a Peruvian passport but self-identified many times during the interviews as Chinese, saying, “Well, I’m Chinese; my parents are both 100 percent Chinese ...” Amidst several student social clubs, Rosalynn said, “... as an Asian person ... I joined the Asian one [club]... Falcon Asian Association or something like that.” But when asked about classroom etiquette, she called Latin America home when she said, “For example like back home, Latin people are very outgoing, laid back let’s say, right? And there’s a prejudice that we’re always late ...” Though culturally she identified more with her Chinese identity, linguistically, Rosalynn identified with both cultures, speaking Spanish or Mandarin depending on audience, in addition to speaking English.

Bill tendered a Salvadoran passport, but self-identified as Salvadoran or Chinese throughout the interviews. He said, “Since I was born in El Salvador – yeah, most of my friends are from El Salvador ... I’d say El

Salvador is my home.” Shortly after, he strongly defended his Chinese identity from anonymous postings on Yik Yak website.

*... I see a lot of complaints ... like all international students are wearing too much clothes when it's not even cold or ... they don't like how some of the Asian students sleep in the library. They're like, you have your own bedroom, why are you here in the library sleeping ... They don't understand different cultural aspects of why people do things ... because of cultural reasons, personal reasons, emotional reasons. They're very ignorant in that sense.*

He continued:

*... A lot of people say Chinese people eat dogs, why do they do that? And then I tell them, well, you didn't grow up living in hunger, you didn't grow up in the time of the revolution where farmers were stripped out of land and people actually even had to eat dirt because they were so hungry. They don't understand that. They just make fun of it ... oh Chinese people eat dogs, they eat cats, they eat snakes, cockroaches ... people are not culturally aware.*

Jimmy did not identify as Ukrainian, instead he tendered his Ghanaian passport and continued to identify as Ghanaian.

*I think the one thing that I probably miss the most that I can't replace here is local food. I miss Kenke [Ghanaian food]. I think they make local dishes from Ghana in Worcester; but that's pretty far away, so I don't go that often.*

He enjoyed surprising people each time he spoke Russian language.

Though Eleanor and Betty were not foreign-born, some hybrid national identities still came into play by virtue of their multiple cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Betty who was born and raised in the Colombian culture lived like an “Arab” at home. Eleanor who lived in Jamaica, an ensemble of cultures, was further exposed to Panamanian, Lebanese and Costa Rican cultures among others at home.

### **Identity Transformation**

Given the diversity of cultures the students had lived in, identity transformation seemed inevitable. Rosalynn, born in Peru, expressed her

Asian identity or “Asianness” in Latin America with nervousness being concerned about not fitting in. “... And sometimes like you stick out a little bit ‘cause there’s not that much of a big Asian population [in Venezuela], so I was a bit worried about that.” The anxiety translated into concerns about fitting in at Falcon feeling “uncomfortable”, “what if I don’t have friends”, and “what if I’m lonely” in the United States?

Bill seemed to have managed his Salvadoran and Chinese identities well, but the choice of one over the other created some identity dissonance. He said, “So it’s kinda weird; ... I don’t actually know where home is right now ... between either going to El Salvador or China ...” On the other hand, he seemed to understand the transformation that takes place when transitioning from one culture to another and maintaining one’s personal-identity.

*... An important thing, when most people move to another country – is trying to embrace their culture. And sometimes it’s hard ... – once you’re there, it’s hard for the people there to appreciate your own culture. But I think since you gotta blend in, you gotta sacrifice something just to blend in, I guess; but still be firm to your values – know when to say yes, when to say no.*

Jimmy said his transition from Ukraine to Ghana was tough, and while adjusting to the weather and English language, he endured isolation at school due to his inability to communicate. At home, he bonded with parents by speaking Russian. Betty, an Arab at home culturally and linguistically, had to integrate into the Colombian culture for success and survival. Eleanor, a hybrid of Panamanian, Costa Rican and Lebanese cultures survived in Jamaica, a melting pot of cultures. Using Schlosberg’s phases of transition, all the participants moved in, moved through, and moved out of different cultures before transitioning into Falcon. They remarked that they made significant cultural and linguistic changes to fit into the American culture, and what they could not change, they coped with.

## **Summary**

The emerged themes provided insights into who the participants were before and in the American college. Though they wanted to study in the United States, their parents further encouraged them to do so for various reasons. By virtue of family structures and cultural dynamics, the students

were confronted with identity transformations for survival in their environments prior to living in the American culture. They had multiple national, cultural and linguistic identities, each student being a hybrid of these multiple identities to the campus environment.

Passport information seemed inadequate in capturing who the students were, especially for those who were foreign-born. Within their repertoire of national, cultural and linguistic identities, the students self-identified differently based on situation and audience.

## **DISCUSSION**

Rosalynn, Bill, and Jimmy who were born and raised in cultures not their home cultures had multiple identities. Betty and Eleanor though not foreign-born, developed multiple identities based on the cultural dynamics within their families and outside in their societies.

The students described their friends as “network,” “support system,” and “second family” among others. These students were not attached to their large co-national groups who spoke Chinese or Spanish languages, instead, they had many international friends from different countries who spoke diverse languages, giving them the opportunity to compare their cultural positionalities with others, as a way of understanding the uniqueness and complexities of their cultural identities (Gomes et al., 2014).

Cultural and language barriers could have contributed to Rosalynn and Betty’s inability to make American friends as supported by Andrade’s (2007, 2008) statement that international students’ college transition can be complicated by language and cultural disparities which may affect self-confidence. Eleanor, Bill, and Jimmy who had mastery of English language and who received English instructions in high school, made friends with American students easily, though Bill had fewer “close” American friends and more acquaintances.

Educators should intentionally engage international students to understand their multi-faceted backgrounds and identities. Without interactions with Rosalynn and Bill, Jimmy, Betty or Eleanor, the assumptions would have been that they were merely Chinese, African, Colombian, or Jamaican students respectively based on obvious attributes, the external 10 percent of who they were, without understanding their multiple identities or the “hidden” 90 percent (Hall, 1976). There are

benefits in understanding the “whole” person, not just the external 10 percent, plus, every one of them had a story to tell.

International students with multicultural and hybrid identities represent an emerging group in U.S. HEIs. They possess a heightened sense of cultural awareness, perceiving their relationships and experiences to be significant (Killick, 2012; Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013). Not only are students with hybrid identities suited for cultural awareness on campus, they are highly adaptable and able to mix effortlessly with people from different cultures (Volet & Ang, 1998). According to Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, the overtime moving in, moving through and moving out of different cultures prior to membership in the American culture, must have significantly changed the students, making them better suited for challenges of integration and transition through the new culture at Falcon (Evans et al., 2010; Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

Therefore, international students’ transition through other cultures prior to travel to the United States should prove beneficial to Falcon University and other HEIs. At a time when U.S. institutions expect future “decline, demographically, in the number of U.S. domestic students,” recruiting self-confident, culturally savvy, and adaptable students should translate into higher international student retention rates (Hegarty, 2014, p. 226). HEIs can offset the future decline by expanding international student recruitment into new geographic locations to maintain student enrollment and generate revenue.

What this study has demonstrated are the complexities of identity and self-formation for international students, similar to Pham and Saltmarsh’s (2013) study of Vietnamese students in how they constantly assess their values and traditions in light of the new environment, their interactions with surrounding networks and reflections on their goals and aspirations, and how they position themselves for survival. The constant negotiations with their surroundings cause them to self-identify differently or at times experience identity dissonance depending on the scenario and audience.

Falcon University is a small-size institution with a total population of 6,000 students. Of this, about 20 percent comprises of international students from over 90 countries. The participants felt they mattered to the university to have been sought out and recruited into the diverse student population on campus.

### **Delimitations**

Participants were full-time, degree-seeking undergraduate international students on F-visa from non-Western cultures. Focusing on these parameters for the study kept the pool of participants as homogenous as possible. Nationally being more in number than graduate students, we focused on undergraduate students. Participation was voluntary, and students were aware they could withdraw at any time.

### **Limitation**

Although sample size is less relevant in qualitative research, our sample size was limited to five undergraduate students who volunteered by responding to our invitational email. After two-to-three in-depth interviews with each participant, the point of saturation was reached, so no additional participants were studied.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The findings are specific to the participants in the study who were all undergraduate students, but they have shown that there is an emergence of international students with multicultural and hybrid identities within U.S. HEIs, and given adequate support, they could be assets to U.S. HEIs. Educators should pay greater attention to international students who not only can be agents of internationalization on campus, but also sources of additional revenue.

Crafting adequate support for international students should begin by understanding the complexities of their identities beyond what passports and other institutional data capture. A genuine interest in who they are will further endear the institution to the students, making them feel that they matter to the institution.

Lastly, the exploratory nature of this study and the findings we have presented here, indicate a need for further investigation into the emergence of hybrid identities among international students, and the impact of their complex cultural identities on college life. Future research could focus on international graduate students, many of whom are in the United States with their spouses and children, to understand their cultural identities and patterns of interactions with people in the new environment. Or, to return to the words of one of our participants with whom we began this manuscript, "It's kinda weird; because I don't actually know where home is right now. It's

still something I wanna work out.” At minimum, we argue, HEIs can be more aware of such processes.

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