

Pathway Student Identity and Support Systems for Their Success in US Higher Education

Fabiola P. Ehlers-Zavala
INTO, Colorado State University

International student mobility, together with the more aggressive approach towards the internationalization of university campuses, has led to the recruitment of a new type of international student, known as a pathway (PW). In this paper, I examine some of the challenges and opportunities connected to this initiative in the US. I describe institutional strategies in place to support PW students in this process and offer suggestions.

Keywords: US, Higher Education, English Learners, Pathways

The US remains a top destination for international students (see Ehlers-Zavala, Didier, & Berry, 2017 citing the Open Doors Report). International student mobility, together with a greater and more significant approach towards the internationalization of university campuses, has led to the recruitment of a new type of international student, known as a pathway (PW) student (other labels include: gateway students, bridge students, international year-one students). In this context, PW students are also English learners (ELs). In this paper, I begin by defining what a PW program is in the US in the context of international education. I describe PW programs and their students. Then, I go on to problematize the concept of PW student identity. I also discuss challenges and opportunities. Finally, I offer suggestions.

Programs and Pathway Students at CSU and INTO CSU

Background

In 2012, Colorado State University (CSU) entered a public-private partnership with INTO University Partnerships (IUP) (UK-based provider of recruitment services) to enhance its efforts in international recruitment as part of a larger comprehensive internationalization strategy. With the advent of INTO CSU, the development and introduction of PW programs (at the undergraduate and graduate level) came along and they became signature programs. A PW program (at the undergraduate level) is also known as *International Year One*, as the curriculum largely corresponds to the university core-curriculum that all students must fulfill in their first year.

Pathway programs and students

A PW program constitutes an alternative route for international ELs to enter an institution of higher education. Thus, it is intended to work with another type of ELs that otherwise would not be typically served by institutions of higher education based

on published direct-entry requirements. PW programs are namely intended to capture a student that falls short of meeting direct-entry requirements in the areas of English language proficiency (as measured by standardized tests, such as TOEFL iBT/PBT or IELTS, etc.) and/or GPA. PW students are therefore students that are deemed by university evaluators to show potential for success (i.e., positive academic trends related to performance as reflected on transcripts; other relevant educational and professional experiences). Table 1 shows a comparative example of entry requirements at CSU and INTO CSU's undergraduate PW program.

Table 1. *CSU and INTO CSU's Undergraduate Entry Requirements*

Entry Requirements	Clear Direct Entry	International Year One or PW	
		2-semester	1-semester
GPA (4.0 scale)	3.0	2.3	2.3
Holistic Review	Yes	No	No
Language Test			
TOEFL iBT	79	60	75-79
IELTS	6.5	5.5	6.0-6.5
PTEA	53	44	50-53
Password	Not accepted	6	7
Other	SAT or ACT (for competitive mayors)		

It is important to note, however, that at times PW programs can and do serve students that meet direct-entry criteria, but desire to have additional support in their first year or semester of university studies to transition more effectively into the university.

PW programs constitute a more expensive educational alternative because they provide students with additional and highly individualized sources of academic support as well as co-curricular and extra-curricular programming to ensure success. Students' performance is also closely monitored by dedicated academic advisors who have the task of deploying tutors when signs of additional support are detected. These additional sources of academic and experiential support help ensure student achievement and proper integration of the ELs to their new environment.

An important technicality central to the main topic of this paper is that, in most contexts (if not all), a PW student is not "fully" a university student despite having access to all benefits CSU students have (e.g., library, gym, cafeterias, dorms, clubs and student organizations). In order to become a CSU student, a PW student needs to successfully complete a PW program by meeting university requirements known as

“progression requirements” at the completion of their PW program. Progression requirements are established by the College and/or academic unit involved in offering a PW program. Here is an example of progression requirements for our undergraduate PW program in Engineering (INTO CSU Brochure, 2018-2019, p. 22):

- 3.0 CSU GPA
- Grade of “C” or better in all classes
- B or better in Math 160 or 161 [Calculus], Ph 141, and/or CHEM 111
- No unresolved “W” or “I” or “U” grades

Therefore, when the student meets all of these requirements, s/he can apply to be considered for matriculation in the engineering program at CSU. Matriculation for students who meet all of the requirements is guaranteed by the host institution. For those who may fall short of these progression requirements, alternatives may be considered before a student is not allowed to continue at the host institution (e.g, extension of a PW program to retake coursework). When a student has not met progression requirements and all reasonable alternatives have been exhausted, the student then has two options: (1) return home or (2) transfer to another institution that offers admission.

Finally, at our institution, a PW program represents a step above what most academic English programs accomplish because, from the start, a PW program welcomes international students with a higher level of language proficiency than Academic English programs (intended to welcome students with lower levels of English language proficiency-iBT lower than 60; IELTS lower than 5.5). The level of English and academic skills that PW programs aim at developing are also more advanced. PW programs (a) offer English for Academic Purposes classes that are more advanced than the highest level of English in our Academic English program; and (b) integrate ELs with direct-entry students at the host institutions from the start.

Problematizing PW Student Identity

Institutional challenges and opportunities

Learner identity has been an important topic in the literature pertaining to ELs, especially in K-12 education (see Cummins, 2001). But it is certainly not exclusive to that particular context. Others have examined the lives of highly successful multiliterate individuals and their journeys to become successful professionals (see Belcher & Connor, 2001). With the advent of new labels to refer to ELs, such as the PW label, there is also a necessity to examine topics that relate to (a) how PW students negotiate their identity in university campuses; (b) how the institution positively contributes to that process, and (c) the potential unintended consequences of such new terminology (i.e., the term PW).

Identity negotiation of PW students

It is important to develop an understanding of how the identity of a PW student is negotiated. As Cummins (2001) stated, this is “fundamental to the academic success of culturally diverse students” (p. 2). PW students are not the exception. For PW students, identity construction is key to their success in the process of teaching and learning as well as of integration to the new academic and social environment. As others have pointed out, “it is through participation that we begin to negotiate and renegotiate our identities within the group” (Nelson & Temples, 2011, p. 64). For PW students, this process can vary in terms of ease. For some (those with more gregarious personalities), it may be a relatively easy endeavor. For others (who are more shy and introverted), the process of integrating to the new environment may be more taxing.

Co-curricular Interventions to Ease Integration and Identity Negotiation INTO CSU’s Global Village

At CSU, we have taken very deliberate steps to address the needs of PW students to help them succeed, as we acknowledge that international student engagement matters for academic success and as a social practice (see Kettle 2017 for a discussion on international student engagement in higher education). A signature initiative of INTO CSU is Global Village (GV). GV is an intentional living and learning community for PW students to ensure that integration is unfolding properly, and it is one of the many living and learning communities CSU has. Therefore, it is based on other examples of student experience success at CSU. GV brings together PW students and direct-entry students to take university courses together and participate in co-curricular programming from the start of the PW program. They also live in the same dorm to facilitate the integration process. Direct-entry students who wish to participate in GV typically have an interest in meeting international students. They apply to be considered for participation in GV, and from the pool of applicants, participants are selected. INTO CSU leaders who coordinate GV also have a body of student ambassadors that contribute to the programming. Thus, GV is a way to create intentional opportunities for students to study together, live together, and develop bonds that will transcend the university experience! For PW students, being able to successfully participate in this community constitutes a social and educational achievement in its own right. Many of our students who have been part of GV while in the PW program return to GV after matriculation to serve as GV ambassadors. This is perhaps one of the greatest testimonies of success beyond educational statistics (over 80% of student satisfaction), that demonstrate the PW program is successful.

The Inherent Risks of the PW Label: The Other Side of the Coin

For every great development and initiative in this world, there is almost inevitably something that is not so positive. The PW label, as is the case of any word or acronym, is both arbitrary and conventional. Yet, at the same time, its definition is loaded with descriptors that, to those who are negatively predisposed, largely highlight deficiencies

rather than positive attributes. Below I describe some of the challenges I have experienced as an administrator of PW programs at my university.

Otherring of PW students and of the INTO CSU Center

Using the PW label has inevitably led to an unfortunate consequence: the *othering* of both the PW student and of the Center (INTO CSU) that serves these students. Basically, for those less attached to the INTO CSU operation, but with strong opinions about bringing ELs below direct-entry requirements, it has come down to the following understanding: PW student equals INTO student, which in turn equals lower student quality. This perception is not sustained on facts. It is usually a biased uninformed opinion that has not been correlated with the academic and student success (over 70% progression rates, for undergraduate PW students and 85% for graduate PW students in AY 16-17; over 82% overall student satisfaction per i-Grad survey/international student barometer results in 16-17, higher than the INTO North America average). Those who hold this opinion typically are reluctant to accept the facts and/or tend to generalize from specific cases, which is problematic.

The othering of the PW student is a problem as it has the potential to lead to the marginalization of a group of students who have chosen our institution to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to reach their personal, professional, and social goals just like any other direct-entry student. This type of marginalization, regardless of intentionality, is not exclusive to individuals with limited international experience. Sometimes, it comes from other internationals who experienced student life and academics at a different historical point in time when they (as international students in the US) had to overcome a higher level of barriers to reach success. While this may be understood as a natural human response, the question becomes: Is this an appropriate response in the context of an institution committed to diversity and to providing educational access to all in order to lessen societal inequalities both here and around the globe?

Monolingual mindset and the deficit perspective

Another institutional challenge is one that was prevalent in the research and work I conducted in my previous academic appointment preparing bilingual/bicultural K-12 teachers in the US. As it is well-documented in the literature related to US bilingual education research, the prevalent monolingual mindset of individuals, which compares the EL to the native speaker in the area of both linguistic competence and performance, within and outside academic contexts in the US has not helped the views of ELs in a number of educational contexts. What I am finding in the context of PW programs is that higher education is not the exception. The monolingual perspective in social and educational places of learning is alive and well (Canagarajah, 2013), despite years of sound research that have questioned this assumption and demonstrated the problems associated with these ideologies (see Cook, 1997; Cummins, 2000, Cummins, 2001). I would like to point out that the monolingual

perspective is not exclusive to monolingual individuals. This is also found among proficient bilinguals/multilinguals. It is a personal ideology—a way of thinking prevalent among those who are not versed in bilingual/multilingual research.

This monolingual ideology and deficit perspective attached to PW students without sound research, as our numbers have been modest, have kept many from being active supporters and collaborators of the PW initiative. Many of my colleagues oftentimes are reluctant to help us expand the repertoire of PW offerings at CSU and they strongly voice a lack of desire to work with PW students because they look at them from a deficit perspective rather than the enrichment perspective they contribute to our community on and off campus. Consistent with Cook (1997), I have argued (with varying degrees of success) that PW students like other second language learners “are not failed monolinguals, but successes in their own right” (p. 46). The challenge however remains: Colleagues expect PW students to use English in the same way native speakers do (or other highly proficient ELs), ignoring the rich linguistic/cultural capital they contribute to our community. After all, our PW students are, at least, bilingual/multilingual learners who have already mastered languages other than English.

Myths about PW students’ underperformance

I have yet to encounter an institutional setting that is not vulnerable to student attrition at some level. In fact, I would venture to say that it is practically impossible to reach 100% student retention in any educational college setting. Yet, in my personal professional experience, I find myself constantly addressing the myths about PW student performance as I interact with colleagues who express deep concern about these PW students and who call for an evaluation of faculty and student perception of the success of the “INTO” program. There are of course some who have changed their minds and have begun to see the incredible work that is unfolding at INTO CSU. They have gone from resisting this programmatic offering to helping ensure PW student success (see Ehlers-Zavala & Maciejewski, 2017; Ehlers-Zavala & Maciejewski, 2016). As shown earlier in this paper, the vast majority of our students who complete the PW program, both at the undergraduate and graduate level, go on to matriculate at CSU, and many of them have already been graduating from CSU as the program has been in existence for over five years. Some of them are already enjoying exciting professional opportunities (i.e., securing jobs in Fortune 500 Companies in the US or abroad). Others have gone on to secure other educational opportunities (i.e., pursuing masters and doctoral programs at CSU or elsewhere). The stories of success are abundant.

Recommendations for Institutions of Higher Education with PW Programs and a Global Educational Goal

For decades, we have been communicating to prospective students that our institutions provide a world-class education, and that, in doing so, we are participating

at a global scale in providing access to our students on campus to the world by engaging in a multiplicity of activities. At times, we take students abroad; other times we bring the world to them through the welcoming of international scholars and students to our campuses. This effort is at the core of the work that we all feel is necessary to build and maintain a world-class university. A world-class university is another denomination for institutions where the most prestigious research unfolds and it is deemed as “essential in developing a nation’s competitiveness in the global knowledge economy” (Wang, Cheng, & Liu, 2013).

In this final section, I offer recommendations for world-class universities to embrace and maximize success of PW initiatives that they may have in place or consider developing. I firmly believe that the success of PW programs will be minimally contingent upon all of the following actions:

- Advocate on behalf of PW programs and students. Advocacy must be an active enterprise that is executed at all levels of the institution. Develop explicit strategies and set aside resources to accomplish an internal marketing plan.
- Help faculty and staff develop positive human relationships with PW students in the same ways they would with all others as this is critical for the success of PW students.
- Guide faculty and staff in reaching the following understanding: We all share in the responsibility for contributing to student success (in and out of the classroom environment).
- Work to maximize integration of PW students with direct-entry students through deliberate curricular and co-curricular activities. High achieving students are excellent role models for students who are learning to navigate a new and, literally, foreign environment.
- Highlight the assets that PW students contribute to the university community by celebrating their personal cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
- Scan the university physical environment, and (if necessary) work to transform the cultural and linguistic university landscape so that it can truly speak: international! Visibly celebrate and embrace cultural and linguistic diversity on campus.

Final Remarks

As we welcome PW students to our university campuses in today’s era of PW programs, we must undertake this new educational enterprise with a deep sense of institutional responsibility. Initiatives of the PW sort require sound and strong institutional support to bring the faculty and staff on board. This is a long-term effort. Challenges must be identified, acknowledged, and addressed. This effort requires active involvement of leaders and supporters of linguistic and cultural diversity on

university campuses. If we are true to our collective desire of preparing our graduates for a global world, we must adjust to the new exigencies of what it means to work in a diverse environment. This environment cannot view students of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds from a deficit perspective. These students must be welcomed and attended to as needed to prepare them for success. This effort will require resources, but most importantly this will require a strong sense of belief in the richness PW students can and do contribute to our campus community and to the community at large. There is no question that student achievement is mediated by many factors as vastly accounted in the literature pertaining to learners and ELs, but there is one ingredient that is essential: Faith in the potential that a student who is in the process of learning English has for success as long as a supportive academic and social environment is provided.

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