

Internationalization in Higher Education: Equity, Affordability, Epistemic Democracy? or Social Reproduction and World-Systems Stratification?

Maribel Castañeda Muñoz
Universidad Anáhuac Puebla, México

ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic paper exposes the multiple barriers encountered by an international doctoral female student in the United States: health issues especially Covid-19, institutional, political, geopolitical, knowledge production and economic factors. Reproduction theory, the world-system analysis and intellectual imperialism are used to examine these factors exposing the illusion of equity in international higher education and its role in perpetuating the imbalances and exclusion of large groups of people and entire countries. Contrary to the narrative, international students are often part of these large excluded groups of people but are not regularly included in the discussion.

Keywords: internationalization, higher education, Covid-19, epistemic democracy, cultural capital, world-systems analysis

Multiple factors converge impeding the realization of and dignifying the life of millions of people around the world. Many of these factors are part of the experience of being an international student as well: they are personal, institutional, political and economic. Sometimes, these factors combined with an emergency like the Covid-19 pandemic, create searing experiences. I am a Latina, Mexican, non-immigrant, first generation, dual PhD degree international student from a working-class family. I am a woman suffering from hypothyroidism. Simultaneously I am also a daughter whose father passed away from Covid.

In this paper, using an autoethnography methodology, I describe my journey as a doctoral student in the United States. The narrative is that higher education and particularly international education provides people opportunities to improve

their position in a stratified society. The reality is that the international education system itself is stratified and is often only reserved for exclusive groups; those who can afford it and possess the needed cultural capital. In that regards, economic, political and geopolitical factors are imbedded into an international education system that perpetuates inequity. Additionally, the perpetuation of imbalances of the system embeds in other areas such as the production of knowledge, the legitimization of knowledge, the definition of the academic *values*, the definition of *merits* and the *worth* of a student, who as a person, deserves respect and appreciation.

Accordingly, in this autoethnography, I reflect on what equity and affordability in internationalization means and, how economic and geopolitical factors intersect with international education to perpetuate inequality and the exclusion of large groups of people. Although these factors are not new, they become clearer when narrated from the perspective of someone struggling with them; they become *alive*, and remind us that behind the label *international students* there are human beings. For this reason, autoethnography is an appropriate methodology to explore these issues; as Adams et al. (2015) suggest, personal experiences and self-reflection are a form to come to knowing because they help interpret cultural experiences, in that regards they are artistic and analytic simultaneously.

Thereby, this autoethnography is constructed based on my reflections, memories, conversations with family and spouse, documents and personal notes; the personal experience of the human behind the label *international student*. As Weaver-Hightower (2012) argues, sometimes beyond a scientific intent, an autoethnography is also an attempt at healing and, this is part of my process.

INTERNATIONALIZATION

There were about 5.3 million of international students in 2019 and an increasing year to year (UNESCO, 2019). In the United States, there were 1,075,496 international students enrolled in the in the 2019-2020 academic year who represented the 5.5% of the total enrollment. The main places of origin of international students are China and India (Open Doors, 2020). Latin America and the Caribbean accounts for the third place of origin of students, mostly undergraduate.

Me and My Internationalization Dream

I was born in Mexico City during the 80's. My parents did not attend college and even secondary school as they were working class. I witnessed their efforts to send my sister and myself to college. Parents of first generation, foreign-born immigrants in the United States consider higher education for their children a priority and an honor (Orazova, 2017). Although I was not an immigrant during my childhood, my parents shared that priority.

I studied for my bachelors at a four-year public institution in Mexico. After completion, I pursued graduate school by applying to several scholarships. Over

time, I was able to complete two master degree programs successfully in Mexico. I never thought of studying abroad because of my financial precarity. All my academic history is product of scholarships due to an outstanding GPA and my work ethic. I applied to another governmental scholarship to pursue my doctoral studies and I was admitted to a private university in 2014 with a scholarship from the National Council of Science and Technology in Mexico (CONACYT by its acronym in Spanish).

My first encounter in life with internationalization and studying abroad occurred during the second year of my doctoral studies. I was enrolled at a private institution with a long history in internationalization and an aggressive strategy. I was told that internationalization and specifically studying abroad was a great experience; a great way to learn from another educational system, develop skills and my cultural understanding and increase my employability. All of that sounded like a dream and above all, I was *sold* the idea that I could make it come true as it was accessible and affordable; that *it was for me*.

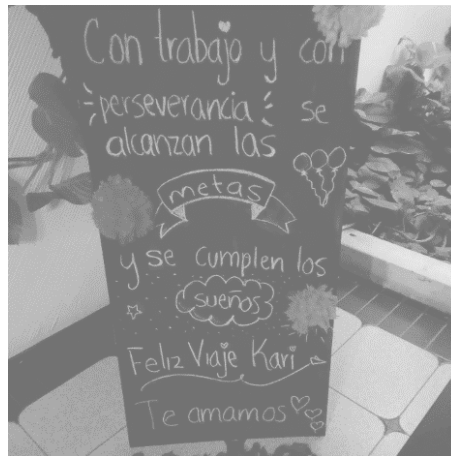


Figure 1

Best Wishes Cartel from My Family Before Coming to the United States

My Journey in the Illusion of Affordability and Equity in Access to Internationalization, A System of Social Reproduction

My university in Mexico had a long history of international relationships with a four-year intense research institution in the United States. In 2016, it had sent more than one hundred students as part of dual master degree programs. Due to a special memorandum of understanding, I became the first person to participate in a dual PhD program between the two institutions. It was treated as a milestone especially for my university in Mexico. This way, I began my journey through the formal admission process and the disillusion of affordability and equity in the access to internationalization.

In order to finance my studies abroad, I applied to a complementary scholarship from CONACYT; although the complementary resources were not abundant, they were sufficient to finance my stay. During the signing process of the memorandum of understanding and the initial admission process, I was never told about the special financial requirements for international students, in particular the financial guarantee required from the United States' government. To my enormous surprise, in order to complete my admission, I was asked to send a financial guarantee consisting of documentation of financial resources to meet my expenses for an entire year. Specifically, I was asked to send a bank statement documenting that I had all those resources in my or my parents' savings account. Additionally, I had to include a letter signed by the bank's manager testifying that the bank statement was real and original.

Although the memorandum of understanding between the universities included an in-state tuition waiver, I was required to send an out of state financial guarantee. I had to send documentation demonstrating I had more than \$33,000 USD; this represents about \$700,000 MXN, an *immense* amount of money that *no* working-class family has in their savings bank account. I question if policy makers know the current exchange rates between the United States and other middle-income or low-income countries. As Choudaha (2020) describes, currencies have increasingly devaluated against the dollar in recent years impacting international student's access.

Suddenly, I was faced with something that appeared surreal to me. I often wonder how other students have dealt with such a requirement; *how many* working-class students could ever possibly meet this? By the time I was asked for the financial documentation, I had an official letter from CONACYT, a Mexican governmental institution stating that I will have the necessary financial resources to pay my expenses at the American university but, this was not sufficient; this was not considered a financial guarantee. I felt frustrated, angry and sad, how can a student from a working-class family ever have access to study abroad with such a requirement? On top of that, I felt as if I were a criminal who must document that a potential bank statement was not a fraud.

My family and I started a painful journey to borrow money from family and friends to achieve such a bank statement. At the end of the day we were able to get it. But even today I wonder if that was worth it because we went on such a journey of countless phone calls, visits, headaches and tears. Now I know I am not the only case. Raby, Ward and Rhoades (2021) report that misinformation, lack of advisor support and institutional coordination, make students feeling alone during the application process and represents a significant barrier to study abroad. As Netz (2015) describes, insufficient information often creates a significant mobility obstacle, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Thereby, internationalization, at least in a study abroad modality is not affordable or accessible to everyone. Universities that incurred in the illusion of equity and affordability are irresponsible to disadvantaged students. According to Bordieu (1973) and his social reproduction theory, the effects of the school are unequal among children from different social classes, in that regards the

educational system reinforces initial inequalities because it dictates the norms and criteria to access and to be successful within it.

Due to such governmental policies, American universities are by no means accessible to everyone and reproduce inequities. As Di Pietro (2020) argues, the cost of studying abroad deters the participation of students from less advantage backgrounds. More important, the accessibility to international education, not only has not improved, but has gotten worse. Di Pietro (2020) shows in his research, the social gap in study abroad has increased, with a clear trend towards wider inequality. In Mexico the outbound mobility ratio has decreased in the latest years data from UNESCO (2019) suggesting that opportunities for studying abroad are increasingly becoming scarce.

Table 1

Mexico's Outbound Mobility Ratio 2015-2019

Outbound Mobility Ratio					
Mexico	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
	0.86	0.78	0.77	0.74	0.73

Adapted from: United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics (2022, Feb 21). *Outbound mobility ratio by host region*. <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>

Financial challenges, or financial precarity, is one of the main struggles of international students (Lin, 2012; Leong, 2015; Liu, 2016; Hefner-Babb and Khoshlessan, 2018) although most of the research concerns to the cost of living during studies and not the admission process itself. As Choudaha (2020) describes, affordability has various dimensions and implications. In my case and in the case of many other students, those dimensions and implications appear to be not considered by national policymakers, institutional outreach offices and faculty.

SOCIAL REPRODUCTION BEYOND INSTITUTIONS, A SYSTEM-ANALYSIS OF AN UNEQUAL WORLD

Social reproduction lies not only in the cost of accessibility but in other norms and criteria imposed by an educational system. In this case, it is significant that the format of the financial guarantee does not meet the needs of disadvantaged students. Although as an international student you have been granted a scholarship, that is not sufficient to meet governmental requirements. At the end of the day, it does not matter if universities sign memorandums of understanding if governmental policies are applied equally to all international students and single cases and special circumstances are not considered. The fact a document issued by a governmental institution from a *partner* country is not valid as a financial guarantee is meaningful given the historical and economic relationship between Mexico and the United States.

Since 1994, there is a special commercial treaty between the United States, Canada and Mexico, initially called North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This treaty was renewed in July 2020 and beyond its commercial benefits, as Gutiérrez (2021) argues, its potential to generate a more competitive human capital and greater technological capabilities for Mexico is more important. The real benefits derived from this commercial agreement for Mexico are beyond the purpose of this article but in terms of education, the student mobility rates have not changed and there are no clear or known initiatives of national policies in both countries to increase the opportunity for more and varied students to gain benefits under this treaty.

In the 2019-2020 academic year, there were 34,319 Mexican students abroad; from those, there were about 15,149 students in the United States (UNESCO, 2019), the top destination of international students. However, Mexican students account for 1% of the total international students in the United States (Open Doors, 2020) indicating these figures are rather small. There are certainly some scholarships from American institutions that allow students to gain access to higher education, particularly for master and doctoral students. However, it is clear that they are insufficient, and their eligibility criteria are likely reserved for students who possess significant cultural capital. As Bordieu (1973) describes, the educational system reproduces social hierarchies based upon the hierarchy of *merits*. However, those merits are the accumulation of training and education carried by individuals often come from dominant or more advantage classes. Most of the graduate students and particularly doctoral students in Mexico are first generation students, thereby they are not familiarized nor possess all the *merits* with international educational systems associated with doctoral studies.

In response, the Mexican government launched the National Quality Graduate Program (PNPC by its acronym in Spanish) to provide opportunities for students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds to access to internationalization; however, the government in the United States does not accept Mexico's scholarship letter as a financial guarantee! What are the options for disadvantaged students? It seems there are no options; the roads are closed and this lack of empathy and adjustments in national policies are part of an unequal treatment considering the historical and commercial relationship. In that regard, bringing in the world-systems analysis is appropriate to understand this situation.

In the world-systems analysis, Wallerstein (2006) argues the capitalist world economy is marked by a division between core-like production processes and peripheral production processes located in core and peripheral states (not necessarily in terms of geographical location). This results in an unequal exchange where core states are strong and wealthy and peripheral are weak and poor. "Strong states relate to weak states by pressuring them to accept cultural practices-linguistic policy; educational policy, including where university students may study; media distribution-that will reinforce the long-term linkage between them" (Wallerstein, 2006, p. 55). Paradoxically this unequal relationship occurs within a *geoculture* that has the inclusion of all as its definition of a good society (Wallerstein, 2006).

Thereby, apparently *all* are welcome to internationalization of higher education, particularly in the United States; as long as they can afford it and conform to the norms. As my lived experience shows, national institutions of *partner countries* do not coordinate in mechanisms that allow students from different backgrounds to gain access. Furthermore, government bodies and universities from a strong State, like the United State, have not made adjusts for students of weaker *partner countries* although both agreed to cooperate under a major treaty to enhance human capital and technological capabilities. Thereby, students from weaker peripheral countries face additional obstacles to gain access to international higher education; this way, an unequal relationship persists, students and the country remain poor and in the peripheral.



Figure 2
Assignment Scholarship Letter from a Mexican Governmental Organization

EPISTEMIC DEMOCRACY OR INTELLECTUAL IMPERIALISM?

In this section I describe my struggles with a lack of epistemic democracy. By epistemic democracy, we understand a knowledge relationship in epistemologically equal and reciprocal terms (Hayes, 2020). It means an appreciation of the different knowledge systems without privileging one over another. However, as Hayes (2020) argues, under a coloniality view, Western educational systems are viewed as superior so that home students and universities consider international students as intellectually inferior foreigners.

Furthermore, this idea prevails in international students' home countries and universities to the point that many students also feel inferior. It is what Alatas (2000, p. 37) calls a "*captive mind*, one that is imitative and uncreative and whose thinking is based on Western categories and modes of thought and is self-induced". Studying the experiences of some graduate students in the United States, Kaya (2020) found some of them see themselves in the past, as ignorant, less capable or less skillful. While I never saw myself in this way, there were very

remarkable episodes when I experienced this lack of epistemic democracy in my relationships with both male and female faculty members. The following are some of those episodes.

English!

In a review of literature regarding challenges of international doctoral students in the United States, Gao (2021) found a prevailing theme that they are required to perform at the same English standards as native English speakers. Although international students understand that language proficiency is a major factor to succeed in an English language educational system, many times the standards seem unreachable.

I began studying English as a kid. Later, after completing my bachelors I took TOEFL and Cambridge Tests and was certified with C1 level. During my master's degree program, I also attended English teaching lessons and was certified with the highest score in the Teaching Knowledge Test administered by Cambridge. None of these were sufficient to satisfy my advisor's standards. I was recommended to request reviews for my class papers in the writing center because according to my advisor, my English ability was never sufficient to write a publishable paper. In regards to my dissertation, I was told that I need to hire a professional editor, otherwise my dissertation would not be approved. I could not afford a professional editor. Still I wonder how I will be able to graduate. I remember thinking it is unfair that a person that does not speak other language than English, may put on hold my dissertation approval because of my proficiency in a foreign language.

Furthermore, these overemphasis in English language proficiency and the publication *issue* reinforces the inequalities in the knowledge production where English is the dominant language of publication. As Collyer (2016) discusses, there are persistent structures of inequality in the knowledge production, they began by the definition of what scientific knowledge means, privileging Northern, English written productions of knowledge as the real, authentic or *best knowledge*. Singh et al. (2018), cited in Suspitsyna (2021), argue the dominance of English is limiting and epistemologically undemocratic. So, it is not only a matter of English *proficiency*, but also a matter of who defines what is worthy and what is not for the academic field.

This way, it was not a matter of being able to communicate my ideas, to give voice to my thoughts and potential contributions to academy in a foreign language, it was about my *proficiency* in English. A proficiency that I never reached according to my advisor. Is that epistemic democracy? As Alatas (2000) states, the basis of intellectual imperialism is ethnocentrism.

Mapping the global research related to international students, Jing et al. (2020) found cross-cultural adjustment as a major theme which includes language barriers. However, in my case I did not struggle to understand or to communicate with professors or peers. I was able to make friendships with people from different geographical contexts, including Americans. Several times I was praised by other professors because of the quality of my contributions and I could reach a 3.7 GPA.

Thereby, I do not think language was a barrier for my academic performance in general and that's why I consider this particular issue from an unequal epistemic approach.

Theoretical Lenses and the Understanding of What a Doctoral Dissertation in the United States Means

Another major episode in the lack of epistemic democracy is *understanding what a doctoral dissertation means*. During my master and doctoral studies in Mexico, I attended methodology lessons and I completed a thesis to graduate. During all these courses, I was never told that I had to use a specific theoretical framework to analyze my research' data. I have worked with faculty from different countries in Latin America and I can say there are several approaches in regards to research and dissertations. In that regard, the use of theory or theoretical frameworks varies. What I mean is that there is no a unique research approach. However, under an intellectual imperialism view, the non-western world is limited in competence and creativity (Alatas, 2000).

I remember discussing with my advisor the need to have a specific theoretical lens in my research. I guess at the beginning I did not understand very well what they meant. I asked several questions. I truly wanted to understand this research approach. Although later now, I understand the importance to have a specific theoretical framework in research however there are different approaches in generating knowledge. I remember being asked how it was possible that I did not know about the importance of specific theoretical frameworks if I was supposed to have written a dissertation. How it was possible that I had graduated from a doctoral program previously without knowing this?

I felt miserable. I wondered what that meant. Does that mean that I graduated from a lesser doctoral program where faculty does not know proper research methodology? Does that mean that I should not have graduated because I do not have the necessary research skills? Is there a specific and valid research approach that I did not know earlier?

It was also then I learned about the qualifying exam in my doctoral program. I learned that a qualifying exam meant a doctoral student shows they possess the necessary research and methodology skills. Now I understand that it means that we possess the research skills according to a United States research approach. I did it and I showed my skills in my qualifying exam successfully in the first attempt.

After passing the qualifying exam I continued working on my dissertation, I completed the first three chapters although several factors, including Covid-19 impeded me in defending my proposal. During this time, I received an email from my advisor stating that the proposal was "almost ready to defend". Due to reasons I still do not understand, I was later told "you do not understand what it means to conduct a dissertation in the United States".

It is important to note, at the moment of the signing of the memorandum of understanding for the dual doctoral program, it was agreed that I would work on a single dissertation to graduate from both programs. That never happened.

Although my previous dissertation served as a foundation, I was asked to complete a second dissertation to graduate from the American university because there is a *specific way to complete dissertations that basically I do not understand*.

Studying the experiences of first generation, foreign-born immigrants in higher education in the United States, Orazova (2017) found that the background education received in their home countries, developed the strong skills necessary to face the challenges encountered in the American academic environment. According to my advisor, apparently this is not my case. It is clear there is no epistemic and academic reciprocal terms because there is no compliance of an agreement between two institutions, nor appreciation of my research skills, thoughts or academic background.

In Other Countries You Do Not Pay Attention to Plagiarism and Ethics Like Us

The third major episode in questioning the epistemic democracy was related to APA style. In Mexico, I studied my masters at a major institution ranked as the most important private institution in Latin America. *Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey* is ranked among the top two hundred institutions in the QS World University Ranking. APA style of writing is required in this university. Furthermore, there were strict regulations in terms of academic plagiarism where any student who received two plagiarism allegations would be dismissed from the entire university system permanently. More importantly, honesty and academic honesty are part of the most important values that were instilled in me by my parents and my teachers. My dad was the most honest man I ever known in my life, and every step I take I feel obliged to honor my dad's values.

Once in the United States, I worked as a graduate research assistant (GRA). I was part of a research team with two faculty members. I had an outstanding performance during my first semester where I was invited to supervise the team's activities. So, I was in shock when during my methodology class with one of the faculty members that was part of the research team, I received an email notifying me that I had an allegation of plagiarism!

Studying APA and having a commitment with academic honesty is not equal to not making any mistakes. So, I had a paper with some mistakes in regards to the extent of paraphrasing; however, all the appropriate references and citations were included. I was accused but was never questioned about the paper! I could not discuss what the issue was, nor was I notified by the professor directly. I received an email to be present at an allegation meeting with the professor and the coordinator of the program; I used to work with both of them! Once in the meeting I was told that "in other countries you do not pay attention to plagiarism and ethics like us".

After the allegations meeting, it was concluded that I did not commit plagiarism! All the necessary references and citations were in the paper but the mistake I made was in the extent of paraphrasing. Even though, not only I was accused of plagiarism, I was accused that in my home-country we do not care

about plagiarism and ethics. My values, my family values, my academic values were discredited even before the allegations meeting. A person I trusted, accused me without even give me a chance to explain anything. They never notified although we had an academic and research relationship; I was *part* of their research team!

At the beginning they say that the professor would fill an admonition form for my record. Later, the professor argued they were an empathic person and did not want to affect my record, so they will dismiss the admonition. They never accepted that my academic honesty was questioned without reason. The non-western world is receptive to *compassion* (Alatas, 2000) and, that *compassion* was an excuse to avoid accepting an unfair accusation.

I did not expect being excused in case of any violation to the university regulations. However, I did not violate regulations and, the admonition that I received was excessive and unfair. I expected to be notified personally and above all, expected not being accused before the necessary reviews were made. I expected my personal values would not be questioned before reviews. That's what I would have expected from faculty members with whom I worked with; however, I realized I was never part of the *team*. I was always an *outsider* holding *lesser personal and academic values* from a *lesser country* (paradoxically a partner country). Racism and ethnocentrism are basic to intellectual imperialism (Alatas, 2000).

HEALTH, COVID-19, LOSS, EVERYTHING INTERTWINED AND A NON-SUPPORTIVE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT THAT REPRODUCES INEQUITY

In this section, I address my health struggles, including Covid-19 and loss as my dad passed away. All factors intertwined to create a painful experience as an international student.

Health Issues

My health issues combined with a dismissal of my symptoms and a lack of appropriate medical treatments at the university health services, definitely negatively impacted my doctoral studies. Although I was a relatively healthy person during my first semester at the American institution, I struggled with my respiratory tract. The first time I requested help was at the University Health Services. I had severe sore throat to the point that I was barely able to speak. Even tough, I was told my symptoms did not indicate an infection or anything serious, I was not given any medication, not even as aspirin. That was on Thursday. On Saturday night I could not breathe and speak, a friend of mine took me to the emergency room where I was diagnosed with severe bronchitis. I spent almost two weeks in bed and I struggled to accomplish academic responsibilities resulting in a low grade in two courses.

The second time I requested help at the university health services, I was suffering from panic and anxiety attacks with severe physical symptoms that I had

never experienced before. That time I was told I could not be given any medication and they recommended me to attend counseling services. The counselor disagreed with the lack of medication and requested to talk with a psychiatrist. However, she was not successful. I attended counseling services almost daily during one week as I was getting worse. The next weekend I was taken to hospital by a friend of mine where I was diagnosed with severe anxiety and panic attacks; I was given medication and hospitalized for two days. My medical insurance however did not cover hospitalization and the recommended lab tests in the hospital.

Remember, I was required to have a financial guarantee and everything I went through to get it; a financial guarantee that includes a quite expensive medical insurance. As Choudaha (2020) argues, universities should reinvest part of the tuition fees on university services for students improving their quality of life. I wonder, how could universities improve their health services for international students? I wonder, how a payment for medical insurance, which was not helpful for me, regarding the university health services I received?

After that episode, I was in shock because I did not understand what was going on with me. The situation was so painful that I made the decision to return to my home-country. I was forced to request a leave of absence for a year to recover my health. Once in Mexico I was diagnosed with an untreated long hypothyroidism that produced an imbalance in brain chemical causing depression, anxiety, panic attacks and other health issues. After a year, I made the decision to return to the university in the United States, where I was forced to go through a re-application for the program, including sending another financial guarantee!

A Tsunami Called Covid-19

Covid-19 represents the worst thing has ever happened to me. Its first impact in my life was the cancellation of my research plans. At the end of 2019, I left the United States because I had completed all my courses and was working on my dissertation. I had been awarded a travel research grant to go to Colombia to conduct a multi-case study. It included financing tuition for my seven remaining dissertation hours. All that was to happen in 2020. I was not yet in Colombia when Covid-19 forced lockdowns worldwide. Suddenly my life change, I was stuck in Mexico without any kind of income, no job amidst a pandemic, no research grant including no tuition coverage because the grant would be released only if I travel to Colombia. In short, I had nothing.

Finally, the research grant was cancelled because I did not travel to Colombia, although it was not my decision. It was travel restrictions, but I was working distantly with universities in Colombia! Uncertainty about immigration policies for international students and the risk of infection made me consider to not go back to the United States. So, I was in Mexico, I was an adult living with my parents with no income at all! I could not afford tuition, so I applied for scholarships explaining my situation but was not granted any of them.

At the beginning of 2021, despite all our efforts and following sanitary protocols and recommendations, both my dad and I got Covid. So far, I still

wonder when and how we got infected. When we were told we got Covid, I was in shocked and in panic. We were told we did not require hospitalization so both of us initiated our quarantines. As days went by, my dad was getting worse and worse; I could not do anything. I was also in quarantine and with severe body pain, headaches, with no energy even to get up. I remember hearing my mom and sister's desperation as he was getting worse and worse. There was no more oxygen equipment available, hospitals were bursting. My dad then passed away and I was still in quarantine; feeling useless, stuck in my bedroom. A useless observer: a distant witness because I could not even attend his funeral as it was risky for other people.

After my dad's death I was living in chaos. I got worse; the physical and moral pain, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation is all I remember. I may need hundreds of words to describe what I went through while in quarantine with my dad in the other bedroom getting worse and dying from Covid. I may need hundreds of words to describe what I lived with my own symptoms. Of course, the last thing I was thinking of during the following months was my doctoral studies. There was no way!!! Afterwards I went through a *prolonged grief disorder* a new psychiatric category introduced in the International Classification of Diseases that involves traumatic, disenfranchisement and chronic grief that co-occurs with anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, guilt, somatization, regret, anger (Kokou-Kpolou, 2020).

After months of psychotherapy I decided to begin to recuperate my life. I decided to request a virtual meeting with my advisor to explore any chance to finish my degree. I did not enroll one semester because of my family's Covid situation and at the time I could not afford tuition. So, I was being forced to request a leave of absence for a second time. Although my advisor agreed with it, I realized later it had quite negative implications for me. For instance, they stated I had a long timeline for graduation as it would take me at least two years to finish my dissertation although my proposal is "almost ready to defend" according to their last email. The long timeline would involve taking more dissertation hours which involves paying more tuition which I could not afford it. My family spent too much money on my dad's illness because he did not have medical insurance. We are still paying back our debt so not only they cannot support me, I have to help them.

In addition to extra credit dissertation hours, I was required to attend research courses as a refreshment because I may have lost research skills. I explained that before getting infected with Covid I was working distantly with a Colombian university and had submitted my research to the annual conference of the Association of the Study for Higher Education (ASHE) and was accepted. I wanted to express that my research skills were *fresh*. No matter, the answer was that I had to take research courses again in case I take a leave of absence. I discussed these implications and my financial struggles; however, I was told that I "do not understand what making a dissertation in the United States means".

Later, my advisor resigned as my chair and as member of my doctoral committee arguing that I do not listen because they suggested to stop and not finishing the dissertation because it will involve a long time and commitment that


clearly, I do not possess. No, I cannot listen to a faculty member that suggests to stop and not finishing a degree in which I have invested time, effort and money, in which I have invested part of my life. Despite all my struggles including prolonged grief disorder because my dad passed away! I have good GPA and I still wanted to finish my degree. That's why I reached out again. Apparently, that is not a proof of my commitment.

Gomes et al. (2021) describe some of the strategies that are critical to support international students and their capacity to resilience, some of them are engaging with peers, supervisors or the university. Those have not been critical supporting strategies for me. I have not felt that the university is supporting me by any means. I am here because of my own agency (Raby et al., 2021) to overcome struggles and trauma and transcend the lack of institutional support. What the university has done is to add more burdens to my situation. As Lipura (2021) argues, Covid is widely discriminating with whom are more adversely affected. Disadvantaged people, in this case international students, encounter serious struggles including financial precarity. The infection forces quarantine, cases of family loss, and severe trauma which may lead to absence from work or school which many institutions do not provide support leading to dismissal from jobs or school, consequently it leads to a vicious circle of precarity and inequity.

Attach the agreement with your graduate program that outlines the conditions of your return from the LOA; it should be on unit letterhead. If there are no special conditions, the program should note this on letterhead.

Reason for LOA (use additional sheets if necessary):

I can't afford tuition to complete my doctoral studies. Both my dad and I got COVID, my family spent a lot of money and my dad passed away. We need to pay back our debt. I got a research travel grant that included budget for the remaining dissertation credit hours(7), but it was cancelled because travel restrictions prevented me to travel to the intended destination. There's no way I can afford tuition this semester.



Student's Signature _____ Date 08/16/2021

My signature indicates that I understand that I must comply with the LOA policies and procedures, including reporting crimes or other serious misconduct occurring during the leave that would have been grounds for suspension or expulsion had I engaged in the conduct while enrolled.

Figure 3
Extract from an Intended Leave of Absence

FINAL THOUGHTS

In writing my experience as an international student, I intend to inform practitioners, faculty, staff, and policymakers at institutional and national level regarding the experience of the human beings behind the label *international students*. I intend to inform them of all the struggles that we and our families go through. Although there is abundant research of international students, there are still areas to focus and further investigate. For instance, most of the literature regarding Latin American students focus on immigrant Latinos in the United States; however, there is need to illuminate the experience and the struggles of

non-immigrant Latino students, particularly Mexican given the context of international cooperation treaties.

On the other hand, there is increasing literature regarding mental health issues; however, there is scarce literature regarding other health issues or the combination of both mental and physical health issues and their impact on the academic performance of international students. It is still coming to surface the multidimensional impact of Covid. Additionally, although the literature highlights financial precarity as one of the main struggles of some international students, more attention is needed to the various dimensions of financial precarity. It is not only a matter of granting scholarships but all the different facets associated to affordability and accessibility.

In that regards, my experiences serve to recognize the gray areas in research and policy. The implications of this article are varied. For international students it involves getting as much information as they can prior to studying abroad, including getting a copy of special memorandums, agreements or treaties and their terms and conditions. It involves the need of a mentality that recognizes their contributions and academic worth as international students. It involves also requesting permanent communication with their home institutions and the adherence to commitments made. For faculty, staff, and academic managers in universities, it involves recognizing the particular needs of students, adapting policies for different cases, recognizing the need to work with foreign universities in reciprocal terms, and acknowledging the role of higher education to achieve international cooperation goals and the knowledge, potential, academic and personal value of people worldwide. It also involves the need to coordinate at national level in educational international policies with partner countries.

As Castiello-Gutiérrez and Li (2020) state, as international students we want to be seen more than money. We desire that universities in the United States be aware that many times international students require not only extra but different support. This is financial, academic and/or psychological because those are the barriers that we constantly encounter. And, we want to be recognized as knowledgeable people.

Most of all, we want to be seen as *human beings*. As Lipura (2021) states, international students are thinkers and not subjects. In this humanness, as Castiello-Gutiérrez and Li (2020) argue, we need to be aware of our own responsibility in creating or perpetuating inequity. I absolutely agree. I do not intend to take a victim's role, actually the opposite. I think I should have spoken up clearly when I encountered each of these issues. Many times, we are afraid to speak up. I assume my responsibility in creating safe and equitable higher education spaces. I share my story with hope in reflection regarding students as human beings beyond labels like international students, Mexican students, Latino students and others.

Every human being has a story and policies and procedures need to be flexible to consider the individuality and the different struggles. Higher education and international higher education need to recuperate its mission and advocacy for human beings beyond labels. An advocacy for fairness, equity and inclusion for the development of millions of people worldwide transcending attachment to

geopolitical and economical evils. In that regards, I wish international higher education recognizes me as a human being with multiple and complex roles and supports me in that complexity because I am an international first generation from a low-income family student, dual PhD degree pursuer. But, I am also a woman, Latina, Mexican, a daughter whose father passed away from Covid. I am a human being and want to be recognized as such.

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MARIBEL CASTAÑEDA MUÑOZ, PhD, is the Coordinator of the Leadership and Management of Higher Education Institutions Doctoral Program at Universidad Anáhuac Puebla, México. Her major research interests lie in the area of leadership, leaders' training, strategic management in higher education and quality in internationalization of higher education. Email: maribel.castanedamu@anahuac.mx
