

What is Still Unwritten: Examining (Mis)alignments of Educational Goals and Career Aspirations Among sub-Saharan African International Graduate Students in the United States

Mavis Gyesi

University of Iowa, Iowa City, USA

Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

A number of universities in the United States recruit sub-Saharan African international graduate students, but little attention is given to how their educational goals align with their career aspirations. Notable contextual influences, such as uncertainties about educational goals, systems of inequality, and restrictive federal policies, significantly impact their educational success and career pathways. This study investigates the (mis)alignment between educational goals and career aspirations of sub-Saharan African international graduate students. Guided by a critical constructivist paradigm and leveraging Ubuntu philosophy (valuing human relations and helping others to succeed), I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with culturally and linguistically diverse African students from various academic disciplines at U.S. R1 universities. Through a thematic analysis approach, I found that significant number of this sub-group experiences are in congruence between their academic goals and course content. However, misalignments including challenges translating knowledge and skills acquired from U.S. education to their home country emerged.

Full paper

Study Significance

African international graduate students from the sub-Saharan regions are among the fastest-growing populations seeking higher education in the U.S. (IIE, 2023a). Before the COVID 19 pandemic, approximately 42,000 sub-Saharan African international graduate students (SAIGS) enrolled in U.S. universities (IIE 2023a). During the 2022/ 2023 academic year, a total enrollment of SAIGS came from Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia, and Kenya to name a few, comprising a total of 50,199, accounting for 18.1% of all international students enrolled in U.S. universities (IIE, 2023b).

SAIGS, upon their arrival in U.S. educational institutions, encounter complex historical and racial dynamics inside and outside of classrooms (Mandishona, 2018). They grapple with cultural differences and report feeling unprepared by faculty and encounter attitudes that disregard their legitimate needs, which leads to a feeling of being undervalued or not prioritized by their college or university (Antwi & Ziyati, 1993; Aurah, 2014; Bofo-Arthur, 2014; Changamire et al., 2021; Mwangi, 2016).

While educational scholars have explored the career aspirations, trajectories, and experiences of the overall international student population (Arthur et al., 2023; Cozart & Rojewski, 2015), (mis) alignment of career and educational aspirations (Khattab, 2014; Perry et al., 2016), post-high school transition, and career influences of African immigrant students (Awokoya, 2012; Molla, 2022; Stebleton, 2007), there is currently no educational scholarship that investigates the (mis)alignment between educational goals and career aspirations of SAIGS in the U.S. Unfortunately, research has not kept pace with the rapid growth of this sub-population. This gap in educational discourse indicates a significant need to shed light on their academic experiences. Because a lack of educational discourse and understanding about the experiences of SAIGS prevents them from being best served, it is vital to cultivate this understanding. Research questions that guided this study are:

1. How might contextual influences shape SAIGS' career aspirations and educational (mis) alignments?
2. In what ways can institutional leaders socialize and support SAIGS in developing career goals, utilizing the Ubuntu philosophy?

Conceptual Framework

I employed a critical constructivist paradigm (Buriro et al., 2021; Schwandt, 1994), alongside social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 2002; Coleman, 1988) and graduate socialization theory (Weidman & DeAngelo, 2020) to gain a deeper understanding of the topic. According to Bourdieu, Lin, and Coleman, social capital are the resources embedded in a person's social network that become readily available through the ties individual's form. Weidman and DeAngelo (2020) defined graduate socialization as the process by which "individuals gain substantial knowledge, skills, and values for successful entry into a professional career, requiring an advanced knowledge and skills" (p. 14).

Method

In this study, I carried out a methodological approach based on a qualitative-phenomenological method. I conducted one-to one semi-structured interviews (Bernard, 2016), to allow for probing and to generate rich narratives about the academic experiences of SAIGS across R1 universities in various academic disciplines.

Participants and Sampling

Following Creswell (2017), I utilized a snowball sampling recruitment strategy. The snowball sampling approach resulted in forty-three initial participants who showed interest in my study. Participants were asked screening questions to determine their eligibility, which cut down the number of interested participants to twenty students. I complied with ethical standards by obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The interviews were audio recorded via Zoom and transcribed using Rev. Service.

Analyses

I adopted a thematic analysis approach using QualCoder (Brailas et al., 2023), a free and open qualitative source software for coding data into themes and categories. I employed a three-coding strategy which aligns with Creswell's (2017) data analysis and interpretation. I used a constructivist approach allowing for new themes to emerge from the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Schwandt, 1994).

Findings

Participants shared a plethora of contextual influences, specifically mis(alignment)s goals that impact their educational expectations and career aspirations. SAIGS understanding of alignments was linked to alignment with their program of study and alignment with institution visions of partnering with African educational institutions. Moreso, it became evident in my study that, most participants had mismatched goals including struggling to translate Western knowledge and skills to home country, having misalignment with future profession being trained for, and misalignment with pedagogical approaches. Based on shared experiences, participants who aligned with their career aspirations and educational goals received support from their advisors.

Implication for Policy and Practice

Findings and recommendations from this study can serve as important implications for policy makers, scholar practitioners, and researchers to reimagining strategies to support SAIGS. Educators can therefore support SAIGS to align their goals by preparing them for careers utilizing the Ubuntu philosophy.

References

- Antwi, R., & Ziyati, A. (1993). Life Experience of African Graduate Students in a Multi-Cultural Setting: A Case Study.
- Arthur, N., Lei, D., & Woodend, J. (2023). From Near and Afar: International Secondary School Students' Career Influences. *Journal of Career Development*, 50(2), 335-352.

Aurah, C. M. (2014). Exploring the academic experiences of African international graduate students in a Midwestern University in United States of America: A phenomenological study. *African Educational Research Journal*, 2(1), 35-42.

Awokoya, J. T. (2012). Identity constructions and negotiations among 1.5- and second-generation Nigerians: The impact of family, school, and peer contexts. *Harvard Educational Review*, 82(2), 255-281.

Bernard, H. R., Wutich, A., & Ryan, G. W. (2016). *Analyzing qualitative data: Systematic approaches*. SAGE publications.

Boafo-Arthur, S. (2014). Acculturative experiences of Black-African international students. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 36, 115-124.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). *Forms of capital*. In J.G. Richardson (Ed). *Handbook of theory and research for sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). New York: Greenwood.

Brailas, A., Tragou, E., & Papachristopoulos, K. (2023). Introduction to Qualitative Data Analysis and Coding with QualCoder. *American Journal of Qualitative Research*, 7(3), 19-31.

Buriro, Ednut, N., & Khatoon, Z. (2021). Philosophical underpinning and phenomenology approach in social science research. *Asia Pacific (Jamshoro, Pakistan)*, 38, 237–254. <https://doi.org/10.47781/asia-pacific.vol38.iss0.2526>.

Changamire, N., Mwangi, C. A., & Mosselson, J. (2021). International students and the neoliberal marketplace of higher education: The lived experiences of graduate students from sub-Saharan countries in Africa of a U.S. University's Internationalization Policy. *Higher Education*, 84(3), 505–521. <https://link-springer-com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/article/10.1007/s10734-021-00782-9>

Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American journal of sociology*, 94, S95-S120.

Cozart, D. L., & Rojewski, J. W. (2015). Career aspirations and emotional adjustment of Chinese international graduate students. *Sage Open*, 5(4), 2158244015621349.

Creswell, J. W. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach*. London: Sage Publications.

Institute of International Education (2023b). International student enrollment trends, 1948/49-2020/21. Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange. <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/enrollment-trends/>

Institute of International Education (IIE) (2023a). Open doors: Report on international educational exchange. Washington, DC: IIE. <https://opendoorsdata.org/annual-release/international-students/>

Khattab, N. (2014). How and when do educational aspirations, expectations and achievement align? *Sociological Research Online*, 19(4), 61-73.

Lin, N. (2002). *Social capital: A theory of social structure and action* (Vol. 19). Cambridge University Press.

Mandishona, T. C. (2018). *Consciously becoming Black: A phenomenological exploration of black sub-Saharan African international students' racial identity development at historically black colleges and universities in the American south*. <https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations/1520/>

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.

Molla, T. (2022). Preparing African students with refugee backgrounds for transition: School practices. *Australian Journal of Education*, 66(1), 5-25.

Mwangi, C. A. (2016). Exploring sense of belonging among Black international students at an HBCU. *Journal of International Students* 6, no. 4 (2016): 1015-1037.

Perry, B. L., Martinez, E., Morris, E., Link, T. C., & Leukefeld, C. (2016). Misalignment of career and educational aspirations in middle school: Differences across race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. *Social Sciences*, 5(3), 35.

Schwandt, T. A. (1994). *Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry*. Handbook of qualitative research, 1(1994), 118-137.

Stebleton, M. J. (2007). Career counseling with African immigrant college students: Theoretical approaches and implications for practice. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 55(4), 290-312

Weidman, J. C., Twale, D. J., & Stein, E. L. (2001). *Socialization of Graduate and Professional Students in Higher Education: A Perilous Passage? ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, Volume 28, Number 3. Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series*. Jossey-Bass, Publishers, Inc., 350 Sansome Street, San Francisco, CA 94104-1342.

Antwi, R., & Ziyati, A. (1993). *Life Experience of African Graduate Students in a Multi-Cultural Setting: A Case Study*.

Arthur, N., Lei, D., & Woodend, J. (2023). From Near and Afar: International Secondary School Students' Career Influences. *Journal of Career Development*, 50(2), 335-352.

Aurah, C. M. (2014). Exploring the academic experiences of African international graduate students in a Midwestern University in United States of America: A phenomenological study. *African Educational Research Journal*, 2(1), 35-42.

Awokoya, J. T. (2012). Identity constructions and negotiations among 1.5- and second-generation Nigerians: The impact of family, school, and peer contexts. *Harvard Educational Review*, 82(2), 255-281.

Bernard, H. R., Wutich, A., & Ryan, G. W. (2016). *Analyzing qualitative data: Systematic approaches*. SAGE publications.

Boafo-Arthur, S. (2014). Acculturative experiences of Black-African international students. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 36, 115-124.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). *Forms of capital*. In J.G. Richardson (Ed). *Handbook of theory and research for sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). New York: Greenwood.

Brailas, A., Tragou, E., & Papachristopoulos, K. (2023). Introduction to Qualitative Data Analysis and Coding with QualCoder. *American Journal of Qualitative Research*, 7(3), 19-31.

Buriro, Ednut, N., & Khatoon, Z. (2021). Philosophical underpinning and phenomenology approach in social science research. *Asia Pacific (Jamshoro, Pakistan)*, 38, 237–254. <https://doi.org/10.47781/asia-pacific.vol38.Iss0.2526>.

Changamire, N., Mwangi, C. A., & Mosselson, J. (2021). International students and the neoliberal marketplace of higher education: The lived experiences of graduate students from sub-Saharan countries in Africa of a U.S. University's Internationalization Policy. *Higher Education*, 84(3), 505–521. <https://link-springer-com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/article/10.1007/s10734-021-00782-9>

Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American journal of sociology*, 94, S95-S120.

Cozart, D. L., & Rojewski, J. W. (2015). Career aspirations and emotional adjustment of Chinese international graduate students. *Sage Open*, 5(4), 2158244015621349.

Creswell, J. W. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach*. London: Sage Publications.

Institute of International Education (2023b). International student enrollment trends, 1948/49-2020/21. Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange. <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/enrollment-trends/>

Institute of International Education (IIE) (2023a). Open doors: Report on international educational exchange. Washington, DC: IIE. <https://opendoorsdata.org/annual-release/international-students/>

Khattab, N. (2014). How and when do educational aspirations, expectations and achievement align? *Sociological Research Online*, 19(4), 61-73.

Lin, N. (2002). Social capital: A theory of social structure and action (Vol. 19). *Cambridge University Press*.

Mandishona, T. C. (2018). Consciously becoming Black: A phenomenological exploration of black sub-Saharan African international students' racial identity development at historically black colleges and universities in the American south. <https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations/1520/>

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.

Molla, T. (2022). Preparing African students with refugee backgrounds for transition: School practices. *Australian Journal of Education*, 66(1), 5-25.

Mwangi, C. A. (2016). Exploring sense of belonging among Black international students at an HBCU. *Journal of International Students* 6, no. 4 (2016): 1015-1037.

Perry, B. L., Martinez, E., Morris, E., Link, T. C., & Leukefeld, C. (2016). Misalignment of career and educational aspirations in middle school: Differences across race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. *Social Sciences*, 5(3), 35.

Schwandt, T. A. (1994). *Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry*. Handbook of qualitative research, 1(1994), 118-137.

Stebbleton, M. J. (2007). Career counseling with African immigrant college students: Theoretical approaches and implications for practice. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 55(4), 290-312

Weidman, J. C., Twale, D. J., & Stein, E. L. (2001). *Socialization of Graduate and Professional Students in Higher Education: A Perilous Passage? ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, Volume 28, Number 3. Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series*. Jossey-Bass, Publishers, Inc., 350 Sansome Street, San Francisco, CA 94104-1342.