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# Peripheral or marginal participation?

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## **Peripheral or Marginal Participation? University-Based Intensive English Programs as an Entryway to U.S. Academia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

For academically bound international students, university-based intensive English programs (IEPs) frequently function as an avenue to American undergraduate or graduate degree programs. This qualitative study examined how one university-based IEP was preparing its academically bound international students and facilitating their transitions to matriculated study. We use the theory of situated learning to explore international students' participation in the IEP as a community of practice and the IEP's own marginality within the university structure. We found that university-based IEPs can play a critical role in helping international students gain the competence and knowledge necessary to begin legitimate peripheral participation in degree programs. However, the extent to which IEP students were able to participate in the larger university community was limited by the IEP's own marginality in the university community and the fact that the IEP is ultimately not a discipline-specific community of practice.

**Keywords:** ESL, intensive English program, international students, student access, student participation

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The United States remains a leading destination for higher education (Amblee, 2018; Institute of International Education [IIE], 2020a) and many U.S. universities have made internationalization a strategic priority (de Wit, 2020).

Despite a decline of 1.8%, international student enrollments in the United States remained near a record high in the 2019–2020 academic year with 1,075,496 enrolled international students representing 5.5% of all enrollments in American higher education (IIE, 2020a). While these international students make a tremendous financial contribution to the U.S. economy (over \$44 billion in 2018; IIE, 2020a), perhaps even more impactful is the academic and social influence of these students. International students “contribute to America’s scientific and technical research and bring international perspectives into U.S. classrooms, helping prepare American undergraduates for global careers, and often lead to longer-term business relationships and economic benefits” (IIE, 2020c).

University-based intensive English programs (IEPs) play an important role in facilitating access to U.S. higher education. International students are often not prepared to enter undergraduate or graduate degree programs directly from their home countries; thus, many make the decision to first attend an IEP in order to develop their English language proficiency and to prepare for matriculated degree study in the United States (Hamrick, 2015; Lee & Subtirelu, 2015; Litzenberg, 2020; Thompson, 2013). In 2019, 49% of all students enrolled in American IEPs reported intending to “continue further (non-IEP) study in the United States” (IIE, 2020b). These days, many students attend IEPs as part of their U.S. college planning—expecting IEPs to facilitate that process. Yet, we currently do not have sufficient knowledge of how IEPs are functioning in this role. This qualitative case study of one IEP, then, investigates this academic preparatory role of IEPs and asks the following research questions:

1. What role can university-based IEPs play in facilitating international students’ legitimate peripheral participation in U.S. academia?
2. To what extent can university-based IEPs prepare international students for successful participation in degree programs?
3. In what ways do university-based IEPs’ positions in the larger university structure affect the IEP students’ learning?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The growth of international students’ enrollments to nondegree programs, including IEPs, had been the “fastest growing trend in international student education” (Miller et al., 2015, p. 335). However, IEP enrollments have declined rapidly in recent years due to a host of geopolitical and economic trends worldwide, along with the American political climate (IIE, 2020b; Ladika, 2018; Litzenberg, 2020). In response to these declining enrollments, it is now more important than ever for U.S. universities to examine the ways in which IEPs are facilitating international students’ matriculation into academic programs. Such university-based IEPs tend to be high-stakes environments as international students’ admission to degree programs hinges on their reaching a certain level of English proficiency. In addition, many IEP students receive scholarships or grants from their home governments, universities, or employers that are conditional on

making sufficient progress in the IEP and ultimately gaining admission to a degree program (Schwartz, 2018). These IEPs, thus, are an integral means of access to American degrees for many international students.

Despite their important function in U.S. higher education, few studies have specifically investigated the role of American IEPs in bridging international students to their subsequent degree studies. Instead, IEPs have frequently served as a source for recruitment of study participants and as “sites of service for language pedagogy, education and language acquisition research, and professional development and training for applied linguistics and language education students” (Litzenberg, 2020, p. 3). Several studies that have explored university-based IEPs as a site for international student support have examined how the English for academic purposes (EAP) instruction offered at university-based IEPs helped to prepare students for university study (Friedenberg, 2002; Lee & Subtirelu, 2015; Miller, 2011). Another category of studies investigating university-based IEPs has focused on the role of IEPs in facilitating international student cultural and social adjustment (Andrade et al., 2014; Chong Brown & Razeq, 2018). While these studies have provided some valuable insight into pedagogical approaches to academic English instruction and international student acculturation, very few studies have specifically examined the role of IEPs as a mechanism for integration into the U.S. academy structure.

One possible explanation for the limited research on IEPs as support structures in their own right is the fact that IEPs have long been marginalized within the larger university context (Hamrick, 2015; Litzenberg, 2020; Thompson, 2013; Williams, 1995). The marginalized status of IEPs within academia can be explained, in part, by the fact that IEPs serve as business units that are expected to generate profit for the university (Litzenberg, 2020). Also contributing to this marginalization are the differentiated academic roles of IEP instructors (e.g., often in non-tenure-track positions, who may not possess doctoral degrees or who have limited publication requirements) and the fact that IEPs are haphazardly situated in a wide variety of academic departments, divisions, or noncredit units (Hamrick, 2015; Thompson, 2013). As a result, international students enrolled in these IEPs are accorded correspondingly lower status within the university (Williams, 1995). Yet, we do not know how the marginal position of the IEPs within the university structure impacts IEP students’ preparation for participating in degree programs. Moreover, prior studies have not conceptualized university-based IEPs as unique communities of practice that assist international students’ beginning participation in U.S. higher education. This study, then, investigates the role of IEPs in facilitating international students’ entry into and participation in U.S. academia.

## **Theoretical Framework**

We employ Lave and Wenger’s (1991; Wenger, 1998, 2010) situated learning theory as our theoretical framework. At the heart of Lave and Wenger’s theory is the notion that learning is fundamentally social and is integrally related to an individual’s evolving identity in a community. That is, learning is not simply the acquisition of decontextualized knowledge and skills but more centrally part of one’s evolving

participation in a community, whereby the newcomer gets folded—first peripherally, but later more fully—into the practice of a community. If the learning is successful, the newcomer gradually develops the identity of a full member.

A community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), then, refers to a community in which members are mutually engaged with one another in shared practice (e.g., running a lab, singing acapella, engaging in Black Lives Matter advocacy), and in order to become a member, a newcomer must develop competence in the shared repertoire and practice of the community. Lave and Wenger (1991), in their initial articulation of situated learning, focused on learning that takes place in small and well-bounded communities of practice; however, more recently Wenger (2010) expanded the notion to larger and more diffuse communities adding “communities of practice formed around an emerging technology by professionals from competing companies” (p. 131). In this study, then, we conceptualize the IEP and individual degree programs of a university as communities of practice, but we also regard the university community that encompasses these programs as a large community of practice into which international students must be initiated.

Many communities of practice overlap with one another, and consequently, individuals may possess multimembership (Wenger, 1998, 2010). For instance, a student within a university may belong to multiple communities of practice (e.g., different programs, study groups, clubs). Situated learning theory, then, also puts forth the notion that learning can transpire at the boundary of a community of practice (Wenger, 2010):

Inside a community, learning takes place because competence and experience need to converge for a community to exist. At the boundaries, competence and experience tend to diverge: a boundary interaction is usually an experience of being exposed to a foreign competence. (p. 126)

In fact, Wenger (2010) went on to argue that some communities need to create special functions to manage their boundaries so that “outsiders can connect with their practice in peripheral ways” (p. 129). That is exactly the role that IEPs have come to play for universities in recent years. University-based IEPs serve as “formal apprenticeships” (Wenger, 2010, p. 130) that initiate international students—i.e., outsiders—into the practice of U.S. academia. In this role, university-based IEPs, as boundary-management organizations, have become much more intentional in providing such apprenticeships, not only by offering academic English classes but also by assisting students with college and graduate school applications, enabling the auditing of college courses, and organizing social activities of the kinds in which college students engage.

The question is: to what extent are IEPs, as boundary-management organizations, successful at helping international students’ initiation into U.S. academia? Wenger (1998) considered a newcomer’s entry into a community in two ways: peripherality and marginality. If the limited participation at the beginning gives the newcomer time and space to develop their competence and leads subsequently to fuller participation, then their initial position is peripherality. In contrast, when the newcomer is prevented from increasing their participation and is

permanently blocked from developing the identity of a full member, then their position is that of marginality. Applying this distinction to the current study, to the extent that IEPs can provide formal apprenticeships that will help international students succeed in their intended degree program and acclimate themselves to the culture of the larger university, their participation in an IEP is part of their inbound trajectory into U.S. academia and therefore represents peripherality. However, if international students' participation in an IEP does not translate into growing participation in the larger university community, then their participation in an IEP represents marginality. In this study, then, we explore the extent to which one university-based IEP, in its boundary-management role, was able to facilitate international students' legitimate peripheral participation in U.S. academia on the one hand, and the limits of its facilitative capacity on the other.

## **METHOD**

Data collection began in the summer of 2015 and concluded in the fall of 2016. The first author collected all the data while the second author advised the data collection and contributed to data analysis and interpretation through the lens of situated learning.

### **Research Site**

This study was conducted at a university-based IEP at a selective, private university located in a large city in the Northeast of the United States, referred to as Fisher University (pseudonym), and was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. The IEP at Fisher University enrolled 279 students at the start of data collection in the fall of 2015. Courses at this IEP run on a 7-week schedule and are structured into eight different levels of proficiency. According to an annual student survey administered in the fall of 2015, 77% of the students enrolled in the IEP aspired to attend undergraduate (41%) or graduate (36%) degree programs at American universities. Academically bound students in the high intermediate level or above were tracked into the University Preparation Program—an avenue of support that guides students through the university application and admissions process, while attempting to prepare them for the rigors of university-level coursework in English. Like many IEPs in U.S. universities (Hamrick, 2015; Litzenberg, 2020; Thompson, 2013), this IEP is not affiliated with an academic department, and is staffed mostly with part-time faculty, and the full-time instructors and administrators do not have faculty appointments.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study included students, instructors, and administrators who were affiliated with the IEP at Fisher University. All 17 students recruited to participate in this study were international students who, at the time of the data collection, were currently enrolled ( $n = 12$ ) or had formerly been enrolled ( $n = 5$ ) in the University Preparation Program at the IEP at Fisher University. The student

participants were quite diverse and generally representative of the overall IEP population at Fisher University in terms of gender, age, country of origin, degree pursued, and funding source (see Table 1). Five instructors, part-time and full-time with a variety of backgrounds and experiences, were recruited to participate in this study. Additionally, five program administrators were asked to participate in this study due to their central roles in supporting the academically bound IEP students at Fisher University. The first author held a fulltime administrative and instructional position at Fisher University’s IEP at the time of data collection, while the second author was affiliated with another university and did not have any connection with this IEP or Fisher University.

**Table 1: Student Participants and Characteristics at Interview**

Student <sup>a</sup>	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Level / status	Length of IEP study	IEP level at entry	Degree pursued	University attending	Funding source <sup>b</sup>	IEP status
Abdul	24	M	Saudi Arabia	800	11 mo	500	Grad	N/A	Govt	C
Aisha	32	F	Saudi Arabia	700	3 mo	500	Grad	N/A	Govt	C
Akilah	26	F	Saudi Arabia	4th sem	8 mo	700	MS Biotech	Jefferson University	Govt	F
Alhusain	26	M	Turkey	2nd sem	12 mo	400	MS Mech Eng	Drexel University	Govt	F
Badir	18	M	Oman	500	1 mo	500	Undergrad	N/A	Govt	C
Chi	24	M	China	800	1 mo	800	Grad	N/A	S/P	C
Dastan	33	M	Kazakhstan	Compl	18 mo	400	LLM	George Washington University	Govt	F
Ingrid	18	F	France	800	3 mo	700	Undergrad	N/A	S/P	C
Jiao	24	F	China	800	11 mo	600	Grad	N/A	S/P	C
Julio	26	M	Colombia	600	9 mo	300	Grad	N/A	S/P	C
Kamilah	20	F	Senegal	2nd sem	4 mo	600	Undergrad Biology	La Salle University	S/P	F
Khulood	18	F	Oman	800	4 mo	700	Undergrad	N/A	Govt	C
Leizl	18	F	Oman	800	4 mo	700	Undergrad	N/A	Govt	C
Mustafa	18	M	Saudi Arabia	800	11 mo	600	Undergrad	N/A	Comp	C
Rana	20	F	Saudi Arabia	4th sem	9 mo	900	Undergrad Biology and Psych	Fisher University <sup>a</sup>	Uni	F
Saad	23	M	Saudi Arabia	800	7 mo	500	Grad	N/A	Govt	C
Youssef	26	M	Saudi Arabia	800	11 mo	400	Grad	N/A	Govt	C

<sup>a</sup> The pseudonym is used here to maintain the anonymity of the research site.

<sup>b</sup> Govt = government scholarship; S/P = self/parents; Comp = company scholarship; Uni = university scholarship

<sup>c</sup> C = current; F = former

## **Data Collection**

We collected the following types of data for this study: (a) interviews with students, instructors, and administrators; (b) observations of instruction, workshops, and advising sessions; and (c) relevant documents (e.g., institutional surveys, student test scores, academic records). We conducted 29 semistructured interviews with 27 participants: 17 interviews with students, five interviews with instructors, and seven interviews with administrators (two of the administrators were interviewed a second time in follow-up interviews). The interviews ranged in length from 23–59 min. All interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed fully. In addition, 12 different IEP courses, eight one-on-one advising sessions, and three university preparation workshops were observed. All of the observations were largely nonparticipatory, with the first author taking detailed field notes.

## **Data Analysis**

For our data analysis, we employed Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybrid inductive-deductive approach, looking at the data through the lens of the situated learning theory while also allowing new themes to emerge from the data. Data collection and analysis was an ongoing, iterative process, and emergent design flexibility was employed when it became evident that we needed to collect additional data or different kinds of data in order to ascertain the veracity of emerging assertions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Dörnyei, 2007; Patton, 2014). We first manually coded three student interviews to create a preliminary codebook of descriptive codes and their relationship to our research questions. Having created this preliminary codebook, we then moved all of the data into the qualitative analysis software package, QSR NVivo 11. Even at this first-cycle coding stage (Saldaña, 2016), it became clear rather quickly that students' active participation in the IEP community of practice stood in great contrast with their difficulty to penetrate the larger university community. During the secondary-coding cycle, then, we brought the situated learning theory to the fore to make sense of the emerging trends.

## **RESULTS**

The main themes that emerged from the data involved international students' active participation in the IEP community of practice, coupled with their limited engagement in the larger university community. International students found it relatively easy to begin participating in this IEP and be recognized as full members. In the safety of the IEP community of practice, the students were able to engage and develop competence in some of the practices of U.S. academia. However, the students' participation in the IEP community of practice did not necessarily translate into their growing participation in the larger university community of practice. Although the IEP encouraged students to engage in boundary interactions such as taking university courses, the eligibility requirements and complicated course registration system prevented many



students from doing so. On the whole, international students stayed within the confines of the IEP community of practice, which itself was at the margins of the university structure.

### **Participation in the IEP Community of Practice**

This IEP's primary focus was on supporting its international students in the development of linguistic proficiency and academic readiness skills, while at the same time helping them to navigate the college application process. Academically bound international students at Fisher University's IEP worked in collaboration as they participated in IEP courses that strove to simulate the common academic contexts and communicative behaviors in which they would later engage when enrolled in their degree programs.

Our analysis suggests that this IEP was effective in functioning as a community of practice that provided students with opportunities for participation and collaboration in academic English courses that allowed them to learn to jointly navigate the norms and expectations of U.S. universities. IEP courses provided explicit instruction on cultural and academic expectations, while at the same time functioning as a forgiving environment in which newcomers were allowed to make mistakes. For example, Rana, a former student from Saudi Arabia who had matriculated into an undergraduate program at Fisher University, described the value she found in such instruction while studying at Fisher's IEP:

I really liked the writing course I took with Sandra. It was a lot of fun because we read a lot of essays and talked it over. It was pretty similar to the courses I take. The classroom set up was very similar to the classes I take now so it was kind of a preview although the coursework was different.... But I do feel like I did learn about how to write an essay, how to research. I've always been a good writer, but my research wasn't always that good. I didn't really completely understand. I knew what plagiarism was, but I didn't know to what extent so I didn't realize that if I used one sentence the way it was phrased, that is technically plagiarism. I didn't realize and that helped me a lot.

In the above excerpt, Rana illustrates two concrete effects of IEP instruction on her subsequent learning. First, because of the similarities between IEP courses and her subsequent undergraduate courses, she gained general familiarity—"a preview"—with U.S. college courses. Second and more concretely, while at the IEP, Rana was allowed to make mistakes, such as inadvertently committing plagiarism and learning from those mistakes, so that she would not make such costly mistakes once she began participating in her actual degree program. In other words, peripheral participation in U.S. academia in the form of membership in this IEP program provided "an opportunity for learning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 166) for Rana.

In addition to explicit cultural and academic instruction, the social activities that were arranged by Fisher's IEP served as an easy means of entry to social engagement in the IEP community of practice for international students. Student

participants reported that engagement in these prearranged activities gave them a venue outside of class to interact with one another, practice their English, and learn about American culture. Khulood, an 18-year-old Omani student, was particularly invested in social participation and had actually worked with other IEP students to found an Omani student association. When explaining why she participated in IEP social activities, Khulood explained:

They are definitely helpful to learn how to socialize in American setting, if it makes sense, because it is different than the parties and socialize setting than back home.... It is similar in some ways but there are different techniques to slide into a conversation or to make small talk basically. The topics you talk about are a bit different—you talk about the weather, the IEP, the classes you are taking, where are you from because it is a multicultural program.

IEP students also socialized with each other outside of the IEP sponsored activities, which, they noted, served as a useful resource for easing their acculturation into U.S. study. Participants described their interactions with other IEP students as being “easy” and “helpful” because their fellow IEP classmates understood what they were going through. In this way, these students were provided with opportunities for shared experiences in their engagement in the IEP community (Wenger, 1998).

Through participation in the IEP community of practice both within and outside of classrooms, international students were initiated into some of the common practices of U.S. academia. Chi, a Chinese student who was interested in pursuing an MBA in the United States, described this initiation in response to our question of how his IEP courses were preparing him for graduate studies:

Of course how the American education system works, you get a very good experience out of it. You choose your own classes, if you don't like the teacher you drop it, and there's the Internet system where you keep track of all your assignments and grades. You have to supervise yourself to finish homework.

Practices within the IEP community such as being able to choose one's own courses, keeping track of assignments and grades online, and being responsible for one's own time management are common across U.S. universities. As such, by learning to participate in the IEP community of practice, students were able to develop their competence in some of the practices of the degree programs in which they aspired to participate. Such legitimate peripheral participation allowed these students to engage in both “learning as doing” and “learning as belonging” (Wenger, 2009, p. 211), albeit at the margins of the university.

Despite the benefits students attributed to their IEP studies, students' attention to their academic English development was overshadowed by their focus on college applications. Many IEPs now serve the dual function of providing international students with academic English instruction and college-application support. The majority of international students who enrolled in Fisher's IEP considered the completion of a successful application, and all of the required

components (e.g., TOEFL score, application essay), as their most important goal during their enrollment at the IEP while further development of their English proficiency often became a means to this end. Several instructors expressed their frustration with students' exclusive focus on the short-term goals of obtaining necessary qualifications and completing their college applications. Amanda, the IEP Manager, shared:

I think the largest issue in our program that I find is that students are so focused on taking tests, like TOEFL or GRE, that they lose sight of the importance of actual language acquisition and learning in their other courses, which are actually going to facilitate higher scores for them.

Thus, while the two main functions of the IEP, namely, academic English instruction and college application support, are in theory mutually compatible and even mutually reinforcing, in reality, administrators and instructors saw with alarm students' focus on the latter at the expense of the former.

### **Participation in the University Community—or Lack Thereof**

In contrast to the ready access to the practices of the IEP community and facility with which they quickly became its full members, many IEP students found their opportunities to participate in the greater university community much more limited.

One avenue of university participation that was available for advanced level IEP students was the option to take an undergraduate credit course of their choice (e.g., calculus, political science, art design). The IEP designed this credit course option in order to provide its students with access to discipline-specific courses as part of the IEP curriculum. While they were taking an undergraduate course, these students were concurrently enrolled in three IEP courses. Several student participants reported the credit course option to be a valuable program feature because it provided them with an opportunity to participate in another community of practice on campus (i.e., a course in an undergraduate degree program) and study alongside matriculated undergraduate students. Akilah, a former IEP student who was enrolled in a Master's program in biotechnology at the time of the interview, described her experience with this credit course option:

I took [undergraduate-level] calculus. It was great actually. I got an A+ [laughs].... I actually liked socializing. I liked being in a classroom and being on a campus, not just attending English classes. I think my favorite part was being able to take a class through the program and still be able to do both things.

Akilah's experience illustrates the type of "multimembership" (Wenger, 2010) that the credit course option afforded these students as they participated as full members of the IEP while simultaneously participating as peripheral members in the matriculated degree department through their credit course. By participating in this boundary interaction, Akilah appreciated the opportunity to take a risk and experience a "real" university class, while still remaining largely in the safety of

the IEP community of practice. Khulood, another student from Oman who was preparing for undergraduate admission, expressed the benefits of taking a credit course as follows: "It gives you the perspective and hint of what U.S. universities are like."

Despite these benefits, few IEP students actually took advantage of the credit course option. In the fall of 2015, for example, only five of the entire IEP student population (1.7%) were enrolled in these credit courses. There were three primary obstacles that prevented more students from electing this option. First, there was a prerequisite to successfully complete at least one session at the advanced level, but many IEP students did not stay long enough to reach the advanced level. Second, taking a university course outside of the IEP increased tuition cost by 31%. This cost prohibited students on restrictive scholarships or those with personal financial constraints from enrolling in credit courses. And finally, enrolling in the credit course option involved advanced planning and a complicated application process. Unlike matriculated students who could easily take courses in other departments, IEP students had to register and pay separately when taking an undergraduate credit course. Moreover, IEP students had to submit a separate application with supporting documents (e.g., letter of recommendation, transcripts) to the college within the university in which the credit course was hosted in order to be allowed to register for credit courses. These additional obstacles highlight the lack of status of the IEP and its students within the university hierarchy.

IEP students' limited participation in the university community involved social dimensions as well. In contrast to the ease with which IEP students interacted with one another, many of them reported being unable to form close friendships with American students and described challenges with meeting American students, saying that they would try to make small talk, but could not develop those interactions into friendships. Leizl, an Omani student applying for undergraduate admission, explained that she did not really "hang out" with the few Americans she had met in her apartment building. When asked if she had expected to have made more American friends, she shared, "I expected that I would meet more Americans. I expected both Americans and internationals and then I realized that it's an English language program, so why would Americans need this?" In this case, it seems that Leizl was relying on the IEP as the site in which she could form friendships, while opportunities for meaningful interactions within the larger university community were much more few and far between. In these narratives, we see evidence of the marginalized status that IEPs and their students have long held within the larger university context (Thompson, 2013; Williams, 1995). Because these students were not (yet) matriculated in a degree program, they did not see themselves as full-fledged members of the university community with whom American students would want to interact. As a result, these IEP students benefitted from the safety of their membership in the IEP community of practice, while at the same time their boundary interactions with matriculated students in the larger university community were oftentimes limited by their affiliation to the IEP.

## DISCUSSION

Our analysis of the data at Fisher University suggests that international students' trajectory into U.S. academia through the IEP is both peripheral and marginal. On the one hand, it is easy to recognize the critical role IEPs, as boundary-management organizations, play in providing for more apprenticeships for students to help facilitate their entry into the U.S. university community. Many academically bound international students enroll in university-based IEPs because they do not yet possess the language proficiency or college application knowledge necessary to enroll directly in the matriculated degree program of their choice. Such students are reliant on the IEP to support their academic and linguistic development to gain university admission and to help ease their adjustment to American academia. Academic language instruction, explicit guidance on cultural and academic expectations, participation in IEP organized social activities, and social interactions with IEP classmates all facilitated international students' engagement in the IEP community of practice. And to the extent that the IEP is part of the larger university and shares many of its practices with other communities of practice within the university, engagement in the IEP community of practice serves as a good preparation for later participation in a degree program. In this way, IEPs are facilitating university entree to international students who otherwise don't have direct access to admission into the U.S. academia.

However, our results also suggest that IEP students' trajectory to a certain extent takes on some characteristics of marginality. The IEP's ability to launch international students into the larger university community is constrained by two factors: (a) the fact that the IEP is not the actual community of practice in which international students ultimately wish to gain membership, and (b) the IEP's own marginal position within the university.

First, academically bound international students enroll in IEPs with the explicit goal of becoming full-fledged members of the degree programs of their choice. University-based IEPs, such as this one, offer EAP courses that aim to prepare these academically bound students by "adopting pedagogical practices that simulate academic tasks, and at the same time developing students' linguistic and communicative competence" (Lee & Subtirelu, 2015, p. 52). Through this instructional approach, the IEP endeavors to prepare these students for their eventual engagement and membership in these specific communities of practice. Fisher's IEP was able to offer a site for peripheral participation that enabled some of its students to ultimately engage in more full participation and develop multimembership. Nevertheless, this approach to the academic preparation of IEP students fundamentally contradicts a central tenet of situated learning—that learning takes place through an individual's engagement in the practice of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2010). Because the IEP is not the actual community of practice to which the students are striving to gain membership (i.e., the target degree program), it can only simulate and never fully replicate the shared practices of those communities.

Therein lies a Catch-22: international students enroll in an IEP because they do not yet possess the language required to begin participating in their target community of practice. The vast majority of universities are unwilling to enroll students in degree programs until they are able to demonstrate a certain level of English proficiency. As a result, university-based IEPs must fill the gap by functioning as intermediary organizations where such students can work to improve their linguistic and academic readiness. And yet, these IEPs cannot fully provide the affordances that the students need to develop such competencies precisely because they are not the actual communities of practice in which the students aspire to participate. Consequently, IEPs strive to function as learning sites for the preliminary participation in the common academic practices that are critical for success in degree programs in general; however, they cannot expose students to the specific practices of individual degree programs.

Second, as researchers (e.g., Litzenberg, 2020; Thompson, 2013; Williams, 1995) have pointed out, IEPs tend to be positioned at the margins of the university. IEPs are often housed in the “extensions” or “continuing studies” of the university system and are not affiliated with any academic departments. Many IEP instructors work part-time while full-time instructors are not part of the university tenure system. The segregation of IEPs from the rest of the academic units of the university and their instructors’ contingent status compromise their ability to serve as a bridge to degree programs, as Williams argued back in 1995:

Many [ESL] teachers who are preparing students ... for further academic work do so in relative isolation. They may know little of what is in store for their students after they leave the ESL program. Conversely, teachers who instruct the “graduates” of the ESL composition classes may know little of their students’ previous experiences, even within the same institution, as well as the specific needs of this population. (p. 175)

This separation has hardly changed in the last 25 years, even though the role of IEPs in preparing international students for academic programs has dramatically increased in recent years. Fisher’s IEP was not an exception and the findings of our study indicate that this program and its students experienced such marginalization and, in many respects, still maintained a fringe position within the university.

Wenger (1998) argued that individuals who belong to multiple communities of practice can and often do serve as brokers, who “are able to make new connections across communities of practice, enable coordination, and—if they are good brokers—open new possibilities for meaning” (p. 109). In creating an avenue for IEP students to enroll in credit courses, program administrators at this IEP successfully served as brokers by providing an opportunity for legitimate peripheral participation through boundary interactions and multimembership to various degree programs while still enrolled in the IEP. Unfortunately, this opportunity benefitted only a small fraction of IEP students, as it remained financially and logistically inaccessible to many. Since the IEP itself has a marginal status within the university, IEP administrators’ and instructors’ abilities to serve as brokers, to incorporate more of the practices of the degree program

communities of practice into the IEP community of practice, to coordinate transitions, and to negotiate collaborations with academic departments on an equal footing are limited.

## **CONCLUSION**

If university-based IEPs are to function as an avenue to enrollment in degree programs and a site of academic preparation for international students, we must consider the ways in which such IEPs are situated within the structure of American academia. The findings of this study reveal that university-based IEPs play a crucial role in supporting international students' entry into and legitimate peripheral participation in the university community. Students who would otherwise be unable to obtain direct admission to the U.S. degree program of their choice are often able to be bridged to university admission by a university-based IEP. Further, providing students with opportunities to engage in the IEP community of practice and participate in the types of academic participation that allow them to "touch" the larger university community can help promote students' legitimate peripheral participation in their intended degree programs. Nonetheless, our findings suggest that the IEP's ability to fully support students' entry into the university community is limited by both the marginal position of the IEP within the university and the fact that the IEP itself is not the actual community of academic practice to which the students ultimately wish to join.

### **Implications**

One clear implication of this study, then, is that university-based IEPs would benefit from greater collaboration with the larger university community to which they belong. This is necessary given the growing importance of international students' enrollment for the fiscal and intellectual health of U.S. universities, on the one hand, and the critical role that IEPs are tasked to play in this enterprise, on the other. However, this is not something that IEPs can accomplish by their own initiative. Instead, universities must work with IEPs to recognize the integral role that these programs are playing in the recruitment and academic preparation of international students. In light of the tremendous economic and social impact that the international student population has on the American higher education system (IIE, 2020c), universities themselves should move to better integrate IEPs and their students into the general university community. Such integration can be accomplished by explicitly including the IEP in university-wide strategic planning to increase international enrollments and diversify the campus. In addition to providing formal apprenticeships to nonmatriculated international students, universities who are not already doing so should leverage their IEP to serve as a support system for their matriculated international students. By providing instruction and support to both matriculated and nonmatriculated international students, IEPs can demonstrate their inherent value as a support organization within the university community. Such a shift would go a long way

in helping to alleviate the marginalized status that students enrolled in university-based IEPs have historically experienced (Thompson, 2013; Williams, 1995).

Beyond such structural changes, which require action from the university administration, there are also concrete measures that individual IEPs can take in order to improve their efficacy as international students' entry point into U.S. academia. First, our analysis suggests that as IEPs' role in facilitating students' admissions to degree programs increases, some students are taking a utilitarian view of academic English proficiency. Rather than as a foundational skill that is vital to their success in degree programs, students may focus exclusively on developing their academic English proficiency as a means to improve their test scores such as TOEFL and GRE. By exposing students to authentic academic English use at the college level (e.g., showing videos of university lectures, facilitating observations of credit courses), IEP instructors should work to raise students' awareness to the vital importance of academic English proficiency for the subsequent success in degree programs.

IEPs should also further explore opportunities for international students to engage beyond the IEP boundary and across the university. Doing so would provide international students with increased access to authentic academic engagement with degree specific content and American students. Further, by facilitating such legitimate peripheral participation in the university classroom, IEPs will, in turn, provide their students with the opportunity to experience a greater sense of identity and belonging within the university community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). At Fisher's IEP, there were several barriers to enrolling in credit-bearing courses. Given that enrollment in general university courses was a valuable means of participation for these students, IEPs should eliminate unnecessary prerequisites and extra application procedures that prevent students from taking such courses. Further, universities must recognize the growing importance of IEPs in securing international students and, in doing so, must then devise a way for students to take or audit credit courses without an added cost.

IEPs are now functioning as intermediary sites of learning that assist academically bound international students in gaining admission to matriculated degree programs at American universities. Despite the fact that many IEPs have shifted their instructional focus to provide their students with the academic preparation and college-going support necessary in this role, their marginal position within and isolation from the larger university structure have not changed. Consequently, while IEPs can provide a safe place in which international students can learn the general practices of U.S. academia, their ability to broker the students' participation in the wider university community remains limited. Further research and interventions should therefore focus on how to make the boundaries between IEPs and the rest of the university more permeable.



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