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University Perceptions of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme and International
Baccalaureate Students: Thoughts for a Dissertation Study in Virginia

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Statement of the Problem

For a student graduating from a high school in the United States, an International Baccalaureate Diploma is not typically accepted as secondary school exit credential. Additionally, there is no other country in the world quite like the United States in both the variety of options for higher education and the structure of admissions for higher education. These things create a unique climate in which the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) in the United States is somewhat different from the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme in the rest of the world.

Because of these conditions, university officials and even policy makers themselves do not always understand the IBDP, leaving students and parents confused and sometimes with the message that the IBDP is not valued. As the IBDP is a two-year pre-university advanced academic program, it is often compared to another advanced academic program in the United States, the Advanced Placement (AP) Program. These two programs have distinctly different purposes but because they often draw similar students and AP has been around longer, colleges and universities often put the two programs into the same category without really understanding the differences.

In addition to the above, International Baccalaureate (IB) programs have been steadily growing in the United States. The Diploma Programme, established in 1968, currently has 717 Diploma schools in the United States as of November 2010 and 50,775 students took May 2009 examinations (IB, 2010). This growth has in turn created a situation where students who complete IB Diplomas and certificates would like to be able to receive credit at American universities. In many cases, American universities do not often recognize either the IB Diploma or some IB examinations with the same zeal as AP examinations and students often are

disappointed by the lack of credit they receive while their contemporaries who take AP exams are highly rewarded. Although more than 25 percent of college students need remedial coursework (Clemmit, 2006; Merisotis & Phipps, 2000), the nature and goals of the IB program ensure that the students who complete the Diploma and other IB exams are prepared for the rigors of university coursework, as the University of Florida reported that “500 IB students completed their freshman year with a 3.38 grade point average (GPA) while the University average for all freshmen (including IB students) was a 2.90 GPA” (IB CURT, 2009). The contradiction between the university preparation that IB students enter their post-secondary institutions with and the attitudes and potential perceptions of many American university officials creates the conditions ripe for study and research. In addition to the reasons noted above, no dissertation level study has been completed in this area in North America and in fact, data and work concerning perceptions of the IBDP in general, especially completed in the United States, is scarce.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my proposed research study is to analyze the perceptions of university officials of the IBDP as well as IB students. In addition, as I am probably an expert concerning IB at this point, I would like through research, to be able to comment on the knowledge of the university officials in regards to the IBDP and consider whether this contributes to the discrepancies in university recognition policies especially when IB programs are discussed together with the AP program. In addition, as Virginia now has legislation concerning university recognition, Code of Virginia § 23-9.2:3.8, I would like to explore if and how attitudes and perceptions of university officials about IB programs have changed since the legislation has been passed and through implementation.

Research Questions

Understanding the perceptions of university officials of the IBDP and IB students is the central point of this research study. As there has not been any university perception study of the IBDP in North America and the United States really does present unique conditions for IB in terms of both college admissions and how the IBDP and IB certificate programs are generally administered in many schools, I find it critically important that not to lose sight of these two objectives. Understanding this, however, there are special circumstances that are present in the United States and in Virginia, that are not present in other areas of the IB world, and I do think it is important that a doctoral dissertation attempt to address these issues even if these are secondary questions to the primary focus. The matter of university recognition, particularly when IB is put up against AP has become particularly sticky for parents and students in a depressed economic climate and in an environment where students see a case of a miscarriage of justice when among their peers. In addition, the recent passing of legislation in Virginia concerning IB and AP is worth looking at since the legislation passed in the Commonwealth is unlike any other university recognition legislation concerning IB any place in the country. Noting the above, the following research questions are being considered:

1. What are university officials' perceptions of the IBDP?
2. How well do university officials believe IB students are prepared for undergraduate coursework?
3. What are university officials' perceptions of IB students?
4. What kinds of policies do universities in Virginia have for granting credit for IB higher and standard level exams and recognizing the IB Diploma?

5. How has the Virginia legislation impacted the climate in regard to university recognition for IB and AP in Virginia?
6. What is the impact on the attitude of university officials when discussing the two programs (IB and AP)?

Conceptual Framework and Research Literature

As previously mentioned, research concerning this specific topic, especially in the United States is scarce. Research concerning IB in the United States has previously sought to learn more about rates of degree attainment and university success, some from a university perspective and others from the perspective of former IB students. No in-depth studies have been completed to date that have dealt with legislation or an in-depth scrutiny in regards to AP.

Outside of the United States, two university perception studies have been completed by or with the cooperation of IB, one in the United Kingdom in 2003 and one by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and authorized by IB in 2007. The English study sought to evaluate the IBDP as suitable preparation for higher education in the United Kingdom, establish strengths and weaknesses of the IBDP as perceived by university officials, and compare the IBDP to another national qualification used in the United Kingdom, the A-level. Similarly, the Australian study looked to determine what university officials in Australia and New Zealand knew about the IBDP and whether they felt it was good preparation for university study. In Australia, depending on state, students' secondary educations can be very different and the study also investigated how the IBDP might be compared to the various Australian school leaving certificates as well as the certificate offered in New Zealand. These two studies form the background and basis for my planning for a university perception study in the United States. The unfortunate thing about these studies, however, is that since they were commissioned by or

executed by International Baccalaureate, there was not a scholarly exploration of literature or a grounding for the perception research. In that way, I am on my own.

There is some scholarly research work about IB and university graduates. Even at this level, however, the work is slight. Anecdotally, there are many people, including parents, teachers, school administrators, and even university officials who commend the rigor of IB and their programs. The earliest level of validation evidence about IB was a study done by Thomas Grexa in 1988. Grexa looked at 102 students at the University of Virginia in three groups – those who had been enrolled in IB coursework (18), those who had been enrolled in AP coursework (55), and those who had never been enrolled in any advanced academic program (31). Although there were definite problems with the samples that Grexa used in his study (he never identified certain characteristics about either the IB or the AP students and there were other issues), Grexa determined that, “it is reasonable to state that IB students do at least as well as their counterparts from the same or other schools that do not offer the IB” (Grex, 1988, p. 5). Philip Thomas (1988) also attempted a study concerning IB students and university entrance but noted that his study could not sufficiently track every IB student’s college path. Given that the only data for this existed informally within the records of high school alumni offices for many years and high schools typically do not keep addresses up to date, it was not possible to be sure that every IB student was correctly documented. In addition, many university alumni records do not identify students by the high school program that delivered that student to the university and that would not be a source that could readily pass information to either the IB organization for research purposes in the past or to a researcher. In any event, both of these studies mentioned above are both out of the subject area of the study that is being currently proposed. The unifying factor however, is that they did concern IB students. The Grexa study is notable as there was an

attempt to compare IB to AP and the study was done in Virginia while Thomas' work is of note because of the sheer size; Thomas tracked students at 178 universities from 1971 to 1986. In addition, Thomas noted that leading universities in the study noted a positive attitude towards the IB Diploma.

Duevel (1999) explored university attainment and perseverance but added another dimension to her work, including students' perspectives on the process of completing the IBDP. Her work surveyed university registrars and IB Diploma holders at 64 different institutions and asked questions concerning specific IB coursework, perceptions of the IBDP and even whether or not the students would want their children to undertake the IBDP. Hayden, Thompson and Williams (2003) looked at various secondary credentials through the eyes of secondary students as the IBDP was compared to the A levels, AP and European Baccalaureate. IB's own Global Policy and Research Department published in 2010 a study completed at the University of California concerning the performance of IB students compared to the UC population at large. The study found that students participating in IB coursework earned higher grade point averages and graduated at higher rates than comparison group students and the study concluded that "performance in the IB programme in high school significantly predicts achievement in college" (IB Global Policy, 2010).

The above studies notwithstanding, another dimension to be considered for this project might be the culture of organizations themselves due to the fact that the IBDP is a pre-university program and the research being proposed is aimed for a university environment. The two entities I propose to deal with (secondary and tertiary educational systems) have distinctly different cultures, different structures of governance, and sometimes the players do not mix. Also, because the students the universities deal with are considered "adults", institutions of higher

education have different rules to abide by than secondary schools. For that reason, the work of Geert Hofstede might be valuable in considering the cultural differences that might be inherent in an American secondary school where the IBDP is being run and an university environment where I have already stated there is a difference in the way admissions and university recognition is handled from the rest of the world in regards to the IBDP. If some institutions of higher education possibly believe that the worst college course is *still* better than the best secondary school course, then I may be able to use Hofstede's theories of power and competitiveness and apply it to some relationships between organizations (like those between secondary and higher ed) when the organizations in question would be institutions of higher education and those secondary institutions that offer programs that give students the opportunity for college credit. Furthermore, given the legislation issue in Virginia, could there be power issues tied up here?

Methodology

It is my intent to complete a qualitative interview study. When I was in Dr. Maxwell's EDRS 812 Qualitative Research Methods course, I remember him saying that a qualitative dissertation generally had a sample size of 15. That concerns me slightly because there are only 15 public colleges and universities in Virginia and that would mean that I would have to have every public university in the Commonwealth agree to participate. Knowing the climate in Virginia at the present time with the university recognition legislation, I am not sure if it would be possible to convince every university to participate in a study, especially those that currently have less IB-friendly policies. When I did my pilot study, I had a sample of five universities and I generally worked with Directors of Admission but I did originally have a plan to talk to faculty and those in the upper management levels of the university (provosts and presidents). In one case, I did get to speak to a university president but because of the time I was completing my

pilot study (summer 2010), many faculty members were not available. I would like to make sure to incorporate interviewing these individuals into any dissertation study as these individuals often give input concerning subject matter expertise and policy suggestions regarding IB and AP credit as I have been learning through my work as a consultant for the Mid-Atlantic Association of IB Schools.

Areas of Expertise Needed on the Dissertation Committee

In order to complete a successful proposal and dissertation, I believe I need the following expertise available to me on a dissertation committee:

1. Someone with background and expertise concerning IB although I also know that the move of the IB Global Centre to Bethesda recently is probably beneficial to my work. Various staff members at the IB Global Centre as well as in Vancouver and Cardiff are aware of my research interests.
2. Expertise available as needed concerning policy and higher education, particularly university structures.
3. Someone to remind me that everyone is not as fluent in IB language as I am. Remind me I have to define things. ☺
4. Assistance with validity and other qualitative methods.

Conclusion

I, more than anyone, know exactly how long I have been thinking about my dissertation. I realize that all my ideas, reading, coursework, experiences, and writing have brought me up to this point and I look forward to moving forward, chewing on this some more, engaging in discussion, hearing feedback, and hopefully, moving on to proposal.

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