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HOW ADAPTING TO A NEW ENVIRONMENT OR CULTURE AFFECTS IMMIGRANT STUDENTS' CAREER PATHS

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SUMMARY

Many first, and second-generation immigrant students face common but not talked about enough, challenges when navigating higher education and career especially in demanding fields like STEM. While these students are academically capable, and sometimes more determined than their peers, they lack access to the professional social networks, mentorship, and cultural knowledge that their classmates inherit from their family and community. Previous research support this, stating from their findings that immigrant students have more difficulties securing jobs and internships. This research builds on that foundation by exploring firsthand experience from FIU immigrant students.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite all the social improvements we have made as a nation, and in education, immigrant students still struggle with invisible barriers, cultural disconnection, lack of access to both social and professional networks, and emotional burdens tied to family obligations which unfortunately affects their career readiness and confidence

PUPORSE

The purpose was to identify how adapting to a new culture and academic environment impacts immigrant engineering students. I will do so by identifying recurring key barriers immigrant students face in their career preparation, including internships and job findings. The purpose of this research is to expose what I discovered from listening to students and faculty/employer. By highlighting their experiences and struggles (especially when looking for work), I am hoping institutions will benefit from this research to better support their immigrant student from navigating through the workforce in the U.S.

THE FRAMEWORK I USED (QUESTIONS)

- From your perspective, what are some of the biggest academic or career-related challenges immigrant engineering students face at FIU?
- How do immigrant engineering students typically perform in the classroom compared to their non-immigrant peers?
- Do their experiences and needs line up with what faculty or employers expect of them?
- How do cultural background and family expectations affect their confidence when it comes to careers?

HOW I DID THE RESEARCH

This was interview-based research. I spoke with:

- 3 second-generation immigrant students studying engineering at FIU.
- One faculty member in the College of Engineering.

I asked them open-ended questions about their academic studies, how they felt adapting to American culture, and what kinds of barriers they've faced looking for jobs or internships. After the interviews, I highlighted recurring themes across interviews to come up to a conclusion.

WHAT I FOUND

- **Lack of Professional Connections:** Students to both social and professional network that helps them find work and career path after they graduate.
- **Cultural Shock:** Some students said they didn't fully understand cultural norms within the workforce. For example, some culture it is considered disrespectful to be blunt and confident whereas the U.S expect those qualities of you during the hiring process.
- **Pressured to Succeed:** Many felt they had no room for failure because their families depended on them both financially and emotionally.
- **Faculty Observations:** Acknowledge that students are more than academically capable they just lack social capital.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Immigrant engineering students at FIU face invisible challenges. These challenges are not due to their abilities, but rather their access to cultural knowledge and disadvantage due to navigational capital and lack of networks. My interviews revealed that these students often figure it out themselves how to succeed, while also carrying emotional pressure from family and cultural expectations. Understanding their struggle will help fill a gap in research and can be a building block for future studies.