Call for Manuscripts

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Published quarterly, the Journal encourages the submission of manuscripts from around the world, and from a wide range of academic fields, including comparative education, international education, student affairs, linguistics, psychology, religion, sociology, business, social work, philosophy, and culture studies. The Journal audience includes international and domestic students, faculty, administrators, and educators engaged in research and practice in international students in colleges and universities.

a) Peer-reviewed Article - includes manuscripts that focus on the interpretation, implication, or significance of research work related to international students and scholars from various disciplines (between 4,500 to 7,500 words).

b) Study Abroad/Reflection - includes descriptions and perceptions from students and scholars concerning another culture, language, people and society from an insider or outsider perspective. Reflections are the building blocks of research papers and offer original points of view on the issues and concerns related to sojourns (between 1,000 to 2,500 words).

c) Book Review - includes reviews and critiques of the written work of scholars from a number of disciplines related to international students (between 750 to 1,200 words).

Please e-mail your manuscript to the Editor, krishna.bista@gmail.com. Include your full address with email and telephone number. Follow APA 6th edition in your citation and references. Double space. Times New Roman with 12 font size.

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EDITORIAL

WELCOME!

We are pleased to welcome you to our Spring 2015 edition of the Journal of International Students in Higher Education! This edition of the Journal has included a variety of topics related to international students’ social and academic experiences, study abroad trends and social networks, student engagement and academic success, cross-cultural experiences, and teaching and learning practices in higher education in the United States and around the world. In this volume, 22 authors, who represented 17 institutions of higher education, have shared their perspectives and research findings (both quantitative and qualitative) based on their experiences in Malaysia, Canada, Ireland, UK and the United States. Each article is rich in term of cross cultural perspectives of mobile students, their learning experiences, and campus diversity.

We believe that educators, policy makers, administrators, teachers, students and individuals interested in mobile student affairs, study abroad, cross-cultural studies and international education, from across the globe, can take advantages of reading these articles published in this volume!

Some updates:

Publication Frequency: Quarterly (Spring, Summer, Fall & Winter) from 2014
Editorial Board: Includes about 110 published authors as editors, assistant editors, and peer-review board members from various institutions across the globe
Readers/Visitors: United States (39.55%); United Kingdom (23.07 %); Australia (17.48%); Canada (14.68%); India (10.92%); Russian Federation (10.10%); Malaysia (9.72%); Germany, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Netherlands (about 4.5%); New Zealand, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Spain, Ireland and Nepal (about 2.5 %) out of 101,107 hits.

As in our previous volume, this current edition also includes a wide variety of articles written by faculty members and doctoral students from various institutions and countries. Altogether, we believe that scholarly articles of this volume from various disciplines will contribute positively to the field of international student studies. As in the past, we have continued our tradition of sharing free digital copies and print copies with students, faculty members and libraries in the United States and abroad. Finally, we would like to thank the reviewers, copy editors, assistant editors, and editors for their voluntary contributions to the Journal.

Happy reading!

Dr. Krishna Bista, Founder/Editor-in-Chief
Journal of International Students
231 Walker Hall, School of Education
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The Interplay of International Students’ Acculturative Stress, Social Support, and Acculturation Modes

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Abstract
This study examined the relationship between acculturation modes (assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization), social support, and acculturative stress in undergraduate and graduate international students (N=104) at a medium-sized public university in the Midwestern United States. The study found that international students with broad-based social support and an Integration approach to acculturation experienced lower levels of acculturative stress. Implications for more effective counseling with international students are addressed.

Keywords: international students, acculturation, acculturative stress, social support

University-level study is fraught with stress and difficulties (Sharkin, 2006). For many undergraduate students, going away to college is the first of many important changes: life away from the security of home and family, independence, and growing responsibility. Graduate study is, in turn, another change requiring yet better time management skills with additional academic requirements and pressure. These common stresses and challenges associated with university study are substantially increased for the 820,000 international students currently in the United States (IIE, 2013). In addition to having to deal with all of the challenges and changes their U.S. classmates do, international students are also confronted with a wide variety of potential new challenges: language barriers, lack of familiarity with the academic system, immersion in a new culture, and the loss of closeness to family and friends (Misra, Crist, & Burant, 2003; Searle & Ward, 1990; Wilton & Constantine, 2003).

International students in the U.S. have long been the subject of studies. Much of the research done in recent years has investigated international student distress associated with culture shock (e.g., Furnham, 2004; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), psychological difficulties associated with their arrival in the US (e.g., Clark Oropeza, Fitzgibbon, & Baron, 1991; Sandhu, 1994), and help seeking behaviors (e.g., Hayes & Lin, 1994; Komiya & Eeles, 2001). Acculturative stress is another prominent factor for international students and has also been of interest to a number of researchers (Yeh & Inose, 2003; Poyzrali, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004; Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004; Olaniran, 1993). Acculturative stress has been defined as “one kind of stress, in which the stressors are identified as having their source in the process of acculturation; [with] a particular set of stress behaviors that occur during acculturation, such as lowered mental health status (especially confusion, anxiety, depression), feelings of marginality and alienation, heightened psychosomatic symptoms, and
identity confusion” (Berry, 1995, p. 479). While these symptoms of distress are similar to other stress responses, acculturative stress has been identified as resulting from and arising out of the act of moving to and living in a new culture, including somatic manifestations, depression, anxiety and decreased self-esteem. In addition to the difficulties international students experience with cultural change, several researchers have explored how academic demands and perfectionism are also associated with elevated levels of acculturative stress (Nilsson, Butler, Shouse, & Joshi, 2008; Rice, Choi, Zhang, Morero, & Anderson, 2012).

Closely associated with the formulation of acculturative stress is the larger matter of how individuals adapt to a new culture, a process referred to in the literature as acculturation, with Berry’s (1980) bidirectional model the most widely referred to and used (Berry, 1995). The acculturation mode is identified as an individual’s level of desired contact with the host culture as well as the home culture. The four resulting categories are related to the attitude or perspective acculturating individuals take with regards to the host culture and people (host nationals) as well as toward the individual’s home culture and people (co-nationals). Table 1 outlines these modes, which have also been referred to as “orientations,” “strategies,” or “attitudes” (Arends-Toth & van de Vijver, 2006). In the case of a French student in the U.S., if she values maintaining her French identity and connections to other French students (co-nationals), as well as building relationships with U.S. students (host nationals), she would be considered to have an Integration acculturation mode. As another example, a Japanese student who values maintaining his Japanese identity, while not engaging with U.S. students or culture would be considered to be pursuing a Separation acculturation mode.

Table 1
Berry’s Modes of Acculturation (Berry, 1980)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Is it considered to be of value to maintain own cultural identity and characteristics?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is it considered to be of value to maintain relationships with the host culture?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Integration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Separation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>Assimilation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation</td>
<td>Marginalization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relationship between the modes of acculturation and acculturative stress has been clearly established in studies involving immigrants (Berry, 1998; Zheng & Berry, 1991), ethnic minorities (Berry, 2003), native peoples (Berry & Annis, 1974), and expatriate workers (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 2000). Adjustment has consistently found to be most stressful for individuals with a Marginalization mode and least stressful for those with an Integration mode, with Separation and Assimilation falling in the middle. There has been much less research focus on whether these results are the same for international students in the United States (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), although there appear to be several compelling differences between international students and other acculturating groups. Typically, international students are compelled to adapt to the United States cultural and academic environment immediately after arriving on campus and may find it difficult to maintain home ties to the exclusion of local ones (Charles & Stewart, 1991). International students are also generally younger, come on their own without a network of family, are more inclined to be interested in U.S. culture, and generally have greater access to U.S. nationals by virtue of being on a university campus (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Pedersen, 1991). The sum total of these characteristics is considerably different from other acculturating groups.

In addition to considering the relationship between the different acculturation modes and acculturative stress, the current study also took social support into consideration. Social support has long been shown to be an important factor in buffering the effects of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The importance of the individual’s social network has also been shown to be a significant factor in assisting with the stressful situations associated with living in a new culture (Kuo & Tsai, 1986). Studies
examining the social support network of international students have focused on international students’
host national and co-national social networks and generally found that host nationals are of greater
benefit in mitigating acculturative stress by being sources of information and guidance on local cultural
expectations and norms (e.g., Hayes & Lin, 1994; Olaniran, 1993; Yan & Berliner, 2011). Extending
this, Zhang and Goodson (2011) found that social interaction with host nationals provided both
moderating and mediating effects related to decreased levels of depression and the difficulties associated
with cultural adaptation, while Lee, Koeske and Sales (2004) found that higher levels of social support
in addition to higher levels of identification with American culture were associated with lower levels of
acculturative stress with Korean graduate students in the United States. Beyond considering the role of
host and home national supports in adapting to studying in the U.S., there has been less consideration of
the role of other international students. Bochner’s Functional Model of Friendship proposed that host
national contacts are important professional, academic, and career supports, while home country
contacts maintain a connection to the home culture. Different from these two groups, international
students from other countries play the primary role in providing recreation opportunities, as well as
being important social contacts (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin, 1977; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Gareis,
2012). Although these studies have explored friendship networks among international students, less
emphasis has been given to how these networks are related to the experience of acculturative stress.
Consequently, the current study examined the connection between acculturative stress and the
acculturation mode, while taking into consideration how the different sources of social support were
associated with different levels of acculturative stress.

Hypotheses
The purpose of this study was to examine if the amount of acculturative stress international student
reported was related to their acculturation orientation and source of social support. Specifically, the
present study investigated the following hypotheses: (a) international students with an Integration
acculturation mode would have the lowest level of acculturative stress, while those with a
Marginalization mode would have the highest; (b) international students with broad based sources of
support, particularly with host nationals and other international students, would report lower levels of
acculturative stress; and (c) international students’ acculturation mode would correspond to their source
of support: Assimilation with host nationals, Integration with all three sources, Separation with home
country, and Marginalization with none.

Method
Participants
The current study is intended to increase our understanding of relationships between
acculturative stress, acculturation orientations, and sources of social support in international students in
the United States. These results could possibly lead to additional interventions being developed by
counselors working with international students experiencing acculturative stress, as well as the
development of new programs by international student offices to assist international students with the
transition to living and studying in the United States.

The final sample for the study was 104 international students enrolled at a medium-sized public,
urban university in the Midwest. The participants were from 44 different countries, with 60 (58.8%) participants from Asia, 24 (23.5%) from Europe, 7 (6.9%) from South America, and 3 (3.9%) each from
Africa, the Middle East, and North America. Almost half were graduate students (n=47; 45.2%), while
the rest were undergraduates (n=57; 54.8%). There were 64 women (61.5%) and 39 men (37.5%), with
a mean age of 25.43 (range 18-42, SD=5.23). The participants had been in the United States for a mean
of 2.11 years (range 0.17-8 years, SD=1.78). A wide range of majors were represented: business
(46.1%), social sciences (14.7%), natural sciences (13.7%), humanities (11.8%), and education (9.8%).
More than half of the participants reported being in a relationship or married (54.4%), with 91.7%
identifying as heterosexual, 3.1% as lesbian or gay, and the remaining 5.2% as bisexual or other.
Measures

**Demographics.** Information was collected related to demographic characteristics such as: (a) gender, (b) age, (c) academic level (graduate or undergraduate), (d) academic program, (e) relationship status, (f) sexual orientation, (g) length of time in the United States, (h) length of time on current campus, (i) country and region of origin, (j) religion, and (k) ethnicity and race. Respondents were asked about their level of comfort with the English language using three questions (with five point Likert-type scales): (a) What is your present level of English? (*not proficient* to *very proficient*); (b) How comfortable are you communicating in English? (*not comfortable* to *very comfort*); and (c) How often do you communicate in English? (*rarely to never* to *almost always to always*) (Yeh & Insoe, 2003).

**Acculturative Stress.** Acculturative stress was measured using the *Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students* (ASSIS; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998). The ASSIS was developed to measure cultural stress reported by international students living and studying in the U.S. It consists of 36 items scored on a 5 point Likert-type scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Reliability has been shown in other studies with samples of international students attending college in the U.S. to range from 0.87 to 0.95 (Constantine et al., 2004; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994, 1998). The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the current study was .94. Sample questions include: “I am treated differently in social situations”; “I feel lost leaving my relatives behind”; and “I miss the people and my country of origin.”

**Acculturation Orientation.** Acculturation orientation was measured using a modified version of the *East Asian Acculturation Measure* (EAAM) (Barry, 2001). The EAAM was developed to categorize acculturating individuals into one of Berry’s (1980) four categories: Assimilation, Integration, Separation and Marginalization, as shown in Table 1. Items were changed from referring specifically to Asian students to refer to international students in general. The EAAM consists of 29 items and is scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Sample items include: “I write better in English than in my native language” (weighted for Assimilation); “I tell jokes both in English and in my native language” (weighted for Integration); “I prefer going to social gatherings where most of the people are not Americans” (weighted for Separation); and “Generally, I find it difficult to socialize with anybody, people from other countries or American” (weighted for Marginalization). The reliability estimates have ranged from .74 to .85 in studies with Asian international students in the U.S. and Asian immigrants in the U.S. (Barry, 2001; Barry & Grilo, 2002; Barry & Grilo, 2003), although the current study showed Cronbach alpha coefficients of .68, .62, .63, and .82 for the Assimilation, Integration, Separation, and Marginalization orientations, respectively.

**Social Support.** A modified version of the *Index of Sojourner Social Support* (ISSS) (Ong & Ward, 2005) was used to assess for sources of social support. The ISSS was developed to measure the amount of social support people living and working abroad receive from others. The ISSS consists of 18 items scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from *no one would do this* to *many would do this*. Respondents were asked to consider a variety of helpful behaviors and evaluate how likely it would be for someone to perform the helpful behavior. Sample items included assistance with understanding local culture and food, spending time with others, and getting assistance with difficulties. The answer set was modified so that respondents answered each question with regard to host nationals, other international students and co-nationals. This provided data regarding the participants’ social support network for each group separately. Reliability estimates have ranged from .94 to .96 in studies with participants working or studying abroad (McGinley, 2008; Ong & Ward, 2005), with the current study reporting a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .96.

**Procedure**

After the researchers obtained IRB approval, the international student office at the university assisted with distributing information on the study by emailing all enrolled international students inviting them to participate in an online survey about the challenges confronting international students living and studying in the U.S. and the impact of friends and support. Approximately 480 international students were invited to participate in the study, with 139 (29%) responding. Of this number, 14 (10.1%) were eliminated for failing to complete at least 90% of the items, as well as 5 (3.6%) who answers indicated
stereotyped responses (e.g. scoring all items with a 3). A further 4 (2.9%) were identified as outliers on key variables such as time spent in the United States or markedly elevated scores. As an incentive for participation, 20 $25 gift certificates were offered, with the recipients randomly selected from among those who chose to enter their contact information on a second webpage created to make sure data remained anonymous.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

All variables were checked for normality of distribution by examining skewness and kurtosis values; the variables had a normal distribution and transformation of the data was not indicated. In addition, analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests revealed no statistically significant differences between levels of acculturative stress by sex, sexual orientation, relationship status, housing, or academic level. Unfortunately, due to the combination of an overall small sample size and group variances varying widely, it was not possible to test for differences according to field of study or regional origin (Tabachnick & Fiddel, 2007). Negative correlations (\(p < .05\)) were identified between acculturative stress and comfort with understanding (\(r = -.18\)) and communicating in English (\(r = -.21\)), indicating that less comfort with English was only modestly associated with higher levels of acculturative stress.

Major Analyses

Following the practice of other studies using the mode of acculturation model (Barry, 2001; Berry, Kim, Young, & Bujaki, 1989; Dona & Berry, 1994), participant scores on the modified EAAM were standardized and then categorized according to the highest resulting Z score, leaving the distribution of acculturation orientations as follows: Integration (30.8%, \(n=32\)), Assimilation (18.3%, \(n=19\)), Separation (26.0%, \(n=27\)), and Marginalization (25.0%, \(n=26\)).

A one-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to explore differences by acculturation mode on levels of acculturative stress. Results (see Table 2) revealed that there was a significant difference: \(F(3, 100) = 10.71, p < .01, \eta^2 = .24\). Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that students in the Integration group reported statistically significant lower levels of acculturative stress (\(M = 3.15, SD = .42\)) than students categorized in the Separation (\(M = 3.54, SD = .49\)) and Marginalization group (\(M = 3.92, SD = .67\)). Similarly, students in the Assimilation group (\(M = 3.47, SD = .47\)) reported statistically significant lower levels of acculturative stress than those in the Marginalization group. Lastly, students in the Separation group reported statistically significant lower levels than those in the Marginalization group.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Lower 95% CI</th>
<th>Upper 95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assimilation</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.47a</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3.15b</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>3.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3.54b,c</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>4.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginalization</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.92a,b,c</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>3.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(a, b, c\) Compared by groups, the mean differences are significant at the 0.05 level.

Pearson correlations were used to determine if there was a statistically significant relationship between acculturative stress and the source of social support. A negative relationship was identified between social support from host nationals and the reported level of acculturative stress (\(r = -.35, n = 104, p < .01\)), indicating that higher levels of social support from host nationals were associated with lower levels of acculturative stress.
Table 3
Mean Level of Social Support by Source (Host Nationals, Other International Students, and Home) and Acculturation Mode

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Host</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Other International</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assimilation</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.38*</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3.49*</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>3.30*</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2.59*</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginalization</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2.70*</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>2.62*</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* By source of support, the mean differences are significant at the 0.05 level.

A second one-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to explore whether the source of social support differed between participants in the different acculturation modes. Results revealed that there was a statistically significant difference with regards to support from host nationals: $F (3, 100) = 14.56, p < .01, \eta^2 = .30$, and other international students: $F (3, 100) = 3.67, p < .05, \eta^2 = .10$. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that participants in the Integration ($M = 3.49, SD = .61$) and Assimilation ($M = 3.38, SD = .78$) groups were found to have statistically significant higher levels of support from host nationals than those in the Separation ($M = 2.59, SD = .61$) and Marginalization ($M = 2.70, SD = .51$) groups, while participants in the Integration group ($M = 3.30, SD = .83$) were found to have higher levels of support from other international students than participants in the Marginalization group ($M = 2.62, SD = .80$).

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between international students’ levels of acculturative stress as related to their acculturation mode and source of social support. Berry’s acculturation model has been used to examine a wide variety of immigrant and minority populations all over the world (Barry & Grilo, 2002; Berry et al., 1989; Dona & Berry, 1994), while much less work has been done testing how the model might apply to international students studying in the United States. Our first hypothesis held that students in the Integration category would report lower levels of acculturative stress than those in the Separation and Marginalization categories. Our findings suggest that this is the case for international students, as has similarly been found with other acculturating groups. Our second hypothesis held that broad based social support, particularly including host nationals, would be associated with lower levels of acculturative stress. This was also confirmed and findings suggest that those with the lowest levels of social support reported statistically significant higher levels of acculturative stress. Lastly, our third hypothesis held that acculturation modes would be associated with specific sources of support; Assimilation with host nationals, Separation with home country, Integration with host nationals, other international students, and home country, and Marginalization with none. This was only partially confirmed, with our findings suggesting that both the Assimilation and Integration modes were associated with higher levels of support from host nationals and that Integration was associated with higher levels of support from other international students. No significant relationships were found with regards to home country support.

International students undergo a wide range of changes as they transition to life and studies in the United States. Although there is a growing body of research on acculturating groups and acculturative stress, questions are starting to be raised about the applicability of this research with international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). This study identified one notable difference with the comparatively large number of students with a Marginalization acculturation mode. Previous studies have generally found the Marginalization mode to be rarely endorsed (Ataca & Berry, 2002; Bektas, Demir, & Bowden, 2009; Dona & Berry, 1994). This new finding could be accounted for by the different experience of being an international student, compared with being a member of an immigrant group. Relevant factors may include that international students are granted temporary visas, struggle...
with isolation and distance from family and friends, and are under considerable pressure to perform well in a new and demanding academic and cultural environment (Constantine et al., 2004; Misra et al., 2003; Olaniran, 1993). Furthermore, taking into consideration that no statistically significant differences of acculturative stress with regard to different demographic considerations like age, gender, or level of study, implies that as a whole international students have similar levels of difficulty as they are confront with the challenge of studying in the United States. These characteristics suggest that international students experience the process of adapting to life in the U.S. differently from immigrant groups, particularly with regards to the higher rates of marginalization and levels of acculturative stress that were reported.

As previous studies have found with other acculturating groups, the current study found that acculturative stress was associated with both the acculturation mode and level of social support. Consistent with those studies, the participants who were categorized in the Integration and Assimilation modes reported lower levels of acculturative stress. These results suggest that intentionally developing connections to the host country and having higher levels of social support from host nationals are important aspects in minimizing acculturative stress. It is interesting to note that the level of support from host nationals was the one source of social support that differentiated among the four acculturation modes. This implies that a higher level of contact with host nationals is related not only to the acculturation modes but also related to lower levels of acculturative stress.

The finding that participants in the Integration mode were associated with the lowest levels of acculturative stress implies that a cultural adaptation approach incorporating aspects of both the home and host culture is associated with lower levels of acculturative stress. It seems that maintaining connection to the home culture while exploring and developing positive connections to the host culture leads to a decrease in difficulties in cultural adaptation. Additionally, the results indicate that a wider social network, extending beyond both co-nationals and host nationals to include other international students as well, is similarly beneficial in adapting to studying in the United States.

Home country support and an emphasis on maintaining ties to the home culture were not found to be beneficially associated with adapting to studies in the United States. Several studies have identified the tendency of international students to have a large cohort of home country friends (Brown, 2009; Neri & Ville, 2008). These groups were found to emphasize maintaining connection to the home country, which in turn led to a corresponding lack of English language skills and knowledge about the host culture. As these studies have alluded, having primary social connections based in the home country seems to prevent the establishment of stronger ties and adaptability in the host country environment. Extending these considerations, Hendrickson, Rosen, and Aune (2011) found a positive association between host country friendships and increased levels of satisfaction, contentment, and social connectedness, while at the same time diminishing homesickness. Consistent with these findings, emphasizing the development of host country rather than home country social support is an important part of decreasing acculturative stress and encouraging successful adaptation to living and studying in the United States.

As with any research study, several limitations arose that need to be taken into consideration. The study sample was limited due to a low response rate, although this is frequently a difficulty with research with international students (Constantine et al., 2004; Kagan & Cohen, 1990; Poyzrali et al., 2004). The issue of English language ability is always a concern with international populations and raises the question in this particular study as to whether or not participants’ language skills are adequate to initiate and maintain significant interpersonal relationships in English. This could skew the distribution of acculturation modes toward the Separation or even Marginalization modes, as well as be associated with increased levels of acculturative stress. These are both important considerations, as well as the challenges of using self-report instruments that could skew study results. Unfortunately these are common concerns in studies involving international students in general.

Moving beyond these limitations will involve additional research into how international students define and develop their connections to the home and host culture. Additional studies could be utilized to gain more insight into the challenges international students face with regards to developing new cultural connections on U.S. campuses while still maintaining connections back home. Quantitative
studies could be used to identify whether or not there are specific areas or aspects of the host culture with which they identify or which might prove to be a basis for greater integration, while qualitative studies could explore the process of balancing the two cultural identities. Further information would also be useful identifying the challenges international students encounter in making more significant social connections with host students.

Somewhat surprisingly, there were not found to be significant statistical differences among different groups of international students. Further studies could be focused on identifying how differences such as academic level, regional origin, and field of study might fit into the experience of acculturative stress and acculturation mode. Lastly, the surprising presence of so many students with a Marginalization mode merits further investigation, in order to ascertain whether this is a generalized difficulty among international students to fit into the host culture or a reflection of the campus where the present study took place.

**Implications for Practice**

Results of this study point counselors in several different directions in their efforts to be of assistance to international students. In particular, addressing difficulties associated with acculturative stress can be done by helping students: (a) develop more diverse social networks; (b) adapt to local academic norms and expectations; and (c) develop additional ties and connections to the campus and local community.

Encouraging international students to expand their social network beyond students from their countries of origin may help to limit the negative effects of acculturative stress. This is a considerable challenge for international students who come to campuses with large numbers of fellow students from the same country. Although students may find it comforting and easier to make friends and connections with people from the same country, developing social ties with a more diverse group of students is important in adapting to studies and life in the United States. Counselors can assist with this process when counseling international students by actively encouraging the development of wider social networks involving a broader range of nationalities. This may entail assisting students with developing additional social skills and providing guidance on making friends in a U.S. context, as well as giving information about how to meet other people on campus not only in the classroom but also through campus organizations and activities.

Counselors need to be aware of the importance of acculturative stress and the unique challenges this presents to international students. As has been demonstrated in the studies on acculturative stress for international students, academic pressures are an important aspect counselors need to take into consideration. The demand that international students quickly begin thriving in a new academic culture with new expectations is clearly difficult and a major source of stress. Working with students to identify and clarify these expectations can assist with minimizing some of the uncertainty and academic stress. In addition to the organizational, social, and coping skills all university students need, international students can benefit from exploring how these skills can be adapted while taking into account their cultural background and expectations (Sharkin, 2006). Faculty can be included in these efforts by making classroom and academic expectations more clear through class discussions and course information as well as by promoting an open and accepting classroom environment in order to embrace the benefits international student diversity brings to campus.

Lastly, the results of this study indicate that many international students struggle with isolation and marginalization. Counselors can assist their clients to address social alienation by helping students to be more engaged and to be active members of the campus and larger community. An important aspect of this will be to identify campus and community groups and organizations where students are more likely to encounter host national students. Student affairs personnel and international student advisors can assist by developing programs that emphasize opportunities for cross-cultural contact by developing student mentor programs to engage a broad range of students in welcoming international students to campus, as well as building additional partnerships through host friend and family programs.
in the local community. Campus efforts could also be made to involve domestic students in order to facilitate contact through on-campus host friend programs, conversation circles, or clubs that directly promote contact between U.S. students and international students. Counselors can also assist international students to identify relevant community organizations and encourage exploring community resources.

Faced with a wide array of challenges and difficulties, international students can benefit greatly from the support and assistance college campuses can provide. Counselors can play a valuable role in assisting students by identifying areas of difficulty as well as developing additional strategies for adapting to a new academic and cultural environment. By helping to promote a more welcoming and inclusive campus and community environment, the entire campus community can work together to be an important resource in assisting international students to have a positive and productive stay in the United States.

References


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International Graduate Students’ Academic Writing Practices in Malaysia: Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract
This article focuses on the challenges faced by non-native English speaking international graduate students in their academic writing practices while they studied at a university in Malaysia as well as the solutions they employed when faced with the challenges. Academic Literacies Questionnaire was used to collect data. Based on 131 participants, the findings indicate that non-native English speaking international graduate students faced challenges in their academic writing practices in the instructional settings where English was used as a medium. In addition, the results revealed that some challenges those students face were mainly attributable to the fact that English in Malaysia is not the native or first language. This study suggests policies and programmes to meet the unique academic writing background needs of these students and ensure their academic success.

Keywords: international graduate students, academic writing practices, challenges, solutions

South East Asian countries, such as Malaysia and Singapore where English is the second language, are increasingly attracting foreign students (Crewe, 2004; Reinties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet & Kommers, 2012). There is a wide gap in research pertaining to the academic literacy practices in South East Asian countries including Malaysia (Crewe, 2004; Reinties, et al, 2012).

In Malaysia, international graduate students, especially from the Middle East countries, contribute as one of the largest blocks of students (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). The increasing number of international students studying in Malaysia has brought linguistic, educational and cultural diversity (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). Kaur (2000) discovered that stakes are high in the taught Master programmes that international graduate students are enrolled in. These Master programmes comprise coursework or mixed mode programmes that require students to attend lectures, participate in tutorials and fulfill various academic literacies demands. The learning in these Master programmes in the university is facilitated through classroom lectures, tutorials, seminars, individual project work, industrial or business placement, problem-solving classes, group projects, research dissertation or discussion groups.

Majority of the non-native English speaking international graduate students enrolled in the Master programmes at the higher education institutions in Malaysia have exposure to academic literacies from their previously gained formal education in their native countries. This attribute crucially impacts the challenges related to the academic literacies when they come to Malaysia to further their study. Furthermore, the use of English as the medium of instruction for majority of the Master programmes caused more academic adjustment problems for the students (Kaur, 2000).
In Malaysia, these students qualify to further their study at graduate level based on their English language qualifications such as the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS) results and academic qualifications such as their cumulative grade point average of their previous degree. However, they are still unable to grasp the new and different academic expectations in their academic writing practices as well as adapt to appropriate academic demands of their academic writing as mentioned in academic studies (Kaur & Shakila, 2007; Sidhu & Kaur, 2009).

However, much of the research on academic writing practices of non-native English speaking international graduate students is confined on students studying in the English as first language environment, such as in the Anglo Saxon countries. Therefore, the underlying motivation of this research study was to explore the academic writing practices of the non-native English speaking international graduate students in Malaysia, where English is the second language.

**Review of Related Literature**

**Academic Writing Practices**

Writing in a discipline requires a complete, active, struggling engagement with the facts and principles of a discipline (Rose, 1985). According to Arkoudis and Tran (2007), academic writing as a form of thinking is fundamental for academic success of the international students. Hyland (2007) also highlighted that as a form of thinking especially in tertiary literacy, students’ ability in sustaining arguments and synthesizing ideas to write in English for academic purposes is crucial for academic success.

Hence, writing in the tertiary level disciplines often poses challenges for international students. For example, students who are non-native speakers of English are often reported to have difficulties with grammar, lexis and syntax (Rose, 1985). These difficulties are worsened when faced with the challenges of the rhetoric of academic English, way of organizing ideas, defending claims, and addressing readers (Belcher, 1994).

In addition, Paltridge (2002) asserted that thesis writing is a difficult process especially for English as a Second Language students because they possess limited language proficiency for critical thinking, genre knowledge and social knowledge. Consequently, the greatest challenge with producing written text is language errors which create negative impressions (Loewy & Vogt, 2000).

**Academic Writing Practices among International Graduate Students**

Studying in an English instructional environment exposes the international graduate students to the complexity of discipline-specific, graduate level literacy requirement. Non-native English speaking students face challenges particularly in meeting the rigors of discipline-based writing (Bronson, 2004). Leki’s (2007) suggested that all the lecturers she interviewed reported that learning to write well was a burden because of its extensive writing requirement. As Brown (2008) discusses, the international graduate students’ difficulties in adjusting to academic writing were not only due to language barriers in terms of vocabulary and grammar, but also due to the inadequate understanding of academic writing standards and expectations from the lectures and institution.

Two studies (Casanave, 1995; Angelova & Riazantsewa, 1999) explored students who were successful in educational settings in their home cultures but struggled to satisfy the literacy demands of their new environments. Angelova and Riazantsewa’s (1999) findings showed their respondents wrote and thought in ways that were outside of the dominant practices of their discourse community. This resulted in problems with topic selection, register, audience, organization, grammar and purpose. The results highlight the ways ESL students learn to write in their home cultures and that the writing expectations of English-speaking discourse communities were different.

Studies showed that international graduate students in Malaysian universities struggled in reading and writing practices which are the thrust of academic literacies (Kaur & Shakila, 2007; Kaur & Sidhu, 2009). Ibrahim and Nambiar (2011) identified that the students’ experiences at their home country where they obtained their first degree (bachelor’s degree) did not prepare them for the rigors of
a writing project in their present university located in a foreign country. The respondents in their study claimed that there were differences in teaching and learning styles between the higher education institution in Malaysia and their home countries and they were not prepared for the autonomy presented in the process of writing up their academic papers. In addition, the respondents cited that cross-cultural limitations stemming from differences in teaching and learning styles within Malaysian postsecondary institutions and their home countries inhibits academic writing (Ibrahim & Nambiar, 2011).

**Research Method**

This paper draws on material from a completed PhD study on academic literacies challenges among international graduate students in Malaysia (Manjet, 2013). The site of the research is one of the higher education institutions in Malaysia that offers various undergraduate and graduate programs (research, coursework and mixed mode) with an enrolment of more than 20,000 local and international students. The institution has graduate students from more than 50 countries all over the world.

This quantitative study utilized purposive sampling with the aim of selecting all eligible respondents who could provide accurate and reliable information regarding the research problem (Teddlie & Yu, 2007; 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The criteria for inclusion of international graduate students in the study are as follow: (a) respondents have to be full-time international master students in the coursework or mixed mode Master programmes; (b) they have to be in their second semester or later; and (c) they have to be a student of the Arts, Hybrid or Science schools at the research site university.

![Conceptual Framework of the Study](image)

Selected items from the Academic Literacies Questionnaire were used to collect data for this study (Chang, 2006; Evans & Green, 2007). The two sections of the questionnaire that were utilized for this research were “Challenges Faced in Academic Writing Practices” (20 items) and “Overcoming the Challenges in Academic Writing Practices” (6 items). The respondents were asked to assess the difficulty level of the challenges in academic writing practices on a scale from 1 (very difficult) to 4 (very easy).
Data was obtained from the university’s Institute of Postgraduate Study. There were 203 international graduate students registered in the 13 coursework and 11 mixed mode Master programmes offered in the 10 schools comprising three Arts (Social Sciences, Humanities and Communication), two Hybrid (Education and Housing, Building and Planning) and five Sciences (Chemical Sciences, Physics, Pharmacy, Computer Sciences, Mathematics) for the Semester Two (Academic Session 2011/2012). Only 131 respondents in the age range of 20 to 47 years voluntarily participated in the study and completed the questionnaire.

Reliability Test

A pilot study was administered to a small sample (n = 21). The Cronbach’s Alpha reliability coefficient values indicate relatively high internal consistency with higher values than the minimum accepted value of 0.70 (Pallant, 2010). The result of the pilot study indicated high internal consistency reliability with the alpha coefficient of .822. The Cronbach’s Alpha value of the 20 items of challenges in academic writing practices in the actual questionnaire administered was .903. The study has set a mean of 2.5 or above to indicate some degree of ease in the academic writing practices challenge in the ALQ based on the items selected from the previous research study by Evans and Green (2007).

Figure 1 provides the conceptual framework of the study. The dependent variable is academic writing practices that are influenced by the challenges faced by international graduate students and solutions employed to overcome the challenges in their academic writing practices in the coursework or mixed mode Master programmes in the Arts, Hybrid and Sciences schools at the research site university.

Results

The majority of the students were from the Middle East countries (64.4%). Iran has the highest number of respondents (26.5%), followed by Iraq (14.4%), Palestine (6.8%), Libya (6.1%), Yemen (3.8%), Jordan (3.0%), Saudi Arabia (2.3%) and Egypt (0.8%). The respondents from other Asian and African countries account for 35.6%. Slightly less than half of the respondents (49.6%) were from the five schools in the Sciences. This was followed by 29.0% of the respondents from two Hybrid schools and 21.4% of the respondents from three Arts schools. The mean age of the respondents was 28.1 years.

Figure 2. Nationality of the Respondents
The primary language used for lecture purposes during the first-degree was English language (39.4%). Persian language was used by 21.2% respondents from the Middle East countries. 12.9% of the respondents used Arabic language. The language that was most frequently used for discussion with lecturers was English language (34.8%). The respondents from the Middle East countries also preferred to use Arabic (18.2%) and Persian (21.2%) for discussions. On the other hand, the respondents from China used a combination of English and Chinese or only Chinese language (6.1%).

Likewise, English language (46.2%) was the most frequently used for reading material purposes. A little over nineteen percent of the respondents from the Middle East countries used Persian language. About 10% of the respondents used Arabic and only 7.6% of the respondents from China read in English. English language was the main language used for writing task by majority of the respondents (43.2%), secondly, Persian (19.7%), Arabic (10.6%) and Chinese language (6.8%).

### Challenges in Academic Writing Practices

Sixty-seven respondents from the coursework and 64 respondents from the mixed mode Master programs used a Likert scale ranging from one (‘very difficult’) to four (‘very easy’) to assess the degree of difficulty they experienced in the 20 items on academic writing practices in the questionnaire. Scale one (very difficult) and scale two (difficult) were combined, while scale three (easy) and scale four (very easy) are also combined for reporting purposes. Table 3 summarizes the respondents' evaluation on the difficulty level of the academic writing practices.

#### Table 1

**Challenges in Academic Writing Practices**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges in Academic Writing Practices</th>
<th>1(%)</th>
<th>2(%)</th>
<th>3(%)</th>
<th>4(%)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using appropriate academic style</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing methodology section</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing findings/analysis section</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing coherent paragraphs</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing ideas clearly/logically</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing ideas in correct English</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesizing information/ideas</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>2.30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing literature review</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing discussion section</td>
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<td>52.3</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>2.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarizing/paraphrasing</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proof-reading written assignments</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>2.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning writing assignments</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>2.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linking sentences smoothly</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>2.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing abstracts</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>2.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revising written work</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>2.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing introductions</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>2.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referring to sources</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing conclusion</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>2.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing recommendation section</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>2.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing references/bibliography</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>2.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scale: 1 = Very Difficult, 2 = Difficult, 3 = Easy, 4 = Very Easy

Writing methodology section, writing findings/analysis section, using appropriate academic style, writing literature review, writing coherent paragraphs and expressing ideas in correct English are ranked as the six top challenges in academic writing practices (mean range from 2.18 to 2.25). The respondents
rated writing introductions, referring to sources, writing conclusion, writing recommendation section and writing references/bibliography as easy and very easy.

The data in Table 1 indicates that writing using appropriate academic style is very difficult (6.1%) and difficult (66.7%) for the respondents. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents reported writing methodology section and writing findings/analysis section as having the same level of difficulty with very difficult and difficult. More than 50% of the respondents indicated each of the following academic writing practices as very difficult and difficult: writing coherent paragraphs, expressing ideas clearly/logically, expressing ideas in correct English, synthesizing information/ideas, writing literature review, writing discussion section, summarizing/paraphrasing, proof-reading written assignments, planning writing assignments, linking sentences smoothly, writing abstracts and revising written work.

More than 50% of the respondents indicated each of the following challenges in academic writing practices as easy and very easy: writing introductions, referring to sources, writing conclusion, writing recommendation section and writing references/bibliography. A little over sixty three percent of the respondents reported writing bibliographies/references as easy and very easy. In addition, slightly more than half (59.8%) of the respondents reported writing recommendation section as easy and very easy.

Mann-Whitney U test, a non-parametric test for two independent samples carried out to compare the difficulty level of the academic writing practices between the coursework and mixed mode respondents revealed a significant difference in the difficulty level of writing abstracts, summarizing/paraphrasing, planning writing assignments and synthesizing information/ideas. The test revealed a significant difference in the difficulty of writing abstracts between the coursework and mixed mode respondents (Z = 2.221, p = .026) with writing abstracts being more difficult for the coursework respondents (mean = 70.99) compared to the mixed mode respondents (mean = 58.32).

The Mann-Whitney U Test also revealed a significant difference in the difficulty of summarizing/paraphrasing between the coursework and mixed mode respondents (Z = 2.175, p = .030) with summarizing/paraphrasing being more difficult for the coursework respondents (mean = 70.44) compared to the mixed mode respondents (mean = 58.18). The test also revealed a significant difference in the difficulty of planning writing assignments between the coursework and mixed mode respondents (Z = 2.487, p = .013) with planning writing assignment being more difficult for the coursework respondents (mean = 71.43) compared to the mixed mode respondents (mean = 57.35). Lastly, the Mann-Whitney U Test revealed a significant difference in the difficulty of synthesizing information/ideas between the coursework and mixed mode respondents (Z = 2.007, p = .045) with synthesizing information/ideas being more difficult for the coursework respondents (mean = 69.33) compared to the mixed mode respondents (mean = 58.41).

Kruskal-Wallis Test, a non-parametric test of four scales carried out to compare the difficulty level of the academic writing practices among the respondents in the Arts, Hybrid and Sciences schools revealed a significant difference in the difficulty level of writing abstracts and writing methodology section. The test revealed a significant difference in writing abstracts among the respondents in the Arts, Hybrid and Sciences (Chi-Square (H) (2) = 11.619, p = .003) with writing abstracts being the most difficult academic writing practice for the respondents in the Arts (mean = 79.23) compared to those in the Hybrid (mean = 70.86). Writing abstract is the easiest academic writing practice for the respondents in the Sciences (mean = 54.89). The test also revealed a significant difference in writing the methodology section among the respondents in the Arts, Hybrid and Sciences (Chi-Square (H) (2) = 6.164, p = .046) with writing the methodology section as the most difficult academic writing practice for the respondents in the Hybrid (mean = 72.93) compared to the respondents in the Sciences (mean = 65.92). Writing methodology section is the easiest academic writing practice for the respondents in the Arts (mean = 52.16).

Overcoming the Challenges in Academic Writing Practices

Table 2 shows the frequency count of the six solutions employed by the respondents to overcome the challenges in their academic writing practices. Based on frequency count, the findings
indicate the most crucial solution employed by the respondents is “Be persistent and try to express yourself in different ways” (56.8%). This is followed by “Discuss with the lecturer to get information on how to approach assignments” (50.8%) and “Seek help from other classmates, for example checking the writing in English” (41.7%). The least popular solutions among the respondents are “Use editors to edit my work” (22.0%) and “Write in my first language and then translate it into English” (23.5%).

### Table 2

**Overcoming the Challenges in Academic Writing Practices**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overcoming the Challenges in Academic Writing Practices</th>
<th>YES (%)</th>
<th>NO (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Be persistent and try to express yourself in different ways</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>43.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take additional writing course</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>63.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write in my first language and then translate it into English</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>76.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss with the lecturer to get information on how to approach assignments</td>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use editors to edit my work</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>78.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek help from other classmates, for example checking the writing in English</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>58.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mann-Whitney U test, a non-parametric test for two independent samples carried out to compare the solutions employed by the coursework and mixed mode respondents to overcome the challenges in academic writing practices revealed significant difference in two solutions employed to overcome the challenges in academic writing practices. The solutions are persistence and trying to express oneself in different ways and taking additional writing courses. It revealed a significant difference in being persistent and trying to express oneself in different ways (Z= 1.974, p=.048) as the more employed solution by the mixed mode respondents (mean = 72.31) compared to the coursework respondents (mean of 61.03). The test also revealed a significant difference in taking additional writing courses between the coursework and mixed mode respondents (Z=2.066, p=0.039) with taking additional writing courses as the more employed solution by the mixed mode respondents (mean = 72.41) compared to the coursework respondents (mean= 60.94).

**Overcoming the Challenges in Academic Writing Practices (Open-ended Responses)**

The data provided by the respondents in the open-ended response question section of the questionnaire, which describe the solutions employed to overcome the challenges in academic writing practices, indicates many ways were employed by the respondents to overcome the challenges in their academic writing practices. Responses given by the respondents ranged from seeking help from seniors about the conventions of academic writing, using the Google Translator to help in their writing process, and using an English language dictionary. The respondents also referred to the internet as a source for websites that provide information on the academic and dissertation writing techniques.

Most importantly, the respondents learned assignments, reports, essays and dissertation writing techniques. The most frequently employed solutions were preparing multiple drafts of assignments, revising the drafts, preparing a final draft, and, to a certain extent, integrating lecturers’ feedback if available. External assistance, such as access to internet to use the Google Translator to translate their written work from their first language into English, further reading on the subject, getting comments from the seniors on their work and improving their language skills, helped the respondents to overcome the challenges in their academic writing practices. The respondents also took the initiative to consult their lecturers on how to approach their assignments. Seeking advice and guidance from lecturers was identified as crucial in contemplating to write assignments.
Discussion

The notion of academic writing practices the students bring from their prior academic learning background differs from the similar notion and socialization in the current Master’s community of practice. Their writing, which is affected by previous learning patterns, does not help them to quickly grasp the new and different academic expectations in graduate programmes. Research indicates that to become accustomed to an unfamiliar culture, a new education system, and navigating these differences in a foreign language or second language (Andrade, 2008; Campbell & Li, 2008; Wong, 2004) is a lengthy process.

The results of this study indicate that international graduate students found writing the literature review, methodology and findings/analysis sections, using appropriate academic style, writing coherent paragraphs and expressing ideas in correct English as very difficult compared to writing introduction, recommendation, conclusion, references/bibliography sections and referring to sources. The results also indicate that writing abstracts, summarizing/paraphrasing, planning writing assignments and synthesizing information/ideas as more difficult for the coursework students compared to the mixed mode students. In addition, Arts’ students found writing abstracts as the most difficult compared to Hybrid and Sciences students. Writing the methodology section was indicated as the most difficult by the students in Hybrid compared to students from other two categories of schools and it is the easiest academic writing practice for the students from the Arts.

Overall, this study found that it was more difficult for international graduate students, especially those from the Middle East, Africa, East Asia and South Asia countries to make the necessary adjustment to study for their Master programmes in English language. Most of them lacked English language exposure in their first-degree to prepare them for their graduate study in English. According to Ringbom (1987) and Odlin (1989), a justification for this challenge is the language distance between their first and second language or third language has an effect on the amount of transfer that can take place between languages. Ringbom elaborated that Arabic speakers consume longer time to acquire English vocabulary because transfer from third languages seems to depend very much on relative language distance. Therefore, it is difficult for them to learn English language and use in their academic writing.

The most crucial solution employed to overcome the challenges in academic writing practices is being persistent and trying to express oneself in different ways. The less popular solutions employed are using the editors to edit their work and writing in their first language and then translating into English. The result also indicated that being persistent and trying to express oneself in different ways and taking additional writing courses were the more employed solutions by mixed mode students compared to the coursework students. The students in this study also used their own practices and complemented with the practices they learned from the lecturers and seniors.

When the respondents are confronted by academic challenges such as writing a research paper, there is likelihood that the absence or lack of the ‘correct’ understanding of the academic culture might lead the respondents to apply their earlier held assumptions, values, beliefs and approaches that had given them stability, consistency and meaning (Schein, 2004). The lecturers often fail to recognize the complexity of language issues confronting foreign students, particularly those issues associated with writing. They do not provide writing samples that demonstrate the academic writing genres (e.g. research proposal, literature review, article critique) and are unable to reduce the challenges in the academic writing practices for the students who are new to academic writing in a particular discipline (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992).

The findings of this study strongly advocate that although the international graduate students are qualified as competent users of the language based on the language requirement (TOEFL, IELTS, or its equivalent) set by the university, they still faced academic literacy challenges in main areas such as academic writing. Therefore, their English language qualifications are not the true indicator of their English language proficiency.

Therefore, this study suggests three recommendations to help international graduate students face the challenges in their academic writing practices. First, is the formation of a Learning Support Centre
for the benefit of the students and the internationalization agenda of the research site university. The one-stop academic centre should support the university in the improvement of the students’ academic writing experience as the academic fraternity at the research site university is the best academic discourse community to reinforce the important route of academic socialization to the inexperienced international graduate students in becoming legitimate members of the Master students’ community.

Currently, there is lack of enforcement on the English language entry requirement by either the individual schools or the Institute of Postgraduate Studies at the research site university. Secondly, this study recommends that the university strictly adheres to the English language requirement policy. Subsequently, the university should not be dependent on the standardized English language requirement across the board for all taught Master programmes. A previous study such as Alco’s (2008) has found IELTS and TOEFL not to be consistently reliable indicators of language ability in the academic setting. There should be future possibility of designing and implementing a more effective in-house standardized English language placement test to evaluate students’ English language proficiency and determine their suitability for linguistically and non-linguistically demanding Master programmes that require different levels of English language proficiency.

Lastly, in order to facilitate the development of effective learning to enable the students to become skilled writers within the graduate education environment, the university should enhance teaching and learning through trans-disciplinary collaboration between content and language specialists’ lecturers which is currently under-utilized in Malaysia. Lecturers from both areas should cross the boundaries of their discipline, collaborate and become familiar with a wide range of disciplines. The expertise integration of both area lecturers is viable to create integrative language and content instruction courses that focus on specific discourses within the discipline to bring about an optimum exposure of the academic writing expectations to students.

Conclusion

This study has revealed how international Master programmes graduate students who come from different academic literacy backgrounds and differ from the present institutionally accepted codes and conventions faced the challenges in their academic writing practices and empowered solutions to overcome the challenges. The findings present only a small part of a much larger picture of the academic endeavor especially the academic writing experience of the students within a broader context of their past and present cultural, linguistic and educational experiences. Nevertheless, the findings have given us insights from their perspective on how they face the challenges in their academic writing practices and employ necessary steps in overcoming those challenges. The findings provide an avenue for a more expansive understanding of academic writing that recognizes value in linguistic and cultural diversity of international graduate students in target English language discourse communities.

The study also reaffirms the idea that “an understanding of literacy requires detailed, in-depth accounts of actual practice in different cultural settings” (Street, 1993, p. 430) and the situatedness of academic literacies are multiple, changing and different from one academic context to another which reflects the Academic Literacies Model (Lea & Street, 2000). Moreover, the higher education industry of Malaysia, which is on a serious quest to upgrade its education system to international standards and join the global ranking as provider of tertiary education for the international society, should consider the recommendations provided in this study to ensure a positive learning experience for international students. Improvement in their educational experience has the potential to create a positive reputation for the higher education institutions in Malaysia especially the research site university. Therefore, implementing the recommendations will be a step towards advancing international higher education environment within the research site university and assisting in the attainment of one of the ultimate aims of the internationalization agenda that is to turn the country into a centre of excellence for higher education.
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Flipping the Script in Study Abroad Participation: The Influence of Popular Culture and Social Networks

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Abstract

This study explores primary perceptions of and motivations to study abroad for adult and higher education learners. A large Hispanic-serving Southwestern university serves as the context of this study where undergraduate students and one graduate student were enrolled in an Italian urbanism study abroad program. The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 47, with six males and 11 females (N = 17) for an average age of 25. Participants self-identified as Caucasian (35%), Asian (6%), Latino/a (24%), Middle-Eastern (6%), and Mexican-American (52) %. Semi-structured interviews assessed formative and influential messages impacting perceptions of and motivations to study abroad. Findings lend special importance to popular culture, peer networks within and outside the institution and socially constructed meaning made about study abroad. Limitations of this study are highlighted, along with implications and directions for future research.

Keywords: study abroad; flip the script; higher education; adult higher education (AHE) learner

Study abroad and international education sit at the forefront of recent conversation in academia as continued interest in the global economy evolves, and more value is placed on international learning for college students. Prevalent themes in research attending to study abroad participation focus on (a) social, (b) institutional, (c) academic, (d) personal, and (e) financial reasons that explain participation in international programs (BailyShea, 2009; Miller, 2004; Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009; Stroud, 2010). However, much of this research fails to explain why participation across diverse groups (including males, non-Caucasian students, and community college students) is unequal (BailyShea, 2009; Brux & Fry, 2010; Stroud, 2010).

This qualitative research study is unique to the history of efforts measuring study abroad participation using quantitative methods. Fairly homogenous efforts to understand and encourage study abroad participation create need for novel research that ‘flips the script,’ or breaks away from the pervasive patterns. Thus, this research incorporates scholarship concerned with study abroad participation including new interdisciplinary literature, adult education theory, and learner-centered approaches. Roberts, Bell and Murphy (2008) refer to ‘flipping the script’ as taking antiquated perspectives to generate new understandings and insights. Applying this lens to study abroad not only encourages new understandings about perceptions of and motivations to participate in study abroad courses, but also offers advocates/international educators meaningful ways to transform the 3% (mostly
female Caucasian) U.S. national average participation rate and encourage study abroad for AHE learners (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2013).

**Review of Related Literature**

Perceptions of and motivations to study abroad with special attention to sociocultural influences are the main focus of the review of literature. The previously mentioned categories of influence (social, institutional, academic, personal, and financial factors) offer insight into study abroad participation and have traditionally employed quantitative methods to students who are in their first and second year of study at the university (BailyShea, 2009; Stroud, 2010). However, the literature rarely offers insight into individual issues of participation inequality (Stroud, 2010). Perhaps one reason is that previous research concerned with study abroad participation has mainly been conducted at large public universities and included a majority of Caucasian females in the learners’ first year or two years of study (BailyShea, 2009; Miller, 2004; Peterson, 2003; Salisbury et al, 2009; Stroud, 2010). As a result, the contexts, procedures, and samples across the literature are not diverse and do not assess the full range of students reflected in the general landscape of higher education (Burr, 2005). Brux and Fry’s (2010) use of focus groups revealed that students’ internalized meaning about study abroad is based on interactions with peers, family, and friends, as well as their access to social and cultural capital. Perceptions about course credit, cost, and peers’ experiences all factor into a student’s decision to participate in a study abroad course. Additional research suggests that peer networks (Dolby, 2004; Paus & Robinson, 2008) and the academic institution (Paus & Robinson, 2008; Salisbury et al., 2009) also influence perception formation about studying abroad.

Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, and Pascarella’s (2009) influential research posited that the intention to study abroad is multi-faceted and influenced by social and cultural capital. Cultural capital can be related to a family’s ethnic background and includes knowledge related to culture, proficiencies in language, educational level, and knowledge gained regarding education (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital refers to an individual’s “access to information, resources and support, acquired through participation, or interactions with others who participate, in social networks or structures” (Salisbury et al., 2009, p. 123). According to Bourdieu (1986), both cultural and social capital can be used to overcome socio-economic obstacles in the attainment of education. As well, the decision to participate in educational opportunities is not just a financial issue; instead participation must be evaluated in terms of an individual’s perceptions, knowledge, and ability to navigate information related to that opportunity. As such, Salisbury et al.’s (2009) research suggests that individuals negotiate a range of influences related to financial concerns, interest, social mobility, and cultural exposure when making the decision to participate in study abroad programs. Further, authors contended, “the process of deciding whether or not to study abroad is virtually identical to the process described by college choice theory” (Salisbury et al., 2009, p. 123), which makes broad (and perhaps questionable) assumptions that students make choices about whether to study in a foreign locale, for long or short term periods, as the same process they use in deciding which college to attend for four years or more. Since Salisbury et al.’s research does not identify the actual messages and sources of social and cultural capital bearing influence on a diverse sample of AHE learners’ perceptions of and motivations to participate in a study abroad course, we believe there may be more nuanced understandings about these decision-making processes to be gained.

**Individual Perceptions and Motivations**

*Perception* is “a student’s localized interpretation,” that is individually framed from a first-person perspective in order to determine how a student thinks and makes meaning about study abroad courses (Walker, Bukenya, & Thomas, 2010, p. 3). *Motivations* are reasons why a student expresses desire to study abroad. The literature on the topic of study abroad participation reveals social and cultural influences from an array of interacting/intermediating factors that shape perceptions of and motivations to study abroad. In an overview of these influences, financial, gender, cultural background,
institutional, personal, and academic considerations are at the forefront of conversations (BailyShea, 2009; Brux & Fry, 2010; Burr, 2005; Stroud, 2010).

Reinhart and Gruzweig (2002) found that students often perceived studying abroad as a novel and unique experience specific to learning about the language and culture of their destination, and Dolby (2004) noted that Caucasian female students believed study abroad experiences would offer fun opportunities to socialize and see new sites. However, globalization and internationalization of higher education has exponentially increased interest in study abroad programs and widened the scope of course options and learning opportunities (Varghese, 2008). In fact, in 2012, less than 6% of U.S. students abroad took courses within the field of foreign languages (IIE, 2013). Currently, the most common fields of study/courses available in study abroad programs include those for students in the social sciences, business management, humanities, fine or applied arts and physical life sciences (IIE, 2013).

Indeed, the face and context of study abroad and international education itself may be changing. Grunzweig and Rinehart (2002) contend that perceptions of studying abroad may be shifting to include a break from the “familiar pervasive effects of global, economic, social, and technological homogenization” (p. 25). Engle and Engle (2002) suggested homogenization is evident with “cybercafés in every neighborhood, Disneyland an easy trip, the swoosh (Nike) everywhere you look…a Gap on the corner and golden arches in lieu of produce fresh from the countryside” (p. 25). It may be true that fading borders and increased mobility are fueling the business of study abroad creating new trends and perceptions about international education experiences (Varghese, 2008).

Yet, research indicates that students who do not participate still often perceive study abroad as reserved for the wealthy elite (Jackson, 2005; Simon & Ainsworth, 2012; Walker et al., 2010). Unfortunately, much of the literature fails to explain the individual perceptions or motivations of the few non-Caucasian and male students who do enroll in study abroad programs (Brux & Fry, 2010; Dolby, 2004; Stroud, 2010). As such, we believe literature on popular culture as pedagogy offers new ways to consider participation choices which may be based on how international education and study abroad are portrayed in media, television, films, tourism marketing, and/or popular culture portrayals of study abroad.

Including New Scripts: Popular Culture and Self-directed Learning

Cultural theorists, media scholars, historians, critical theorists, and adult educators do not unanimously agree on a single definition of popular culture (Parker, 2011), but Parker suggested, “popular culture is like pornography—in, oh, so many ways: we may not be able to define it, but we know it when we see it” (2011; p. 147). Tisdell and Thompson (2007) define popular culture as “entertainment media, which serve(s) as a medium for knowledge construction about [one’s] own and others’ identities” (p. 652). Indeed, what we hear and see in our daily lives is accessed through popular culture outlets like television, film, Internet, books, music, etc. Westgate (2010) discussed that popular culture serves as evidence of “commercial goods and services of the media industries,” but conversely, it also emerges from the interests and issues of “the people, rather than the commercial establishment” (p. 1). Collectively, researchers recognize that the images and messages from popular culture are widely accessed tools used in perception formation (Giroux, 2012; Parker, 2011; Tisdell & Thompson; 2007; Westgate, 2010).

Giroux (1991) considered popular culture as pedagogy through his analysis of the United Colors of Benetton apparel marketing campaign. His findings concluded that company slogans and marketing campaigns cultivated a ‘fad label’ on multicultural appreciation and encouraged consumers to equate buying Benetton’s apparel with celebrating diversity and social equity. Catch phrases like “Diversity is good…your culture (whoever you are) is as important as our culture (whoever we are)”, promote inclusion through purchasing clothes (United Colors Catalog, Fall-Winter, 1991). Giroux (2012) contended that popular culture messages and narrative themes could mold values, morals, attitudes, and conscience dramatically impacting a social perception of ability, opportunity, and sense of responsibility.
Recognizing popular culture as pedagogy led us to consider the vast spectrum of messages that potentially shape and mold perceptions of and motivations to study abroad for AHE learners. Researchers indicate that popular culture, like movies, television, Internet, magazines, and books, contains possible sources contributing to perception formation and ultimate motivation for continued learning and participation (Giroux, 2012; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007; Storey, 2009). Giroux (2004) explained that media serves as an “expansive teaching machine” designated to “rewrite public memory and offer people an increasingly privatized and commercialized notion of citizenship” (p. 68). Giroux’s (2004, 2012) position implies active perception formation happens every time an individual encounters media. Further, he contends that not only do people use media as a way to construct their identities, media is also used to affirm those identities over time (2012). However, the potential places and spaces where perceptions are formed about study abroad through popular culture is limited in the research.

We do know that popular culture portrayals of study abroad may promote identification for affluent Caucasian females, but they can alienate minority students and males (Jackson, 2005). Jackson’s findings explained that minority students often lack models in terms of characters in media in general, as well as in their immediate social contexts within the academic institution. As well, the messages and narratives within much of popular culture do not encourage associations between characters, plot, experiences and overall life situations for minority students. As such, Jackson (2005) offered an alternative perspective and possible reasons based in the messages of popular culture to explain disparities in participation in study abroad.

The significance of media influence [is apparent] by listing a number of movies that depict the study abroad or travel abroad experiences of young Caucasian women: *Sabrina* (1954), *Gidget Goes to Rome* (1963), *The Lizzie McGuire Movie* (2003), and the Mary-Kate and Ashley movies. Similar movies featuring minority students and students of color are almost impossible to find. As a result of both historical exclusion and media influence… a “not for people like me” syndrome; minority students don’t think of study abroad as right for them and they then filter out or ignore information about study abroad (p. 1).

Unfortunately, Burr (2005) found that many minority students felt studying abroad was not something that applied to their lives or identities. And in 2012, Simon and Ainsworth’s participants reported that “Black people just don’t engage in that kind of stuff. We’re kind of like, that’s a white thing to study abroad” (p. 11). Finally, since study abroad participation is typically limited to affluent Caucasian females, minority students often do not have access to ethnic/cultural peers within their institutions who have studied abroad who can act as models of that experience. As a result, minority student participation in study abroad programs continues to go “unnoticed and unaddressed in academia” (p. 9).

Finally, as popular cultural messages both about identity and studying abroad influence many students’ educational choices, we posit the relevance of the adult education theory of self-directed learning. Self-direction, according to Malcolm Knowles (1975) refers to a process “…in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes” (p. 18). For example, Lee’s (2011) research found that students who studied abroad often fostered sources of self-directedness including the ability to make plans, take initiatives, make commitments, and assess their own progress. Individuals who commit to participating in study abroad programs likewise may need to engage in a complex process involving self-questioning and reflection, educational planning and goal-setting, risk-taking, and completing scholarship and funding applications.
Research Method

To investigate individual frames of study abroad from the students’ perspectives, we believed a focus should be placed on the sociocultural influences at play when students make the decision to participate in such a learning experience. As such, our approach included interdisciplinary inquiry, which encourages using “the resources of highest value” pertinent to the individual when investigating complex phenomena (Lindeman, 1961, p. 6).

In this research, we were interested in ascertaining the sources of social and cultural capital that AHE learners who had chosen to participate in a study abroad course accessed via popular culture and their social networks, and the distinctive messages that contributed to their perceptions of and motivations to enroll in the course. We hoped that identifying these sociocultural influences on perception and motivation formation (the antecedents to their enrollment choices) would serve to broaden the existing scope of what we currently understand about study abroad participation. Ultimately, it is difficult to isolate the total sum of cultural and social influences for any one individual and to identify how all of these influences contributed to perceptions of and motivations to participate in study abroad.

We ascribe to and utilized Vygotsky’s (1962) sociocultural learning theory as the investigative framework through which to conduct the study. Like Vygotsky, we believe that individuals co-construct knowledge in their own minds and together with the world in which they live. Sociocultural learning acknowledges human consciousness as the self-regulatory means required for problem-solving. These processes include planning, attention, logical memory, and evaluation (Lantolf & Appel, 1994). We utilize sociocultural theory in the current research to help us to explain how individuals make meaning and learn about their own world through social interaction – through symbolic and concrete activity – connecting humans with other humans and humans with their physical and representational worlds.

We conducted an exploratory investigation about what influenced diverse AHE learners’ motivations and perceptions of study abroad programs at a minority-serving institution. Specifically, our research questions included: (1) what particular messages served to underpin participants’ perspectives about what study abroad is?, (2) what roles did popular culture play in forming these perceptions? And, (3) what role did popular culture serve as an informal learning source?

Table 1
Participant Demographic Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Self-Identified Ethnicity</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pat</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Asian (Vietnamese)</td>
<td>International Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mexican-American</td>
<td>Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candace</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Business Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Business Management</td>
</tr>
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<td>Meagan</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mexican-American</td>
<td>International Business</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<td>Robin</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Business Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Middle-Eastern (Arab)</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Mexican-American</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Participants

Previous research investigations have mostly been limited to large research universities with predominantly Caucasian students. Thus, this research pushed to include a more inclusive view that involved students who had registered to participate in a study abroad program and who self-identified within multiple races/ethnicities, gender, and age. Participants were enrolled in a large, urban, Hispanic-serving institution where 51% of the undergraduate students are 23 years or older, and 64% of the undergraduate students identify as a non-White minority (UTSA website, 2012). Participants were primarily undergraduate students, as well as one graduate student, enrolled in an Italian urbanism course for a short-term summer study abroad program lasting approximately 3.5 weeks. Ages of the participants ranged from 20 to 47, with six males and 11 females (N = 17) for an average age of 25. Participants were from a variety of majors including education, business, art, psychology, engineering, and accounting. Participants self-identified as Caucasian (35%), Asian (6%), Latino/a (24%), Middle-Eastern (6%), and Mexican-American (52%). Table 1 shows participants’ pseudonym and corresponding demographic information.

Data Collection

Students who were enrolled in the 2011 summer course received an email invitation to participate in the study. Those who were interested in participating in the research were briefed as to the purpose of the study and were informed that no identifying information would be linked between them and their interviews. Interviews took place in the three months preceding the course. Seventeen semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following nine questions aimed at helping to identify the symbolic and concrete interactions that influenced their perceptions of and motivations to engage in a study abroad program:

1. What made you decide to study abroad?
2. When you think about study abroad, what particular messages in popular culture (television, movies for example) help to illustrate what it means to study abroad?
3. What sources of information have added to your knowledge of study abroad in general, and what sources of information have added to your knowledge of the destination that you are preparing to travel to (Italy) [for the purposes of study abroad]
4. Share what you know about the culture and people of the country that you will be visiting including knowledge both outside and inside the classroom
5. What is your own perception of study abroad with reference to popular culture?
6. What do you hope to get out of the study abroad experience?

Participants were encouraged to share their stories and personal feelings about each of the topics. Interviews lasted 30 minutes to 1.5 hours and were audio-recorded. Interviews were then transcribed and sent out for participants’ review as a member check.

Data Analysis and Findings

Recorded interviews were transcribed and comprised 62 single-spaced pages of data for analysis. Individual transcripts were coded and analyzed for emergent themes using the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A coding schema was created in order to facilitate the constant comparative technique “to group answers…to the common questions [and] analyze different perspectives on central issues” (Patton, 1990, p. 376). Afterwards, cross-case analysis was employed systematically to take an individual interview and compare it to other interviews in order to assess the convergence and divergence across the data set (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Additional categories and overarching themes then emerged from the cross-case analysis.

Participants reported using social networks and popular culture to learn more about study abroad in their learning choices. Further, participants indicated popular culture and social network sources may have also increased their motivation to embark on a particular study abroad experience.
Self-direction and Study Abroad Participation Choices

While an array of responses was offered about motivations, every participant reported an implicit desire to learn and identified aspects of self-direction in their educational journeys. Studying abroad in another country became a way to satisfy the participants’ interest in learning experientially about another country and in developing intercultural knowledge. Students demonstrated self-directed qualities in identifying a study abroad experience that could increase their employability or create opportunities for advancement/promotion in their careers. Pat noted:

…to see how they do business and, ya’ know, grasp Europe as opposed to America …and I think that it has always been really important for me to have that perspective, and I think that it will have tremendous value when I go back into the work force.

Other participants echoed similar feelings about how studying abroad offered international travel experiences and exposure to international perspectives that might otherwise not be possible for them. They were concerned that they had deficits in their own intercultural awareness, and they felt studying abroad would help to address these issues. John shared:

Knowing about cultures is always good in the business sense aspect. As a participant in study abroad it makes it easier to interact and makes you more qualified for jobs, especially since most companies are going global…its not just the United States.

Responses indicated that students had preconceived notions about personal and professional benefits of a study abroad experience. As such, these participants took charge of their own learning by identifying a specific course, engaging in the lengthy application and enrollment process for participation, and researching their own financial supports and possible university funding sources.

FIGURE 1. Illustration of how the concepts and codes work together to inform AHE learners’ perceptions and motivations to engage in a short term study abroad program.
Motivations: Should I Stay or Should I Go Now?

Participants also indicated that their motives to enroll in the study abroad program were influenced by learning they could financially afford to enroll, by the encouragement of peers, and by a need for escape. Of the 17 participants, 14 reported that funding was a significant factor contributing to his/her ability to commit to the study abroad course in Italy. Linda shared, “I heard that scholarships were available this summer and not a lot of people had applied…so this might actually be my chance to go!” Sally, Tania and Erica suggested that study abroad had seemed unattainable because they, themselves, were not “rich.” Sally commented, “International travel is really glamorous. They always tell you what celebrities have vacations houses where, ya know… not necessarily why I wanted to go, but [the cost] would influence my decision.” Sally and other learners revealed perceptions that study abroad was very costly and not available to “just anyone.” Students who get to participate are usually “well off” or are part of the wealthy elite. So, finding funding sources and researching other ways to afford the program became important in their ultimate choices to participate.

Having peers who studied abroad before, and/or instructors with study abroad experience were sources that aided in de-mystifying the possibility and the process. Kate shared the advice a friend offered, “I went up [to the study abroad office] after she convinced me to do this …”. This particular participant noted that her friend both encouraged her and gave her details about scholarship information about which she had not previously known despite having expressed interest and done research about study abroad on her own. Interactions within social networks became especially important in that these conversations helped learners to overcome beliefs that study abroad was “too expensive” or simply “not for me.” Six of the participants suggested that having someone in their social network offer information about study abroad not only motivated them, but this information also changed the way that they had previously perceived study abroad participation. For these participants, real or perceived perceptions about study abroad discouraged a desire and ultimate motivation to study abroad. However, because these perceptions were modified through specific conversations with a friend, family member, and/or faculty member, students could re-frame their perceptions and were more motivated to participate after the social interactions.

Finally, participants indicated they were motivated to study abroad because of the promise of escape from personal, professional or academic stress. Monica commented, “I guess it’s just that I have never done anything on my own before, and I just want to be able to escape from this every day and be able to make my own decisions.” Sally and other participants similarly shared that taking a break from the “everyday” and going on a “new adventure” where there were no “everyday worries,” and “having fun” was important for them to commit to this particular study abroad course. John and other participants’ responses regarding motivation stemmed from the perception that study abroad would offer “different experiences from the everyday life in the United States.”

Perceptions: Fun, Fantasy, Food, and Fashion!

A connection between respondents’ motivations to “escape” and “have fun” can be made with some of the perceptions participants had of study abroad. When asked to share their perceptions of study abroad in general, and on the specific destination (Italy), George and other participants shared that study abroad would be interactive and “fun with friends.” Tom extended, “yeah, when I think of study abroad I definitely think of having a good time somewhere else.” Further, Sally, Kate, Tom and John noted general impressions about study abroad revealing associations made between “greenery,” “forests,” “historical landscape,” “nature,” “architecture,” and “exploration.” Female participants like Tania, Martha and Megan described the study abroad experience in terms of learning about the history of the country and destination itself, which they believed to be “beautiful,” “magical,” and “magnificent.”

Participants often indicated their perceptions about the foreign locale were elicited from movies they had seen. For example, respondents mentioned movies and television shows like Under the Tuscan Sun, Gladiator, Letters to Juliet, Romeo and Juliet, When in Rome, The Godfather, The Sopranos, and Princess Grace of Monaco provoked romanticized imagery that helped construct their perceptions of what the study abroad experience might be like. For example, Candace explained, “Movies like Under
the Tuscan Sun portray it as a very kind of romantic place... where like dreams can happen and stuff like that.” Findings revealed that many of the female participants readily identified with romantic themes present in Italian movies about “love” and “fairytale.” Based on Tisdell and Thompson’s (2007) research, these identifications are made possible because female participants often connect with storyline, plots, and dilemmas of the characters present in much of these popular portrayals. Male participants’ identifications with popular culture were also found, yet they manifested somewhat differently from those of the female participants. The Godfather, The Sopranos, and other popular culture references to the prevalent Italian Mafia storyline were noted indicating a connection with a more mysterious and action-oriented perception of Italy and the Italian culture.

Additionally, participants alluded to public portrayals of Italian culture from across a variety of media may have indirectly influenced their perceptions of study abroad in Italy. Richard suggested, “Well I know that they dress well, and they are fashionable, and I think it would just be cool to be a part of that culture.” Students’ responses revealed that popular culture messages, at least in some part, influenced how their perceptions of the foreign locale were formed.

Self-Directed Learning and Study Abroad: “I Saw It on The Travel Channel!”

New insights suggest participants accessed a wide range of informal learning resources like social networks and popular culture when they made meaning about participation in a study abroad course. Not only were participants actively forming general perceptions about international travel, but they were also forming perceptions about the specific culture, people, and values of that culture. George, Candace, and Kate indicated having a limited knowledge base about Italian culture and people. They suggested that The Travel Channel was an important informational resource they used to learn about foreign locales and peoples. Others additionally cited MTV’s Road Rules, The History Channel, The Food Network and other popular network programming as influential sources of learning. John and Tom also discussed the ways these television shows provided insight about daily interactions and details relevant to Italian culture that they had not previously known. Participants also identified images of historical tourist attractions from the popular television programming they consumed. Robin shared: “Michelangelo, all the Da Vinci stuff is there...it is cool to see it on like The Travel Channel or The Discovery Channel, but to actually see it, that is just another thing.”

The Travel Channel and The Discovery Channel programming piqued their interest and attracted them to the study abroad course in Italy. Further, Pamela and other students indicated that getting to see things that they had only seen on television or in the movies was a “once in a lifetime opportunity” of which they needed to take advantage.

Discussion and Implications

Social networks and popular culture created avenues of understanding for participants to identify and construct meaning about participation in a study abroad experience. It is clear that the participants exhibited adult learner qualities in self-directing their own learning – through research, planning, and use of resources like popular culture and social networks to make sense of and navigate their own participation in a study abroad opportunity. Their learning resources were stories and testimonies from peers, faculty, family, and friends, as well as narratives within popular television and movies. These resources helped to persuade AHE learners to socially construct and modify their thinking about what study abroad may mean for their own personal, professional, and academic lives.

Study Abroad Participants as Self-Directed Adult Learners

Findings from this study suggest that higher education students who study abroad can be characterized as making adult learning decisions; they are self-directed, intentional, and motivated to engage in learning experiences that directly connect with their own personal and professional development (Knowles, 1975). As such, framing study abroad within adult education theory and practice on self-directedness creates new opportunities to consider recruitment, marketing, course
offerings, instructional formats, and assessment for international education. It is possible that current discussions surrounding study abroad, in terms of awareness and even perceptions, are framed in a way that exclude the kind of adult learner that is most likely to engage in this type of learning. Dolby (2004) indicates a vast majority of students are simply motivated by meeting new people and engaging in novel experiences. Although many of our participants included these same motivations, this study found that diverse study abroad participants were additionally motivated by the promise of deeper and more complex life learning that could take place while studying abroad. Generating messages about study abroad that align with the goals of self-directed adult learners (personal growth through enhanced perspectives, economic security, and long term professional marketability) through the institutional and public sphere could expand thinking and meaning made about study abroad.

Interconnectivity of Perceptions and Motivations

Research in the last decade has identified various social influences on perceptions of and motivation to participate in study abroad programming (Booker, 2001; Miller, 2004; Peterson, 2003). However, the message exchanges within students’ social interactions are largely missing from research concerned with study abroad participation. Social network messages influenced both perceptions of and motivations to participate in study abroad for learners in this study. Participants who never thought about studying abroad, because of real or perceived monetary restrictions, reported accessing social networks as a source of information.

This research also illuminates a new side to study abroad participation with reference to perception and motivation in education. Firstly, research presented here investigates motivation and perception as two separate entities. However, through an analysis of these findings, the two concepts appear to have a great deal of interdependence. Data from this study not only reveal perceptions are formed through popular culture, but also perception itself contributes to the desire for students to want to study abroad (motivation). This finding additionally supports the notion that popular culture can be a powerful resource for learners when they make meaning about study abroad. Further, public messages serve as a resource motivating students to engage in a particular study abroad experience based on the type of popular culture they consume. For learners in this study, popular culture showcasing Italian life and peoples/characters was a mediating motivator to encourage participation in this short term study abroad to Italy.

Adult and higher education learners, who believed study abroad was not very accessible and reserved for the wealthy, mentioned popular culture in perception formation. While students did not reference a specific medium or message within popular culture, most noted how frequently their understanding of study abroad came from resources like *MTV’s Road Rules*, *The Travel Channel*, *The Discovery Channel* and *The History Channel*, as well as their personal social networks. Findings indicate that although students began with the perception that studying abroad may be too expensive, their social networks provided a personally tailored source of information on possibilities for participation regardless of economic class, and thus, were powerful in motivating students to participate in study abroad.

Social Net Worth of the Social Network

Further, social network support influenced both perception and motivation. Social networks included members from the familial, peer, and institutional (instructors, faculty or staff at the university) networks. Each of these resources served as a medium of social interaction that contributed to the students’ motivation to participate in a study abroad program. Participants acknowledged they were more motivated to study abroad once they knew about and had access to interactions with someone who had experienced it first-hand. Students who lack peers, family members and instructors to encourage or offer similar stories and experiences may miss out on vital resources of social and cultural capital regarding study abroad.

Literature advocating social network benefits in higher education suggests social support strategies that sustain the preparation and success of all students are critical to improving academic
achievement, raising expectations, and increasing college-going rates of underserved students” (Pathwaystocollege.net, 2012, p. 1). Underscoring the importance of various peer networks may encourage participation for students who do not perceive studying abroad as accessible or conceivable. Despite scholarships reserved for study abroad participation, learners are sometimes unaware and uninformed about financial support that is available to them. Our research reveals that encouragement and motivation from learners’ social networks may offer resources about information that could otherwise be overlooked. Oftentimes students are encouraged to consult an institutionally centralized office or center (i.e. office of international programs, study abroad office, centers for learning abroad, departments in charge of the course abroad) to learn more about any given study abroad course or scholarship opportunity. However, changing the emphasis from institutional formal offices to informal conversations within social networks could breakdown surface perceptions and initial obstacles a learner is likely to encounter. Stressing the importance of informal resources that learner should access, like conversations with peers, family members, and faculty who have first-hand knowledge about a particular course abroad/program, may also encourage study abroad participation across historically underrepresented students who may have typically dismissed it as an option.

**Popular Culture as Pedagogy**

Participants indicated that travelling abroad and studying abroad are synonymous in offering opportunities to see notable destinations and tour popular sites with friends to enjoy novel and exciting experiences. Shows like *MTV’s Road Rules*, *The Travel Channel*, *The Discovery Channel* and *The History Channel* were resources participants credited when offering general impressions about studying abroad. Nearly 75% of the participants suggested perception formation was, in part, influenced by popular culture (television, movie, travel books, or internet, or other mass media outlets). Further, specific places and spaces where students’ knowledge about study abroad is constructed were identified using specific television networks and television shows. These connections occurred in different ways for both males and females indicating messages about Italian culture, and study abroad in general, may be internalized uniquely, and thus, impact perceptions and motivations in individual ways. Tisdell and Thompson (2007) explain:

> Whether or not we consciously think about it, the entertainment media teach us something about ourselves as we map new meaning onto our own experience based on what we see; it also ‘teaches’ us a lot about ‘others’, often in unconscious ways. (p. 1)

Likewise, this study’s findings indicate today’s entertainment media can teach viewers about places and peoples unknown, while it also offers pathways of motivation for higher education students to learn more about study abroad programs and perhaps perceive themselves as international students.

Data yielded in this study lend strength to Tisdell and Thompson’s (2007) suggestions in that students personally negotiated their study abroad experience based on themes, stories, and representations from popular culture. Because the data reveal an interconnection between perceptions/motivations of study abroad and popular culture, it also becomes important to note that these perceptions and motivations could be subject to change over time as popular culture messages change. This is especially paramount when considering the fact that primarily females study abroad (Dolby, 2004). In our research, many of the females identified personally with some part of the romantic fairytale plot lines evident in popular culture about Italy, which provided them at least partial impetus, both in perception and motivation, to enroll in their study abroad programs. Personal identifications with characters and story within popular culture, while present in both males and females, emerged differently, however. The males in the current study identified with the adventure storylines or single characters that helped shape their perceptions of the country, but they did not designate how these identifications influenced their motivations to study abroad specifically.
Implications for Practice

Perception formation and influence of perceptions on participation in study abroad programs are largely devalued and underestimated in the research literature. The power of perception plays a primary function in meaning made about study abroad for AHE learners. Responding to lower participation rates across the US means developing strategies and tactics that address this issue. The current study proposes interconnections between perceptions of and motivations to study abroad with popular culture and a diverse set of learners’ social networks with peers, family, and the institution. Two suggestions are offered to provide academic institutions, proponents, and facilitators of study abroad programs strategies to encourage equitable participation for AHE learners.

First, a refocusing of efforts to encourage study abroad participation that leverages how AHE and minority learners make sense of study abroad is imperative. This research indicates resources influencing student perceptions are accessed within the higher education institution, conversations with peers, and certain popular culture programming. Thus, a synthesized resource creating spaces for dialogue fueled by specific popular culture message(s) could create a forum for discussion where students are able to get practical information about academic credit, costs, logistics, and resources to facilitate participation. For example, universities across the US host biannual, monthly or even weekly ‘movie nights.’ Rice University’s “Starlight Movie Night,” for example, advertises free snacks and drinks to encourage socializing and community while showing a film on their outdoor screen (Events at Rice, 2008). At an event of this nature, all three resources of influence (peer networks, institutional networks, and popular culture) come together simultaneously. To be explicit in creating positive perceptions about international education opportunities, popular culture screenings with characters that are identifiable by ALL students (not just Caucasian females) coupled with information and conversation about a specific study abroad program could prove effective in generating interest and motives to study abroad. Popular culture serves as a conductor to the conversation in an already social environment, and being selective about the media that is shown could make all the difference for students who have never considered studying abroad as an option.

Second and more generally, study abroad fairs are commonly used as a tool for creating awareness and advertising about specific study abroad programs. These often do not create a space to ‘just talk’ about the experience of study abroad. These also can be pressurized with a pitch that is meant to ‘sell’ the course as a commodity or good rather than an objective discussion about best-fit, goals, academics, costs, and logistics. Capitalizing on strategic marketing and recruitment with specific attention to information and resources students are already accessing, like their own social networks and narratives within popular culture, creates opportunities that are not obligatory and maximizes chances for diverse AHE learners to create positive connections/identifications about participating in study abroad programs. These events could offer prospective participants the opportunity to talk faculty who have studied abroad or facilitated international programs in previous years. As well, event coordinators could provide testimonies/narratives from previous study abroad participants, including those from typically under-represented groups (minority groups, males, community college students, non-traditionally aged students, or students with disabilities) to generate a non-pressurized environment to seek information and confront any negative perceptions that may have deterred participation in the past. Third-party facilitators, universities, and faculty who honorably desire to flip the script to encourage equitable study abroad participation must meet challenges head on. A purposeful and novel re-writing of the stories/narratives/messages that AHE learners encounter can occur only when calculated and meaningful efforts are put forth.

Future Research

While this research identifies some of the explicit messages from the media and social networks, research is warranted in identifying additional messages from popular culture and their collective influence on study abroad participation. Peer, familial, and institutional networks function in dynamic ways and offer a wealth of information, but a comparison among social network messages could also
reveal which specific messages from each of these networks offer the most influence. Further studies are needed to continue to identify the implications of these messages for minority students, adult students, and males who are largely underrepresented in the research.

Minority presence and research context add novelty to previous investigations concerned with study abroad participation, but focus groups comprised of only male participants in one and only females in another may offer future research nuances not possible within the one-on-one semi-structured interview. In order to gauge effectively socially-constructed knowledge, it is often useful to create a space where social interaction is natural and authentic. One-on-one interviews may lack a degree of social interaction and could limit what may be uncovered in the research.

When considering popular culture, media agendas, and the collective influence on perceptions and motivations, the question becomes: who is selling what? A content analysis of recent popular culture movies and television from the inception of thinking about study abroad may also aid in identifying perception formation and ultimate motivations. Analyses may then illuminate what particular messages in popular culture are more influential and what meaning is made from those messages. Not only are content analyses valuable for perception formation in general, but they could also serve as an essential piece in identifying what sorts of learners - (non)traditional, minority, female, or male - identify with which characters and what story lines. Additionally, the same could be argued for social networks. Pinpointing the specific agents within the various social networks (peer, institutional, familial) could reveal who most influences students’ motives and ideas about participating in a study abroad experience. Future research should also include programs and participants who choose to study abroad in non-Western cultures to identify the ways in which social networks and popular media influence their perceptions of and motivations to engage in international education programs. Equally important will be studies that investigate the ways in which males and females are influenced/motivated by certain messages within those contexts.

There is still much to uncover about how AHE learners make meaning about and become motivated to study abroad. Socio-cultural learning theory reinforces that meaning made about study abroad is continuously modified and shaped based on an individual’s social interactions with others and popular culture. Thus, meaning about study abroad participation will always be subject to change and evolve over time for the learner. In order to meet challenges in continually low participation rates across AHE in the US, more individual, qualitative, learner-centered approaches should be incorporated into the seminal literature related to study abroad participation. We believe that research that focuses on socially-constructed perceptions of and motivations to study abroad in more breadth and depth holds promise to continue to flip the script and transform participation rates for AHE learners in the US.

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Promoting Critical Thinking through an Interdisciplinary Study Abroad Program

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Abstract

This paper discusses the promotion of critical thinking through an interdisciplinary curriculum design using multidisciplinary faculty as well as details the implementation of an experiential short-term study abroad program in China. To achieve this educational goal of critical thinking, along with meeting the requirements specific to each course, the program was built on a framework using two interrelated approaches – theme-based interdisciplinary curriculum and cultural immersion. The theme-based interdisciplinary curriculum was constructed on three principles (the ability to pose great questions that encompassed drawing knowledge and skills from each discipline, acquiring global awareness, and developing glocal awareness). Cultural immersion was accomplished through carefully selected site visits, activities, and assignments. Students’ experiences, reflections, and applications were assessed through formative and summative evaluation.

Keywords: Critical thinking; study abroad; interdisciplinary curriculum; cultural immersion

Critical thinking is a subject of much discussion and debate in higher education (Petress, 2004). It is highly desirable for employment in the current marketplace. Casserly (2012) identifies critical thinking skills as one of the top ten most in-demand skills for employment in 2013 and found critical thinking as required for nine out of the ten most in-demand jobs. Critical thinking is the process that leads to improvement in the quality of one’s thinking by the thinker skillfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them (Paul & Elder, 1999). Critical thinking is, “in short, self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking, which requires rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use” (Paul & Elder, 1999, p. 2).

The research on critical thinking in higher education can be broadly categorized into two areas: i) perceived need for a consistent and precise definition; and ii) pedagogical approaches used to promote critical thinking (Lloyd & Bahr, 2010). The latter is accomplished either through standalone courses or integrated into preexisting courses that are part of general academic programs. While there is much debate about what constitutes critical thinking, it is often thought of as having three components involving a person’s knowledge, attitude, and skills. The combination of rigorous academic coursework combined with a carefully crafted study abroad experience with clear objectives can enhance critical thinking through global understanding, cultural competency, and intellectual development.
There are at least two approaches, multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary, to promote critical thinking skills among learners. The multidisciplinary approach emphasizes teaching across more than two subject areas or disciplines. It helps learners to make connections among disciplines and empowers them to address issues where a single disciplinary perspective may not provide feasible and effective solutions (Longa & Yost, 2007). In contrast, Rowntree (1982, p. 135) defined interdisciplinary approach as “one in which two or more disciplines are brought together, preferably in such a way that the disciplines interact with one another and have some effect on one another’s perspectives.” Ivanitskaya et al. (2002, p. 108) stated that the teaching and learning for this approach “focuses on the methodologies, interpretive tools, and language of several disciplines on a central problem, issue, or theme.”

The purpose of this paper is three-fold: i) to explain the promotion of critical thinking through an interdisciplinary curriculum design using multidisciplinary faculty and multicultural perspectives; ii) to describe the implementation of an experiential study abroad program in China to promote critical thinking; and iii) to provide a framework to promote critical thinking through an interdisciplinary approach in a study abroad program.

Review of Related Literature

The number of students from the United States, who are studying overseas increased to 283,332 in 2012 from 273,996 in 2011, an increase of 3.4 percent (International Institute of Education [IIE], 2013). However, critical questions about the value of study abroad programs continue to rise (Salisbury, 2012). The Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program (2005) noted study abroad programs as an important step towards creating a more globally informed American citizenry, many of whom are our future leaders with the ability to shape policies both within and outside the United States. Such engagement with other cultures outside the United States is key to understanding globalization and to be effective proponents of glocalization that is understood as “providing a global offer (brand, idea, product, service, etc.) while taking local related issues into account” (Luigi & Simona, 2010, p. 159). In recognizing various benefits that may accrue to students learning through study abroad programs, Steinberg (2007) identifies one as the understanding and appreciation of the world and one’s place in it. This is exemplified by reflecting on one’s own and other cultures and developing perspectives on the role of politics and the arts in shaping the human condition.

One of the concepts that is often discussed in the educational arena and receives a lot of attention in the context of study abroad programs is globalization. According to Stiglitz (2002), globalization is the closer integration of the countries and peoples across the globe, facilitated through reduced costs of transportation and communication, resulting in the breaking down of artificial boundaries that limit the flow of goods, services, resources, knowledge, and people. The forces of change constituting globalization are evident in every facet of life and is articulated by Friedman in his book, The world is flat (2006). Friedman (2006) addresses the importance of culture in glocalization as to how much a culture is both outward and inward. Moreover, the ability of the culture to absorb new ideas and global best practices and blends those with its own traditions nurtured through centuries is critical for glocalization (Friedman, 2006). Thus, students in modern times have to become proficient in understanding the process of globalization, and yet have the openness of understanding different perspectives, and readiness to utilize some of the principles and practices of other cultures. Such an ongoing effort in their educational journey is facilitated by experiences that immerse them in cultures different from their own allowing for their understanding the world through a horizontal rather than a vertical perspective.

Educators are urged to be models of the empathetic and integrative thinking and help students develop a sympathetic stance (Gardner, 2008). This could be done by providing models and offering lessons that lay the foundation for students to understand and respect differences. Study abroad programs, in addition to disciplinary content, also bring learners into new cultures wherein physical, cultural, and educational adaptations become necessary (Smith & Kruse, 2009). The key then is to have
a curriculum that connects with foundational skills, forms of knowledge and methods of inquiry, and with the world. Through exploring big global questions that call for integration of knowledge, skills, and personal and social responsibility, students could develop capacity for global citizenship or engagement (Hovland, 2010). Study abroad programs help in the development of intercultural skills and a sense of world-mindedness (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006).

Kolb (1981) provides a learning model to facilitate a continuum of the learning cycle that fits well study abroad programs with strong experiential components integrated into them. The educational curricula, according to him, should provide learning experiences that move the learner through different phases – one that begins with concrete experiences, supported by observations and reflections that then help their formation of abstract concepts and generalizations, which in turn allows for them to test the implications of the learned concepts in new situations. Six characteristics of experiential learning, as espoused by Kolb (1984), include: i) learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes; ii) all learning is re-learning; iii) learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to with world; iv) learning is a holistic process of adaptation; v) learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment; vi) learning is the process of creating knowledge (see Passarelli & Kolb, 2012; In Berg, Page, & Lou, 2012).

Both instructional methods and interdisciplinary curriculum are fundamental to reaching the student learning goals in study abroad programs (Jones, 2010). Ivanitskaya et al. (2002, p. 97) mention that multidisciplinary learning “refers to the involvement of several different professional areas, though not necessarily in an integrated manner.” However, there is a need for interdisciplinary studies that go beyond multidisciplinary studies (Repko, 2008).

An interdisciplinary study is also identified “as a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline or profession” (Klein & Newell, 1997, p. 393). It “draws on disciplinary perspectives and integrates their insights through construction of a more comprehensive perspective” (Klein & Newell, 1997, p. 394). The key is on the principle of integration which is something multidisciplinary studies do not have as a goal. Repko (2008) identifies “in the context of interdisciplinarity, integration is a process by which ideas, data and information, methods, tools, concepts, and/or theories from two or more disciplines are synthesized, connected, or blended” (p. 4). Klein and Newell (1977) had earlier identified the strength of interdisciplinary studies as its ability to address a topic that is too broad or complex to be adequately dealt with by a single discipline. They indicate that multiple perspectives and insights from different disciplines are integrated through construction of a more comprehensive perspective. Jones (2010) reiterates that methodology is the key to interdisciplinary success and points out that neither the domain of subject material or textbooks alone is sufficient to the success of interdisciplinary teaching and learning. The interdisciplinary techniques help the learner’s “lifelong learning habits, academic skills, and personal growth” besides helping him/her “learn any one single discipline or solve a problem in a synthesized manner” (Jones, 2010, p. 78)

Powerful learning outcomes are likely if every off-campus program, whether international or domestic, is built around specific learning goals. Well-structured pre-trip and post-trip learning experiences are important parts of study abroad program and the field trip must have linkage to these on-campus learning experiences (Musil, 2006; McLaughlin & Johnson, 2006). Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich (2002) identify the following ten key principles as guiding experiential pedagogy in study abroad programs: i) process and personal integration/development; ii) problem-based content; iii) critical analysis and reflection; iv) collaboration and dialogue; and v) community; vi) diversity and intercultural communication; vii) action and social transformation; viii) mutuality and reciprocity; ix) facilitation by trained faculty and staff; and x) evaluation and assessment. They further posit that formation of communities of learners, their immersion in the host country community, and aided by reflection of each learner to one’s own connections to the global community leads to education for global citizenship.

Combining students from different universities in a short-term study abroad program can further facilitate student learning by bringing together difference campus cultures to exchange in a new learning
Providing students course requirements and expectations at an early time can help students become aware of what is expected of them academically, promoting positive student interaction to help establishing friendship among them, and preparing students in advance with basic cultural information and customs. They also concluded “simply raising awareness on the part of students as to how the activities and processes involved in the study abroad program could help them better relate their experiences to qualities and skills that are typically valued by employers” (Mills et al., 2012, p. 961). Furthermore, students need opportunities to discuss their experiences and how the experiences might provide an opportunity for their professional career-related personal growth, how the experiences were structured, and how students learn affect their learning outcomes (Mills et al., 2012).

Curriculum design, pedagogical methods, and measurable goals are critical components of any educational program. Difficulty in measuring student learning outcomes, especially isolating the component of the program itself from other factors such as gender, language of the study abroad country, amount of cultural immersion, previous student international travel experience, and other factors, has been noted by McKeown (2009). A study by Zamasil-Vondrva (2005) examined students’ perceptions of their experiences to identify meaningful conclusions about the impact of short-term immersion study abroad programs. Results showed that through clear objective oriented and carefully designed study abroad programs, students were provided with opportunities to confront, accommodate, and assimilate new information and concepts into their existing body of knowledge. Students also are able to reflect on their experiences and learn to interpret their surroundings in a different manner.

Research Method

China as the venue for this experiential learning program was based on the need to: i) allow students to learn in a cultural setting that was more foreign to them; ii) expose them to a nation where English is not the native language; and iii) utilize the prior experience of all three program faculty with Chinese culture including multiple visits to the nation.

Participants (Student and Faculty)

A dozen students, three female and nine male, ten of whom were 19-22 years old, from two universities in the United States participated in this program. Students had diverse academic majors including political science, history, elementary education, public health, economics and environmental science and ranged from second to fourth year of study. The group included nine Caucasian (including one international student from Greece currently enrolled in an American university), two African American, and one Asian student. Except for one student, this was their first study abroad experience. Two students had taken an introductory course in Mandarin prior to their visit to China.

Three faculty members (from education, public health, and environmental health) collaboratively conducted the program, with each bringing his or her areas of disciplinary expertise. All faculty members had extensive prior international to different countries. Two faculty were born outside the U.S., and speak another language besides English. The third was a Fulbright scholar in Asia for one semester.

Program Design

The university has specified general education goals for all baccalaureate programs. One of them focuses on developing students’ critical thinking skills. To achieve this educational goal, along with meeting the requirements specific to each course, the program intentionally focused on two interrelated approaches: i) theme-based interdisciplinary curriculum, and ii) cultural immersion.

A conceptual framework of the theme-based interdisciplinary curriculum supported by a cultural immersion to promote critical thinking in this study abroad program is presented in Figure 1.

Theme based interdisciplinary curriculum: The program was designed as a six-credit undergraduate course integrating three existing general education courses (Global Perspectives, Transcultural Health, and Humans and Environment) available to majors from different disciplines. The Global Perspectives
course laid the foundation for the program by addressing issues in international relations, education, social, and economic systems, globalization, and global citizenship. Global viewpoints were integral to the other two courses as well to help students apply knowledge and skills developed to the content areas addressed in Global Perspectives. These were discussed in the context of culture, politics, health and environment, medical system, and social and economic development in China.

Three basic principles were used to choose study themes. These were: i) the ability to pose great questions (answers for which requires drawing knowledge and skills from each discipline); ii) acquiring global awareness (applying concepts skills in a global context), and iii) developing glocal awareness (understanding one’s own culture in depth within the global context). Based on these three principles, the three faculty after much thought and deliberation selected four themes – i) the impact of construction of a new dam; ii) the school system; iii) the role of a wastewater treatment plant; and iv) the integration of a traditional system of medicine with western medicine. These themes were deemed appropriate to meet content requirements of each course and its expected outcomes. They also were to help lay the foundation to develop connections among the disciplines and obtain a deeper understanding of the issues.

The cultural immersion: The Theme-based Interdisciplinary approach was supported by and operationalized through cultural immersion that included practical experiences, opportunities for reflection, and appropriate applications (see Table 1). The cultural immersion experiences, viz., site visits, activities, and assignments, were carefully chosen to enable students to raise and answer
questions that are of significance to local residents, facilitate students to explore issues in historical and
current social, political, and cultural context, and apply different perspectives, in understanding of the
issues in the context of multiple cultures, including their own.

These site visits provided an experiential learning related to the four themes cited earlier. They
added authenticity of the learning process and allowed students to draw connections among the three
disciplines. Additionally, visits to cultural and historical sites were included to stimulate students’
critical thinking.

Assessment: Assessment focused on student growth in cognitive and affective domains such as use
of the following skills: analyze specific disciplinary issues and develop inferences using multiple
perspectives in global and glocal contexts; understand and draw relationship among all three disciplines
in decision making process; develop an appreciation for diverse cultures; and adapt to different cultures
and develop an in-depth understanding of one’s own culture.

The formative evaluation guided making changes to content and instructional delivery based on
student needs. Such formative evaluation was through frequent conversation and contact between the
faculty and students, through face-to-face meetings, e-mail, and online discussions, and journal article
critiques.

The summative evaluation revealed what the participating students learned the content as studied
through interdisciplinary perspectives in a global context, developed cultural awareness and cultural
sensitivity, and enhanced their critical thinking skills. Summative evaluation was based on a written
report of students’ experiences, reflections, and application of lessons learned, submitted individually.
Both oral and written reports and the daily journals were to reflect on the course and the learning
process, as well as demonstrate their use of critical thinking skills. A final presentation to the class using
appropriate technology was also required.

Operationalizing the Curriculum

Pre-trip: The pre-trip study included disciplinary content, cultural learning, and reflections
operationalized through seminars, assigned readings, films, and video clips. Chinese philosophy, brief
history, fine arts, beliefs and customs, economic and political systems, educational system,
environmental issues, health care system including Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) were
introduced. Frequent correspondence and conversations between students and faculty, and formal and
informal meetings and interactions were encouraged and expected. Student learning was guided through
a variety of questions that integrated the three disciplines and related to the cultural immersion planned
for them.

During Trip: The visit itself focused on cultural immersion, problem-solving, critical thinking
skills, and application of disciplinary knowledge to issues in an authentic way. Students were expected
to interact with local experts, lay persons and participate in on-site discussion with their peers and
faculty about their observations and offer perspectives about the issues identified. Students were also
required to keep a daily journal to record and reflect on their experience and to read the local daily
English newspaper (available readily at their housing sites) to learn about issues from Chinese
perspective. Faculty purposefully used every “teachable moment” during the trip.

Post-Trip: Students presented a written final report of his or her experiences, reflections, lessons
learned and plans to share their experience with their family, friends and peers. Students made an oral
presentation using technology while reflecting on the course, the learning process, and the integration of
their cognitive, analytical, and critical thinking skills.

Result and Discussion

This section illustrates how the program operated in relation to one of the four selected themes,
integrative medicine. Figure -2 operationalizes the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 and
further explains how students’ critical thinking skills were further developed in understanding of TCM
through the study of disciplinary content within the cultural milieu. This process can be readily applied
to other themes as well within an interdisciplinary course.
Theme: Integrated Medicine

Theme-based Inter-disciplinary Approach

**Great questions:** How do you relate the philosophy of TCM to cultural beliefs and values about health and illness? How is the practice of TCM affected by urbanization and globalization as they relate to the physical and cultural environment? How would you construct a future scenario with various systems of medicine to effectively combat global health issues?

**Glocal awareness:** What do you perceive the value of alternative medicine for your own health? What do you foresee as the debate in adopting integrative medicine widely in the United States?

**Global awareness:** What other types of traditional health or medical care systems exist in the world today and what are the similarities and differences among them? How does the introduction and acceptance of western medicine influence the lives of Chinese people? What is the relationship between herbal medicine and living environment and how does this relationship reflect the TCM philosophy?

Cultural Immersion (site visits, activities, and assignments)

**Experiences:** Observe and interact with local residents about how they apply the philosophy of integrated medicine to their daily lives.

**Reflections:**

Site visits and activities: The TCMH and pharmacy, experiencing acupuncture, cupping, and medical massage, discussion seminar with experts (TCM practitioner), patient interview

Assignments: Critique articles; reflect on history of TCM and development of integrated medicine in China; document your experience regarding local residents’ reactions to the practice of TCM; comment on the role of “barefoot doctors” as providers of health care in China; develop a course report.

**Applications:** Reading assignments, discussions, and reflection on the following topics. Identify how the “barefoot doctors” concept as providers of health care could be suitably modified and adopted for training and placement of community health workers to deliver care

Assessment

**Formative assessment:** Journal article critique, daily travel journal, personal reflection/position paper, discussion group

**Summative assessment:** Final report

**Figure 2.** Example of Theme Development in the Curriculum Design Process
Students were informed of an upcoming visit to a Traditional Chinese Medicine Hospital (TCMH) in Beijing, during the program. They were expected to develop an understanding of the Chinese perspective of TCM and seek and draw parallels among western medicine and TCM. This included the historic role of ‘barefoot doctors,’ exploring reasons for each system’s popularity in the historical, political and cultural contexts of China and the US, and identifying the genesis of integrative medicine and its popularity globally. They were directed to particularly focus on similarities, differences, availability, acceptability, affordability, and effectiveness of TCM and western medicine.

During the visit, students were provided details about the hospital to provide them in-depth knowledge about its history, structure and functions to facilitate their understanding of the medical system in China. They were briefed on the diagnostic process and viewed certain treatment modalities such as acupuncture, medical massage, and herbal medicine. Students also observed and interviewed a patient receiving acupuncture for stroke. A student, who had pulled a muscle in the neck, voluntarily underwent a cupping procedure to relieve muscle stiffness. Several others volunteered to experience acupuncture and medical massage for problems with their back, neck or shoulder. Students were introduced by the clinicians to the concept of holistic medicine and the importance of attending to the needs of the person (i.e., mind, body, and spirit) versus the focus on treating the medical condition in western medicine. The visit to the herbal pharmacy at the hospital kindled a wide-ranging discussion on cultivation of herbs, climatic and other environmental conditions for their growth, and cultural traditions associated with their use. Sources of modern pharmaceutical agents, impact on ecology particularly in rain forests, stewardship of the planet, and corporate responsibility were some of the other issues addressed. Students also expressed surprise that the pharmacy prepares each dose for every patient by carefully measuring and mixing the appropriate herbs. This generated discussion about the way TCM is practiced where the focus is on customizing treatment for every patient versus western medicine where standard protocols are the norm.

The pharmacy personnel detailed the planned cultivation of herbs rather than relying on them growing in the wild, as used to be the tradition in the past. The conflict between use of land for growing of medicinal herbs versus its use for new construction to support rapid industrialization and urbanization was identified by the students.

Several questions arose spontaneously and were discussed. For example, students were asked to relate the philosophy of TCM to cultural beliefs and values about health and illness. They were instructed to use their own observations and understanding of Chinese culture to analyze how the Chinese people are incorporating TCM in their day-to-day practices to promote health and prevent illness. Additionally, students were asked to construct a future scenario with various systems of medicine to effectively combat global health issues.

**Student Personal and Professional Growth**

Students’ reflections in their daily journal and final report provided valuable information about their growth in developing global and glocal awareness, critical thinking skills in analyzing issues, and decision making ability in the context of historical development and present social and cultural milieu and using multiple perspectives. This is in line with what Montrose (2002) states as the key to understanding experiential learning. According to her, what transforms the study abroad program into a valuable academic experience is the critical analysis of the activities and not merely the activities themselves. Examples of students’ reflections that support the application of their critical thinking skills are provided next.

When a great question “What does the Great Wall mean to ordinary Chinese in their daily life?” was posed to students, their answers demonstrated their understanding of connectedness of global issues, depth of analysis, and their desire to learn more beyond the question itself. A sample response is given here.

“I was trying to answer the question by linking to concepts of human rights, environmental protection, national security, global citizenship, and the sad and touching Chinese story, Meng Jiang Nu Crying the Great Wall. This wall has been in my mind
forever. Suddenly, I realized there are other walls that are significant as well such as the Berlin Wall, the newly built wall at the border between the US and Mexico, and the wall surrounding Vatican. What does the wall at the US border mean to Americans and Mexicans? … I could not get the question out of my mind, what the wall means to an ordinary person in China. I know this is how I am going to think when learning about other things…”

Examples of glocal awareness gained by three different students are reflected in their statements after visits to a middle school and a wastewater treatment plant.

“Today, while visiting a middle school, I learned something about Confucianism and science development…. Pictures of the world famous scientists (all white and male except for Marie Curie) were hanging on the walls, in each hallway, in the school. No picture of Chinese scientists was included. I learned that the Chinese culture, shaped by Confucius’ ideology, continued to place greater emphasis on the ability to manage people (and thus having power) rather than the study of science and engineering. I did not know of any of those famous scientists myself, but had opportunity to learn about them today while visiting the middle school. I am going to adopt this to my future classroom. However, I will be sure to include females, scientists from different nations and cultures, and human rights leaders.”

“The visit to waste water treatment plant provided me the opportunity to realize how lucky I am in the US as most places I visit I can drink the water from any faucet without worrying whether it is clean or contaminated. I never thought of how much public and environmental health works in the background to protect the community’s health. However, I still have concerns every now and then when I hear or read about the dumping of toxic or sewer waste into the neighboring rivers and streams.”

“Another thing that I will never forget is our participation in the Kongming lantern ceremony to honor the Chinese affected by the earthquake. We were welcomed by hundreds of Chinese who had gathered near the Yangtze river for this ceremony. At that time, I did not feel like a visitor or a foreigner, but as another human being in this community. We lifted the lanterns along with the Chinese and sent it up with our prayers for those who were not with us. It dawned on me that when such unexpected natural disasters occur in the US, people who are unrelated come together and help one another just as what I was experiencing then.”

Global awareness was illustrated in a student’s reflection after the visit to the Three Gorges Dam and the need for utilizing multiple perspectives.

“We had a great time visiting the Three Gorges Dam. This has interested me in finding other related man-made constructions to benefit humans such as canals and reservoirs. In the history of civilization, humans have to decide between the benefit to the people and changes to the natural environment. Certainly, the Three Gorges Dam has created a lot of controversy similar to the construction of dams in other nations such as the Aswan Dam in Egypt and other dams in places like India, Brazil and Turkey. Loss of cultural and historical sites, mobilization of millions of people for construction, changes to marine life, generation of more electricity to satisfy the needs of residents, and reduction of flooding along the Yangtze River are some of the issues to consider. No wonder, a Chinese said it was a dream of hundreds of years to build the dam. Now I know that
there is a need to think from perspectives of history, culture, environment, needs of humans, politics, and maybe others that I am not aware of to truly understand an issue.”

Appreciation for diverse cultural practices was affirmed by the following reflections from two participants in the study abroad program.

“Undergoing cupping was a new experience for me. I was very hesitant at first, but my desire to experience something new and learn overcame my fear. I felt better soon after the procedure. I had less muscle stiffness, even though I had a patch of skin that looked like a pepperoni! I now understand why TCM, based on its centuries old philosophy and practice, is so popular among the Chinese.”

“… Since our arrival, we have followed the Chinese tradition by ordering group dishes and sharing them together at each dinner. I recounted this experience with Chinese college students in my group while we were visiting the Summer Palace. They told me that sharing helps one taste a variety of foods and get multiple nutrients in one meal. It also relates to the value placed on collectivism in the Chinese culture. I appreciate the notion behind the idea, but on reflection I note that it does deviate from my upbringing with a focus on individualism…”

The desire for lifelong learning was captured succinctly in the following reflection offered by a student.

“The China program has motivated me to study about China and other countries. I know my answer to questions and personal reflections are somewhat novice in many ways, and I need to continue to study more about China, the US, and the world to better respond to these questions.”

As is evident, the student reflections in their daily journals and final report support enhancement of their critical thinking skills developed through cultural immersions during this program. Since student learning was highly individualized in this study abroad program, the formative and summative evaluation focused on qualitative aspects of student educational needs and learning outcomes. Thus, qualitative data obtained throughout the students’ learning experience and their reflections at the end of the program provided an appropriate and authentic picture of their learning.

**Conclusion**

This thematic interdisciplinary approach for a short term study abroad program was effective in developing analytic and critical thinking skills among students. The basic principles of the program such as asking great questions, selecting sites for visits that allowed the learners to draw content knowledge from different disciplines, and choosing themes that permitted analysis of issues in both global and glocal contexts proved to be beneficial. Cultural immersion and focus on higher order thinking questions helped develop student understanding and appreciation of their own and other cultures. Both formative and summative evaluations were applied to understand students’ learning process and outcomes. This approach effectively stimulated students’ critical thinking skills and the desire and ability to apply them to real life issues besides kindling in them the desire for lifelong learning. Thus, with well-coordinated efforts from students, faculty, and the counterparts in China, this study abroad program became a true learning experience for all.


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Students’ Stories of Studying Abroad: Reflections Upon Return

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Abstract

Study abroad brings an enriching experience to students’ academic and personal lives. This narrative essay relays two students’ experiences with study abroad sojourns and touches upon their technology use during their study abroad as recounted in semi-structured interviews. Details of their cultural experiences and reflections thereof as well as the impact these experiences had on their lives are presented. Student participation in study abroad semesters is increasing each year. Understanding previous students’ experience studying abroad, how this impacted their studies and life afterwards can inform decision making of other students considering this option. Additionally, awareness of the technologies used to stay in touch with those at home informs administrative and technical decisions for institutions to consider.

Keywords: study abroad, higher education, narrative, technology

Study abroad is a popular university experience for students as it allows them to travel to another country or continent to study in a foreign institution. Students can expect exposure to foreign languages and cultures, and possibly have opportunities to learn the language and immerse themselves in cultural experiences. The number of students engaging in study abroad is growing (OECD, 2011).

Student participation in study abroad semesters is increasing each year; the numbers of students studying abroad have increased four-fold in the last two decades (OECD, 2011). In Canada 45,090 students studied abroad (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). According to the Institute of International Education (2013), 283,332 students from American institutions studied abroad in 2010/12 (para 1). As this number continues to grow, it is ever important to hear and learn from students’ experiences in order to know what works well for participants and how this experience impacts their lives upon repatriation. Similarly, as the technology use continues to integrate daily lives it is important to know which technologies study abroad students find useful.

Review of Related Literature

Study Abroad is an academic experience where students “physically leave [their home countries] to engage in college study, cultural interaction, and more in the host country. It may include foreign language study, residing with a foreign host family, internships, and service” (McKeown, 2009, p. 12). It can range from one week to a full academic year or program. Deardorff (2009) warns of the tendency to focus on Western-based definitions. While there is consensus that study abroad programs see students traveling to a foreign country to study, there are debates relating to what form these programs take. The debates relate to its duration, credit-granting, collegial arrangement with educational institution, and related finances. For some, credit must be received if it is to be considered a study
abroad (LeBlanc, 2003). Niser (2010) outlines four types of study abroad programs: (a) one-to-one arrangements between institutions; (b) partnerships with host institution; (c) programs run by study abroad providers; and (d) programs managed by home institutions.

**Barriers and Benefits**

Barriers to study abroad for most students include: (a) perception of such programs being reserved for the rich; (b) costly; (c) minority’s fears of facing prejudices; and (d) advisors who shy away from questions of race and ethnicity. Walsh (2010) warns that a “lack of integration of overseas students represents a missed opportunity for all students to develop intercultural competence, increasingly valuable as competition for jobs and resources becomes more global” (p. 557). Stewart (2010) warns that study abroad for second language learning is less effective today than twenty years ago. This is due primarily to social networking, email, and visitors which interfere with the process of learning a second language.

The benefits of study abroad far outweigh the barriers and drawbacks. The first type of benefits relate to the choice of venue: (a) choice of durations (Norton, 2008); (b) readily available campus-support networks (Norton, 2008); and (c) sharing experiences with friends and family (Norton, 2008). Secondly, professional and academic benefits include: (a) academic commitment (Freedman, 2010); (b) improving foreign language skills (Freedman, 2010; Parsons, 2010; Slimbach, 2005); (c) personal development (Deardorff, 2006; Freedman, 2010; Parsons, 2010); (d) improved career development (Freedman, 2010); and (e) return on investment (Norton, 2008; Parsons, 2010).

The third, intellectual benefits, include (a) disposition to critical reflection (Desai Trilokekar, Jones, & Shubert, 2009); (b) bouleversement and re-calibration of lives (Bilash & Kang, 2007; Desai Trilokekar, et al., 2009; Roberts, 2002); (c) decreased xenophobia, fear, and ethnic distance (Parsons, 2010); and (d) deeper understanding of oneself (Freedman, 2010; Gill, 2010; Malone, 2008; Parsons, 2010; Ooper, Teichler, & Calson, 1990). The fourth type, cultural growth benefits, include: (a) enlightened international knowledge (Bilash & Kang, 2007; Freedman, 2010; Ooper, et al., 1990; Palomba, 2006; Parsons, 2010; Slimbach, 2005); (b) changing opinions about the home country (Ooper, et al., 1990; Parsons, 2010; Slimbach, 2005); (c) changing opinions about other countries (Deardorff, 2006, 2009; Ooper, et al., 1990; Parsons, 2010; Slimbach, 2005); (d) in-depth exposure to other cultures (Deardorff, 2006; Freedman, 2010; Parsons, 2010; Slimbach, 2005); and (e) cultural cosmopolitanism (Parsons, 2010).

A final type of benefit sees increases in participants’ competencies. Study abroad is often associated with facilitating intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006, 2009), cross cultural competence (Bilash & Kang, 2007), transcultural competence (Slimbach 2005) internationalization (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Desai Trilokekar, et al., 2009; Knight, 2003; Parsons, 2010), and globalization (Trilokekar, et al., 2009; Kirby, 2008).

**Technology**

The study abroad literature referenced above does not make reference to technological use. It was likely not an aspect of interest in these studies. However computer based technology permeates many aspects of our lives. It is used to help keep us in touch with or avoid contact with others, to search for information, to entertain us and provide much efficiency in our lives. Many forms of technology, such as computers, phones, and music devices are ubiquitous among learners today. Wherever these students travel, their technologies follow. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) reports that Internet “user penetration has been growing on average at double-digit rates over the past ten years” (2013, p. 9-10). Montgomery (2010) writes about the impact of technology on globalization; today’s technological communication means that distance is not necessarily a barrier to non-local friendships. … In addition to email and the internet, mobile phones and text messaging appear to be a highly significant means for international students to communicate with friends and relatives, both locally and internationally. (p. 68)
Furthermore, technology can support friendship and comradely which relates to distributed global communities unimpeded by geospatial distance (Montgomery, 2010). Palomba (2006) warns that technology is not universal, but contextually and culturally-dependent. As such its creator’s values of speed, accessibility, openness, and immediacy are inherent and must be considered. The technologies used by the students while abroad are identified as well as the purpose for which they were employed.

Five authors stress the existing gaps in research relating to study abroad. Regan (2003) questions study abroad programs’ effects on students upon repatriation; while Walsh (2010) notes that there is little research from students’ perspectives on study abroad experiences. McKeown (2009) says it’s a “subject with a worthwhile, but limited, body of research” (p. 12). Bilash and Kang state that research into “study abroad programs for language teachers is scant” (2007, p. 206). Finally, Montgomery (2010) notes that much of the research in this field in the last twenty years has been large scale quantitative surveys studying students’ views. Few studied an aspect in detail; of these, less looked at social and cultural contexts international students’ presence created.

This narrative research sought to understand and retell students’ experience of study abroad and technology use by answering the questions: What are students’ study abroad experiences and technology use while away?; and how does the study abroad experience impact their lives upon return?

**Research Method**

As a narrative case study, this paper seeks to present and examine the storyteller’s experience of the topic, allowing individuals’ storied lives to be recounted individually and socially (Johns Hopkins University & Fritz, 2008), while addressing “complexity, multiplicity of perspectives and human-centeredness” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 31). Narrative involves the study of the ways individuals experience the world wherein interviewees are simultaneously “engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989, p. 4).

A way to think about living (Connelly, Philllon, & He, 2003), narratives are situated in a tri-dimensional space of time, interaction, and place (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2010) involving a balancing act stressing interaction of the personal, social and contextual while highlighting interviewees’ stories rather than interviewer’s adopted theory or ideology (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2010); thereby allowing the locateur to share in the experience. Narratives reveal stories that weave past, present and future reflections ultimately leading to awakenings and transformations (Coulter, Michael & Poynor, 2007).

The researcher enters into a convivial discourse with participants wherein participants freely speak to their experiences of a particular phenomenon in their own words and in their own way. The narrative approach provided the participants with an opportunity to describe the change stemming from experience, how it’s understood in new ways and how it could inform other’s decisions (Clandinin & Huber, 2010).

The two participants’ narratives shared their experiences in in-depth, open-ended interviews relating to their study abroad sojourns in constructing their life histories through collaborative discourse with the interviewer (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) rather than recounting their life’s events (Chase, 2005). With informed consent in place, the interviews were recorded on the interviewer’s encrypted computer. Transcripts were verified by each participant before analysis began. Sampling for these conversational interviews was purposive; participants having experienced a study abroad semester during their bachelor degree program and available within project timeframe.

While seeking to retell participants’ stories about study abroad, life impact and technology use associated with it, several prompts and probes were used to encourage elaboration and comprehensive stories. These included questions about: (a) why study abroad; (b) what did it entail; (c) what was studied and how it related to degree; (d) what was learnt; (e) previous international travel experience; and (f) dealing with unexpected events.
Data Analysis and Results

Two participants’ stories are retold. Parallels with literature are presented; illustrating how students’ experiences align with or compliment others’ research. Features of narrative inquiry including: plotline, character, setting, action, place, time, and point of view (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; and Webster & Mertova, 2007) are revealed in retelling stories.

Kelsey’s Story

Kelsey, a graduate student at a central Canadian university, participated in a study abroad semester as part of her studies before completing her bachelor’s degree at an eastern Canadian university. In an interest to improve her French language skills she opted to attend one semester at a university-sponsored and facilitated study abroad institution in West Africa in the Winter of 2005 which was arranged by the home institution. Kelsey learned much about the host country’s culture, which has influenced her current studies and which she will remember always.

There was not very advanced technology; there were overhead projectors and internet cafes for email. However, the cafes were very slow and did not work well so Kelsey went only once or twice a week to send email and pictures. Kelsey decided study abroad here to learn and practice French and as it would provide a really unique and different experience somewhere far away where it was warm; Canada’s winter being cold. Kelsey’s home university had a program set up with the university in West Africa where students successfully attended previously. A number of professors were from Africa and endorsed this type of study abroad as it allowed students to experience another culture and see what Africa was like.

Kelsey lived in a village north of the town, traveling to university by bus or taxi with classmates, where the official language was French. Living with a family, sharing meals; Kelsey noted “just through everything that you do; going to the market, just buying things and going to school. … is experiencing their culture”. Kelsey got to know some of the locals, befriending one of the host family’s daughters. Generally, the foreigners sort of kept to themselves, not mixing with locals much. Reflecting on why this was, Kelsey wondered if everything was just too different, or due to a language barrier. Kelsey was surprised by the amount of English spoken in this French-speaking country and spoke mostly English while there. Through a housemate, Kelsey gained exposure to another school that “seemed to have a more integrated program” and was able to mix a bit more with the locals, which was rewarding.

Kelsey’s experience had a notable impact on her life and point of view; it was pretty eye-opening and life changing, and shocking! … it sort of put things into perspective in North America, … makes you realize how different things are outside of the developed world … [and] realize that we’re very lucky over here [in Canada]. There are a lot of people in [West Africa] who make a lot less money so that changes everything.

Kelsey took five courses while abroad, for which credit was received at the home university in eastern Canada. These were courses in literature, social studies, translation and two in basic grammar. Upon return to Canada, Kelsey noted a positive change in study habits, working harder and taking advantage of more opportunities. Kelsey decided to embrace winter more, learned to ski and tried to learn to skate. Kelsey has not returned to West Africa but would definitely consider it or studying in other countries. Kelsey took a lot away from this study abroad experience, reflecting:

maybe I’m less selfish now. I’d like to think so, I don’t know if that’s true. And, I just try to, I don’t know. be more grateful and I’m just, I guess I’m just more aware of how different things are for other people and how many advantages I have.

Kelsey’s experience impacts current studies, planning, in that “planned communities can improve quality of life for people and make their life easier and more enjoyable”. Kelsey stays in touch
with a few people from the study abroad experience, mostly through Facebook. Kelsey learned a lot from fellow students.

Kelsey noted as well the commitment of the West Africans to their religion and spiritual life. Kelsey is an athlete and had to change the preferred sport while on study abroad, “running was pretty much abandoned as it was considered socially unacceptable”. Instead, swimming became the sport of choice as she had access to a first-rate pool. Kelsey attended a few local parties which were ‘cultural’ and ‘a neat experience’. One evening Kelsey witnessed an exorcism of a lady who was said to be possessed by a spirit from the ocean. “It was sort of like a really wild dance with drums and a lot of crazy things going on.” Reflecting, Kelsey suspected “they were probably just putting it maybe in terms they thought I’d understand.”

Kelsey remembered how poor the locals were by western standards, not having TVs and electronics, for example. Many people had absolutely nothing at all, there were “a lot of really impoverished people who lived on the street and they’re just everywhere”, which made Kelsey feel guilty. Foreign students were advised not to give them money as “it makes them become dependent and sort of creates a really negative situation”. In an effort to feel useful, Kelsey volunteered for two organizations: habitat for humanity and a local organization that provided social help and emergency relief for people in bad situations.

Alex’s Story

Alex is an artist who has worked in a café and as a special needs preschool teacher. Alex participated in a study abroad semester while completing a bachelor’s degree in English Literature from a southern university in the United States. The study abroad, inspired by boredom and uncertainty about studies, brought Alex to a Scandinavian country for a semester in the Winter of 2006. The study abroad semester was arranged by study abroad providers. Alex became engaged to a local Scandinavian and returned the following year for an additional sojourn as the relationship evolved.

Alex remembers this experience and a friendship formed with fondness and is very appreciative of the opportunity abroad as it provided a better understanding of the broader world and exposure to both the Scandinavian culture and cultures of other exchange students from other parts of Europe, South America and Korea. Alex laughed often when revisiting memories during the interview, indicating how much she really enjoyed the experience.

Like the other students, Alex was curious about people and the places from which others came. As locals tended to address them in English there were few opportunities to pick up the new language. Nevertheless, one time Alex was on a tram and someone said ‘entaxi’ to her before passing by. Following repetitions of this situation Alex realized ‘entaxi’ meant pardon me or excuse me in the Scandinavian language. “Just hearing what different words might sound or feel like” was very interesting to Alex. Now, living again in the southern US, there is no opportunity to speak the Scandinavian language, which, for Alex, is a pity.

Alex had the opportunity to spend time with local families. During subsequent revisits Alex traveled to BellaRussa and Russia. Alex felt that it helped in character building and provided certain humbleness particularly when seeing “people who wouldn’t have very much at all would be very eager to share it with you”.

Scandinavia offered many appealing cultural elements: appreciation of and connection to nature, stronger than that of the US; and understanding of resource limitations, using public transport and bikes, even in winter. Before going to Scandinavia, Alex read about the culture and recognized the stereotype of its people being peaceful and very much in connection with nature; “it was one of the last countries in the western hemisphere to join … in the industrial revolution. … people … were still living more a lifestyle of self-sustenance and, ahm, self-reliance, ahm. … it was very different”.

Alex took five classes for which she received credit on two from her US home university which was okay as “the courses were really interesting”. A Scandinavian literature course Alex thought was “maybe the best class that I took there because it helped me get a better understanding of the […] culture just from reading different poetry and literature works, ah, folktales”. Another was called
Shamanism and Culture by an anthropologist who had lived with and shadowed a Lappish shaman, coming to understand many of their rituals. Taking courses in Scandinavia was very beneficial as it ignited more interest in and fascination with studies at home. Alex notes that she was in a bit of a rut ..., not totally satisfied with some of my teachers, and, ahm, somewhat bored in some of my classes and probably just needing some type of shift or change to stir up more like self-curiosity or interest in what I was learning.

So Alex jumped at the “opportunity to be in a whole different culture on the other side of the world and frigid climate”; to which a hearty laugh was shared. The excitement of meeting people from Italy, Germany and different places, to share things in common with, and learn from was inspiring. They went on outings together; to ruins of an old castle; to a dairy farm in Lapland above the northern circle, renting cabins and cross country skiing for the first time – which Alex loved; and to a sauna, which is really popular in Scandinavia. Scandinavians love sauna, going at least once a week. Alex’s laughter revealed fond memories of the sauna. Alex would love to be a sauna steward one day, to operate a sauna.

Technology-wise, Alex used email and a Scandinavian cell phone, bought upon arrival, to stay in touch with people back home. Once back in the US, letters and packages were exchanged with close Scandinavian friends. Technology did not play a significant role. Back home, Alex is more aware of those around, particularly those with accents. Alex is eager to meet people from other parts of the world because in a way it’s like traveling but you don’t have to go anywhere because you can just chat with them to get a sense of what life is like where they’re from.

Following the study abroad, Alex returned for a year and a half and at one point was considering settling down in Scandinavia and maybe marrying. Alas, Alex and partner split after two years “because they couldn’t decide on a continent!” Alex hopes to one day return to Scandinavia, having been most impressed with the quality of the food, and feels it is a bit sad that it’s not a little closer so “more visits could be organized”.

Discussion

Students’ experiences in study abroad reveal unique, yet common experiences. While some experiences, such as the sauna, travels to nearby countries, exorcism, and impoverishment of locals were unique to individual stories, impetus for and preparations to go, witness of local customs, exposure to local and foreign languages, meeting other study abroad participants, interactions with locals and technologies used were common to each. The way these manifest themselves differed for Kelsey and Alex. Several of the benefits outlined in the literature were encountered by Kelsey and Alex such as: (a) disposition to critical thinking; (b) support networks; (c) deeper self-awareness; (d) increased academic commitment; (e) increased intercultural development; (f) improved career development; (g) improved communication skills; and (h) deeper global and international competence.

The biggest challenge experienced by both was developing relationships with locals. Deardorff (2009) tells us that “[b]uilding authentic relationships, however, is key in this cultural learning process – through observing, listening, and asking” (p. xiii). It is from these authentic relationships, which rely on respect and trust, we learn from each other. Alex befriended a few locals and other students and became engaged to a local. Kelsey befriended the host’s daughter and students in other programs who were integrated more with locals. Making connections to locals seems to be of interest and benefit to participants as it affords social interaction, leading to cultural awareness. Their ability to find ways to integrate stemmed Walsh’s (2010) fears about not developing intercultural competence due to lack of integration. While their ability to acquire the local languages was limited, it was due to the lack of and
types of interaction and encouragement with the native speakers. Stewart’s (2010) concerns (social networking, email, and visitors) did not come into play in these contexts.

Both Kelsey and Alex received credit for their study abroad classes; though Alex’s courses were rewarded with fewer credits from the home university. Picard (2002) reminds students to ensure that they receive credit for the courses they complete while abroad. Nevertheless, study abroad is about more than attaining credit towards a degree. The awakening and awareness it generates in participants both enriches their lives and influences their futures. Alex makes a point to strike up conversations with foreigners visiting ‘home’ in the south-east US when possible upon hearing their foreign accents. Kelsey’s interest in planning draws from the West African experience, in terms of wanting to influence the design and plans of communities such that they benefit its inhabitants. Seeing how little so many in West Africa had while managing to eke out an existence was inspirational for Kelsey. Both participants, upon repatriation, made conscious efforts to more greatly appreciate and take advantage of opportunities presenting themselves back in North America.

Both participants had seen and lived in low-tech study abroad environments and noted the stark differences to home and North American’s reliance on technology. Though e-mail, Facebook (and other social software), and cell phones existed at the time, Kelsey and Alex used them limply for their studies or to stay in touch with those back home. Whether because the technology was scarce and expensive, such as in Kelsey’s case, or because it was not high priority or expensive, such as in Alex’s case. Kelsey sent email from a local internet café from time-to-time and Alex used email and a Scandinavian-bought cell phone. Alex’s study abroad university gave her access to computer labs whereas Kelsey’s saw overhead projectors and photocopies of books as being the technology level. West Africa did not seem to have the resources and infrastructure to support a high-tech computer and internet service. When the internet was available, it was expensive and unreliable. While Scandinavia did have more modern information and communication technologies, their cost necessitated Alex being frugal with its use. It would be interesting to know what changes, if any have happened, technology-wise in both locations in the interceding years. Their experiences echo experience reported by Montgomery (2010) and Palomba (2006) as described in the literature previously. Increased emphasis on use of and increasing access to affordable ICTs could facilitate closer and longer relationships with students and locals in the study abroad countries, allowing them to stay in touch once students have repatriated and possibly open new and more international collaborative endeavors.

Both students’ study abroad experiences had impacts upon their lives upon return home. Both were able to settle into and complete their studies; were more appreciative of advantages and opportunities afforded at home; are more aware of cultural and international issues; and are desirous to seek further intercultural experiences both at home and away. Kelsey’s narrative highlights the extreme poverty of West Africa, in comparison to Canada. Kelsey was able to turn this reality into a positive by volunteering for organizations that helped the poor while abroad. Similarly, Alex was struck by the generosity of those who so evidently had so little. Alex volunteers in a soup kitchen each Sunday and seeks ways to reach out to others and be useful when possible.

Kelsey and Alex each experienced personal growth and maturity due to their experiences, as well as elements of cultural diversity, as identified by Goodfellow and Lamy (2009): geographical, historical, climatic, religious, political, and linguistic. Kelsey and Alex both extended their intercultural competence; their stories illuminating experiences demonstrating “feelings, tolerance, respect, empathy and flexibility” (Belisle, 2008, p. 2).

Conclusions

This study contributes to the much needed qualitative research on study abroad experiences. It touches upon the impact the sojourns had on students upon repatriation from students’ perspectives. In some respects Kelsey and Alex learned and took away more than they bargained for from their respective study abroad sojourns, relating to themselves and others. Kelsey’s and Alex’s stories reveal rich cultural experiences which have impacted their lives upon their returns home in different ways,
helping them appreciate the opportunities afforded them at home as well as increasing their awareness of interculturality.

Ironically, both participants spoke about taking advantage of opportunities presented upon return home, yet, the very act of taking advantage of an opportunity – study abroad – stemmed this awakening; they have come full circle. It was the fulfillment of an opportunity that inspired them to want to take advantage of opportunities. Years later, both continue to reflect on and be impacted by this experience and its social and international implications. This profound impact strongly supports the benefits study abroad opportunities offer, particularly in relation to its ability to foster intercultural competence.

While both students endeavored to immerse themselves in the local language, this proved challenging and less than fruitful. They did, however, experience varied, rich cultural events which allowed them to expand their social and cultural awareness. Results cannot be extended to generalize technology use or impact of study abroad of students outside of North America (NA) as the dataset is too small and non-NA students were not included in this study. As both students were undergraduates; their experiences do not necessarily reflect those of students from other demographics.

In retelling participants’ experiences, narratives strive to present the stories such that readers are almost experiencing the phenomenon themselves. These two narratives attempt to do so. More research is needed in this area to gain a fuller picture of today’s study abroad experiences, including technologies and post-study impacts. Future work could involve presenting narratives of more participants from the same study abroad trips; or different contexts. A stronger focus on technology use during these sojourns would also be of interest. Further research may see development of framework for successful intercultural study abroad programs which institutions could adopt to ensure student success and strengthen intercultural competence.

References


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Impact of English Proficiency on Academic Performance of International Students

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Abstract  
Using an ex-post facto, non-experimental approach, this research examined the impact of English language proficiency and multilingualism on the academic performance of international students enrolled in a four-year university located in north central Louisiana in the United States. Data were collected through a self-reported questionnaire from 59 students who were in their sophomore, junior or senior year of college. Statistical analyses revealed significant differences in language proficiency and multilingualism in relation to academic performance. The highest mean GPA was evident among students who had reported high levels of self-perceived English language proficiency, and among students who spoke at least three languages.

Keywords: International students, self-perceived English proficiency, multilingualism, academic performance.

In recent years, the number of international students in U.S. institutions of higher education has increased to a record high. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2013), the number of international students studying in U.S.-based postsecondary institutions increased by 7% during 2012-2013 compared to the previous academic year (IIE, 2013). The top three countries with most international students in the United States were China (28.7%), India (11.8%), and South Korea (8.6%) as reported by IIE (2013). Unlike domestic students, international students, especially those from non-English speaking countries, might have difficulties understanding lectures and interacting with their professors due to lack of English proficiency (Ramsay, Barker, & Jones, 1999; Selvadurai, 1998). According to Cummins (1983), it usually takes longer for immigrant students to reach academic norms in a second language (i.e., 5 to 7 years) than to acquire interpersonal communication skills required for day-to-day conversation (i.e., about 2 years). It is assumed that international students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) who reside temporarily in a host country for the purpose of obtaining a
degree might take even longer to obtain academic skills in the second language, and their limited language skills might be one of the determinants directly or indirectly influencing their academic success. Therefore, their language proficiency might be a key factor in their academic success (Daller & Phelan, 2013).

This research was conducted to investigate the relationship between self-perceived English language proficiency and academic performance of international students in a 4-year university located in north central Louisiana, with the hope of providing insights for administrators or faculty members who wish to promote international students’ academic success. Furthermore, the relationship between multilingualism and academic performance was also investigated in this study, hoping to fill the gap that exists in the current literature.

Related Literature

Existing research on factors contributing to academic achievement of students in higher education reveals a number of factors in multiple dimensions. In general, these factors fall into the following four categories: academic, psychosocial, cognitive, and demographic (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). All these factors have been extensively explored and examined by previous research. For example, among academic factors, prior academic achievement (e.g., McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; McKenzie, Gow, & Schweitzer, 2004), learning skills and habits (e.g., Abbott-Chapman, Hughes, & Wyld, 1992), learning strategies (i.e., general learning strategies, subject-matter-specific strategies) and approaches (e.g., Duff, Boyle, Dunleavy, & Ferguson, 2004; Pokay & Blumenfeld, 1990; Sadler-Smith, 1996; Watkins & Hattie, 1981) were explored as variables influencing academic performance. With regard to the psychosocial dimension, social integration into the university system, motivation, anxiety, social and emotional support, and psychological health were explored (e.g., Terenzini & Pascarella, 1978). The cognitive dimension, which includes self-efficacy (e.g., McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001) and an individual’s attribution style (e.g., Peterson & Barrett, 1987) were also studied in many empirical studies. Lastly, various demographic features such as gender and age were examined in relation to academic performance in higher education (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010).

These factors that were identified in the literature are applicable to both domestic and international students in higher education. However, there are other factors involved when it comes to the international students' academic performance in higher education, since international students have unique characteristics that distinguish them from domestic students (Li et al., 2010). Many empirical studies indicate that English proficiency plays a crucial role for international students in completing their studies in English-medium institutions, especially for those students whose first language is not English (e.g., Li et al., 2010; Wardlow, 1999). In addition to English proficiency, some culture-specific and cross-cultural issues (e.g., academic culture shock associated with a different education system, lecture style, and relationships between students and lecturers) have been identified as factors that contribute to the international students' potential for academic success (Li et al., 2010).

Importantly, the socio-cultural and psychological adjustment of international students might be influenced by their English proficiency, which might impact their academic success. For example, Yang, Noels, and Saumure (2006) highlighted the role of English self-confidence in the process of socio-cultural and psychological adjustment to an English-speaking academic environment. Further, Trice (2007) reported that weak English language skills were perceived as one of the reasons why international students were isolated from local students and faculty members. These findings indicate that English proficiency is indirectly associated with academic performance of international students through its impact on other factors in the socio-cultural and psychological dimensions.

Research on factors affecting the international students' academic success in foreign institutions is ongoing, not only due to increasing numbers of international students, but also due to changing demographics of international students. The literature reviewed below presents some existing research on the relationship between self-perceived English language proficiency and academic performance of international students, as well as the relationship between multilingualism and academic performance.
Self-perceived English language proficiency and multilingualism were the main independent variables examined within this study.

**Language Proficiency and Academic Performance**

Many researchers (e.g., Hill, Storch, & Lynch, 1999; Huong, 2001; Johnson, 1988; Kerstijens & Nery, 2000; Krausz, A. Schiff, J. Schiff, & Hise, 2005; Light, Teh-Yuan, & Weinstein-Shr, 1991; Light, Xu, & Mossop, 1987; Staynoff, 1997; Woodrow, 2006) investigated the relationship between language proficiency and academic performance among different groups of international students in English-speaking institutions by utilizing standardized test scores such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System). In a study conducted at the State University of New York at Albany, Light et al. (1987) determined a statistically significant positive correlation between TOEFL scores and grade point averages (GPAs) among 376 international graduate students ($r = .14, p < .05$). Similar results were reported by Johnson (1988), who conducted a confirmatory study at the University of Wisconsin - Green Bay among 196 international undergraduate students. There was a moderately low correlation between overall TOEFL scores and mean GPAs (Johnson, 1988). Students with TOEFL scores lower than 500 had significantly lower grades compared to those with TOEFL scores of 500 or above.

Some other studies also produced similar results on the relationship between language proficiency measured by TOEFL and GPA (e.g., Light et al., 1991; Staynoff, 1997). Staynoff (1997) examined factors influencing international students’ academic achievement among 77 international freshmen students who were in their first six months of studies. Based on the results, a statistically significant correlation ($r = .26, p = .01$) was reported between TOEFL scores and GPAs (Staynoff, 1997). This meant that participants who had high TOEFL scores were more likely to have a high GPA, and those who had low TOEFL scores were more likely to have a low GPA.

While there are a number of studies emphasizing the relationship between language proficiency as measured by TOEFL scores and academic achievement as measured by GPA, there are also studies implying that TOEFL scores might not be a good predictor for international students' academic success (Krausz et al., 2005; Xu, 1991). For example, the findings of a study conducted by Krausz et al. (2005) showed that TOEFL scores were not associated with academic performance of international graduate students majoring in accounting. Xu (1991) also examined the impact of students' English proficiency and background variables on international students' academic performance among 450 international graduate students enrolled in three large universities in the United States. The findings revealed that self-perceived English proficiency was a predictor for academic difficulty that students perceived, but TOEFL scores were not significantly associated with students’ actual academic difficulty (Xu, 1991).

Another recent study reported results of a meta-analysis of 22 studies on the relationship between English language proficiency and academic achievement of international students in U.S. institutions of higher education (Wongtrirat, 2010). The studies reviewed were conducted between 1987 and 2009 using TOEFL score as a measure of English proficiency, and GPA and course completion as measures for academic performance. Based on the results of the meta-analysis, it was concluded that "TOEFL has a small predictive ability on academic achievement of international students whether measured by GPA or the course completion" (Wongtrirat, 2010, p. 45).

Available literature on the relationship between IELTS scores and academic performance of international students is as inconsistent as is the case for TOEFL. Hill, Storch, and Lynch (1999), Huong (2001), and Woodrow (2006) found a statistically significant positive, but weak relationship between IELTS and academic performance among international students, especially those from non-English speaking backgrounds. Inconsistently, Kerstijens and Nery (2000) found no statistical relationship between IELTS and GPA.

Overall, the review of existing literature in relation to international students’ academic performance and English proficiency indicated that the majority of studies investigated the relationship between TOEFL or IELTS score and GPA. The findings were contradictory, implying that English proficiency measured solely by TOEFL or IELTS scores cannot be a reliable predictor of international
students’ academic success. Moreover, Fox (2004) noted that language tests do not measure other factors such as social networks of support, financial security, time availability for study abroad, acculturation, and academic adjustment that might impact international students’ academic performance significantly. Other researchers also indicated other contributing factors such as inadequate background knowledge, poor study skills, ESL support, difficulty of course work, differences in language demands for different courses, motivation, maturity, and previous experiences (see, Daller & Phelan, 2013; Drennan & Rohde, 2002; Hill et al., 1999; Huong, 2001; Kerstijens & Nery, 2000; Light et al., 1987; Woodrow, 2006). Therefore, additional investigations are needed to explore other constructs in measuring English proficiency, as well as other variables that might predict international students’ academic success.

**Multilingual International Students and Academic Success**

There is a dearth of studies on academic success of multilingual students who speak two or more languages, implicating cognitive advantages or disadvantages of being multilingual in American higher education. Kovalik (2012) investigated the association between multilingualism and academic success measured by GPA among 305 undergraduate students. The researcher administered a survey to discover the number of languages that the participants were fluent in and their overall grade point averages. The findings revealed no relationship between multilingualism and GPA. Interestingly, those who spoke more than one language obtained lower GPA. However, in the study, the sample size representing those who spoke two or more languages was too small (i.e., only 12.43% out of total sample), which might have skewed the results (Kovalik, 2012). It was also not clear which language was each respondent’s first language. It is therefore hard to conclude that international students who are multilingual, but do not have English as a mother tongue, have cognitive advantages or disadvantages in predominantly English speaking institutions. Hence, in addition to investigating the relationship between self-perceived English language proficiency and academic performances of international students, this study also examined how GPA is related to the number of languages spoken by international students.

The following research questions were addressed in this study: (a) Are there significant differences in the academic performance of international students in relation to the level of English language proficiency?; (b) Are there significant differences in the academic performance of international students in relation to the number of languages spoken?

**Research Method**

**Research Design and Instrumentation**

An ex-post facto, non-experimental approach was used in this study to examine the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance of international students enrolled in a 4-year university located in north central Louisiana. A standardized self-reported questionnaire was developed and utilized to collect data. In addition to some basic demographic questions, the instrument included items on English language proficiency. Students were asked to rate their English language proficiency using a 4-point Likert scale: 1 (poor), 2 (average), 3 (good), and 4 (excellent). They were also asked to indicate whether they had academic difficulties in understanding English, specifically in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. A 4-point Likert-scale was used for these items as well: 1 (always), 2 (often), 3 (sometimes), and 4 (never). The questionnaire included an item on the number of languages spoken as well. Participants indicated whether English was their 1st, 2nd, 3rd or more language. Participants’ academic performance was measured by their current GPA. In addition, participants were also asked to indicate how they felt their English language skills affected their academic achievement.

**Participants and Data Collection**

Researchers obtained an IRB approval from the university where the study was carried out. The university had around 300 international students. Sixty-five surveys were randomly distributed, out of which 59 were returned. Five of those returned surveys were incomplete. Therefore, the sample
consisted of randomly selected 54 international students who were ranked as sophomores, juniors, or seniors in undergraduate programs. The sample was about one sixth of the overall international student population at the participating institution.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were given informed consent forms, which provided information regarding the study, including the contact information of the principal investigator. Participants were given five days to complete the surveys and return them together with signed informed consent forms to the principal investigator.

Data Analysis

SPSS (2008) statistical software package was utilized to analyze data. Students' academic performance measured by their GPAs was the outcome (dependent) variable, while self-rated questions about language proficiency and language difficulty, and the number of languages spoken were independent variables. Descriptive statistics of the sample and ANOVA inferential statistics were applied to analyze the data. In addition, multiple regression analysis was utilized to determine which independent variables were the best predictors of international students' academic performance.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulties in writing</td>
<td>Always</td>
<td>11 (20.4%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Often</td>
<td>7 (13.0%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>27 (50.0%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>9 (16.7%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulties in reading</td>
<td>Always</td>
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<td>Often</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>30 (55.6%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>24 (44.4%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulties in listening</td>
<td>Always</td>
<td>7 (13.0%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Often</td>
<td>14 (25.9%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>28 (51.9%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>5 (9.3%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulties in speaking</td>
<td>Always</td>
<td>11 (20.4%)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Sometimes</td>
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<td>Never</td>
<td>3 (5.6%)</td>
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Results

Descriptive statistics were computed to learn about the characteristics of the sample. Out of the 59 questionnaires received, 54 were accepted as complete and analyses were conducted based on these responses. There were 31 (57.4%) females and 23 (42.6%) males students. Of the participants, 28 (51.9%) were sophomores, 15 (27.8%) were juniors, and 11 (20.4%) were seniors. Participants were
asked to indicate whether English was their first, second, third or more language. For 16.7% of them (9 participants), English was their first language because it was the official language in their home countries; 51.9% indicated English as their second language and 31.5% listed English as their third language. Participants were also asked to rate their English proficiency level: 25.9% of the participants rated their English language proficiency as excellent, 53.7% rated as good, while 20.4% rated as average. When asked whether English as the language of instruction limits their academic achievement, 57.4% said yes, and 42.6% said no.

Academic majors represented in the sample were Political Science, Education, Psychology, Mass Communication, Electronic Engineering Technology, Criminal Justice, Business Management, Nursing, Accounting, Public Administration, and Computer Sciences. As for the participants’ GPAs, 18% were in the 3.5-4.0 range, 48.1% were in the 3.0 to 3.4 range, while only 18.5% were in the 2.5-2.9 range. In addition, participant responses indicated the frequency of having difficulties in writing, reading, listening, and speaking English. From the results displayed in Table 1, it is apparent that at least half of the participants sometimes had difficulties in all four categories. Based on the responses, it was also evident that 57.4% of the participants believed that having English as the language of instruction limited their academic performance, while 42.6% did not feel the same way as their peers. Surprisingly, although 16.7% indicated that English is their first language, some of them still reported having difficulties in writing, listening, and speaking.

Factorial analysis of variance was conducted to find out whether there were significant differences in academic performances of international students with different English language proficiency levels, and whether there were significant differences in academic performances of international students who speak multiple languages. Table 2 presents the group mean and standard deviations of the GPA for self-perceived language proficiency categories. Table 3 displays the group mean and standard deviations of the GPA for the number of languages spoken. Interestingly, the highest mean GPA (3.76) was evident among students who indicated English as their third language. The highest mean GPA (3.57) was also evident among students who rated their English proficiency as excellent. However, the group that indicated English as their second language had the lowest mean GPA (2.68).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Proficiency Level</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>.831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>.680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>.514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>.711</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Group Mean and Standard Deviations of GPA for Language Proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English is your 1st, 2nd, or 3rd language</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>.726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>.476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>.437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>.711</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3
Group Mean and Standard Deviations of GPA for the Number of Languages
ANOVA results, presented in Table 4, showed significant main effects for English Language Proficiency (englevel) \([F(2, 45) = 4.03, p = .025, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .152]\) and for the number of languages spoken (language) \([F(2, 24) = 21.24, p < .001, \eta^2 = .486]\). Interaction between those two factors was significant as well, \(F(4, 45) = 3.033, p = .027, \eta^2 = .212\).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>ES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between treatments</td>
<td>17.124a</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.140</td>
<td>9.939</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.639</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>englevel</td>
<td>1.735</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.867</td>
<td>4.027</td>
<td>.025</td>
<td>.152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>language</td>
<td>9.148</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.574</td>
<td>21.239</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>englevel * language</td>
<td>2.613</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.653</td>
<td>3.033</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>.212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within treatments</td>
<td>9.691</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>.215</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>562.000</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>26.815</td>
<td>53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a. \(R^2\) Squared = .639 (Adjusted \(R^2\) Squared = .574)

In order to determine which language proficiency categories were significantly different, Bonferroni's post hoc test was conducted. Results showed that students' GPAs were significantly different for those students who perceived that their English proficiency level was average to those students who thought their English proficiency level was excellent. The difference was the same with those who thought their level was good, compared to the ones who thought their level was excellent. There was no significant difference between average and good. In terms of the number of languages spoken, GPAs were significantly different between those students who had English language as their second and those who had English as their first or third language. However, there was no significant difference between those who had English as their first and those who had English as their third language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In your opinion your English level is</th>
<th>(B)</th>
<th>(\beta)</th>
<th>(t)</th>
<th>(p)</th>
<th>Bivariate (r)</th>
<th>Partial (r)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>difficulties in writing</td>
<td>.359</td>
<td>.345</td>
<td>2.741</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>.254</td>
<td>.371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>difficulties in reading</td>
<td>.257</td>
<td>.359</td>
<td>1.539</td>
<td>.131</td>
<td>.239</td>
<td>.219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>difficulties in listening</td>
<td>.012</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>.058</td>
<td>.954</td>
<td>-0.029</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>difficulties in speaking</td>
<td>.136</td>
<td>.160</td>
<td>1.234</td>
<td>.223</td>
<td>.076</td>
<td>.177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English is 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th</td>
<td>-.050</td>
<td>-.062</td>
<td>-.285</td>
<td>.777</td>
<td>.203</td>
<td>-.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>language</td>
<td>-.545</td>
<td>-.524</td>
<td>-3.771</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>-.303</td>
<td>-.482</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To further examine the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance, a standard multiple regression was utilized. GPA was the dependent variable, while self-perceived English language proficiency, number of languages spoken, and having academic difficulties in reading, listening, speaking and writing were the independent variables. Results indicated that the overall model of six variables predicted GPA, \(R^2=.332, R^2_{\text{adj}}=.246, F(6, 47) = 3.89, p<.05\). This model accounted for 33.2% of variance for GPA. A summary of regression coefficients presented in Table 5 indicated that only two out of the six variables significantly contributed to the model. Although the sample size was relatively small for regression analysis, it was, however, acceptable for this analysis. According to Cohen and Cohen (as cited in Phillips, n.d.), when having a sample size of 50, and 5 or 10 independent variables included in the multiple regression analysis, the \(R^2\) value has to be 23 or 29%
respectively or above in order for the results to be considered statistically significant at .05 level. In this study, the sample size was 54, there were 6 independent variables included in the analysis and the $R^2$ value was 33.2%. Thus, it is appropriate to conclude that the use of multiple regression analysis was adequate, and self-perceived English language proficiency and the number of languages spoken were significantly contributing variables for the international students’ academic performance as measured by their GPAs.

**Summary of Findings and Discussion**

This study intended to contribute to existing research on the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance of international students, and to fill the research gap on the relationship between the number of languages spoken and academic performance. Based on the results, it is concluded that (a) there are significant differences in the academic performances of international students with different English language proficiency levels, and (b) there are significant differences in the academic performance of international students who speak multiple languages.

Results on language proficiency and academic performance were consistent with previous research (e.g., Xu, 1991) that reported that there was indeed a relationship between self-perceived English language proficiency and academic performance as measured by GPA. Findings on the effect of multilingualism on academic performance revealed that there were indeed significant differences in academic performances of international students who spoke multiple languages. The highest mean GPA was evident among those who spoke at least three languages, as they had indicated English as their third language. Interestingly, those who had listed English as their second language had the lowest mean GPA. The relationship between the number of languages spoken and academic success is still an area that needs further research.

The United States has been one of the largest host countries with a 22% market share in global higher education (Robertson, 2007). Even though the proportion of international students in U.S. institutions of higher education is less than 4%, they significantly contribute both to higher education in the U.S. and the local economy (IIE, 2013). It is therefore important for administrators and educators to consider the needs of the international student population and address challenges associated with their academic experience in U.S. institutions of higher education. Many of these students are non-native English speakers or they speak English as a second, third, or even a fourth language. Limited language proficiency could put international students at risk and result in their departure from the U.S. without earning a degree. The departure of these students will lead to negative results on overall student retention and graduation rates in U.S. institutions of higher education. Recruitment of new students would be more costly than retaining students who are already matriculating through a higher education curriculum. Additionally, promoting academic success of international students will contribute to the enhancement of institutional reputations and increased market values of U.S. higher education in the global education market.

The findings of the present study implicate the role of English proficiency on academic achievement of international students. However, the previous analyses of literature indicated that the effect of English proficiency on academic achievement among international students should vary depending on the required levels of language skills in completing courses or programs (cf., Light et al., 1987, Johnson, 1988). Therefore, findings are applied cautiously. Along with language proficiency, there may be many other factors associated with international students’ academic success such as motivation, learning strategies, background variables, and personal characteristics (Staynoff, 1997). As noted in the literature review, other contributing factors, especially those within the cross-cultural dimension influencing academic performance of international students, should be considered as intervening factors (Li et al., 2010). Academic culture shock and difficulties in cross-cultural adjustment may create barriers in international students’ sociocultural and psychological adjustment, which in turn could affect their academic performance. Hence, the unique experiences of international students in the process of cross-cultural adjustment should be taken into consideration.
The findings of this study in relation to multilingualism were interesting. International students, who spoke at least three languages, had the highest mean GPA. This, perhaps, implies that some people tend to learn foreign languages better and once they overcome barriers related to one foreign language, they are more likely to learn another language and be successful. This, however, is only an assumption as there is no existing research on the relationship between multilingualism and academic performance of international students. This is an area that needs further research involving a larger sample size, in order to make conclusions on the effect of multilingualism on academic performance.

**Implications for Practice**

Based on the findings of this study, several implications were drawn, which lead to some recommendations for future practices. These implications could be useful for U.S. institutions of higher educational when addressing the needs of their international students and when designing and providing support programs for them. Moreover, implementing these recommendations would not only help institutions to meet international students’ needs and expectations, but will also have positive effects on overall retention and graduation rates of the institutions.

This study revealed that self-perceived English proficiency is associated with international students' academic performance. To support international students’ academic success, it is necessary to offer support services specifically designed for international students at the institutional level. These services should include English-language courses, tutoring, and supplemental courses that will help to improve their language and academic skills (Andrade, 2006). Furthermore, professors in different disciplines should identify the needs of international students and provide appropriate support by incorporating various pedagogical strategies that helps students to improve their English academic skills (Andrade, 2006; Shapiro, Farrelly, & Tomaš, 2014).

Another area for consideration is the implementation of student activities. Lee (2013), a faculty member from the University of Arizona, believes that social engagement is critical for academic success in college. Implementing activities that provide opportunities for international students to meet with domestic students and develop relationships will not only contribute to their adjustment process, but will also have a positive impact on their language skills. There are many international students who arrive with a high level of English proficiency in reading and writing, but who lack listening and speaking skills due to lack of previous practice. Interactions with domestic students would help international students to become proficient, especially in listening and speaking - skills that are crucial in face-to-face classrooms.

Additionally, ongoing communications between administrators, international student advisors, and faculty members are essential factors for having an international student-friendly campus. Ongoing communications will help to promote mutual understanding and collaborative decision making among all the stakeholders involved, which will in turn benefit the international students and the university. Moreover, ongoing communications would also support the integration of international students into mainstream student life on campuses. International students will not feel isolated, and their social adjustment will be easier.

**Implications of the Current Study**

Language proficiency solely measured by TOEFL or IELTS might not be a good predictor of academic success because other influential factors might be omitted in the investigations (Light et al., 1987; Fox 2004). In fact, the standardized test scores commonly utilized as valid cut-off entry points of international students at colleges or universities have been constantly scrutinized by the research community (Alderson, Krahne, & Stansfield, 1987). Hence, other studies included alternative measures of assessing language abilities such as self-perceived language proficiency (e.g., Takahashi, 2009; Xu, 1991). Takahashi (2009) found that the level of self-perceived language competence was negatively associated with the level of anxiety but positively related with language proficiency test
scores. In terms of the relationship between self-rating language proficiency and academic success, Takahashi (2009) discovered a statistically significant correlation. Moreover, Xu (1991) indicated that self-perceived English proficiency was considerably associated with the level of academic difficulty in all four dependent variables (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening). Taken together, self-rating language proficiency, instead of language skills that are measured solely by standardized test score might be a more effective measure for this study. This is because the minimum language test score required for entry into academic programs does not measure improvements of English language skills over the course of study. Furthermore, self-perceived English ability might reflect various factors in the multiple dimensions influencing academic performance such as self-efficacy, motivation, confidence, and a positive attitude toward learning in a second language. Thus, the present study focused on examining the relationship between self-perceived English proficiency and GPAs of international students. Additionally, the relationship between the number of languages spoken and GPAs of international students was examined. Both of these areas require more research, and the findings of this study aimed to fill the gaps that exist in current literature.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study had several limitations. First, it was limited to one institution. It is recommended for further studies to include more than one institution in order to have a larger sample size. Second, this study examined the relationship between self-perceived language proficiency and academic performance of international students. Future studies may consider examining the effects of standardized tests like TOEFL in addition to self-perceived English proficiency and compare the results. Third, this research was limited to a quantitative survey. Future research could employ a mixed methods approach in order to obtain more comprehensive information on international students' perceptions of challenges associated with their academic endeavors in a foreign country. Finally, more research is needed on the relationship between multilingualism and the academic performance of international students. This is an area the researchers of this study will explore further. Educators interested in this area are welcome to contribute to a larger scale study, which will be conducted in the near future.

References


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A Comparative Study of Student Engagement, Satisfaction, and Academic Success among International and American Students

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Soko S. Starobin, PhD
Iowa State University (USA)

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between student engagement, student satisfaction, and the academic success of international and American students using 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data. It was found that international students scored slightly higher than American students on enriching educational experiences and supportive campus environment/institutional emphases during their senior year benchmarks. Further, international and American students similarly evaluated their entire educational experience at this institution between good and excellent; however, American students evaluated it slightly higher than international students. Additionally, academic success measured by grades was between B+ and A- for both groups of students; however, international students evaluated it slightly higher than American students. Finally, it was found that the best predictors of satisfaction with the entire experience at this institution and academic success measured by grades were the five benchmarks of effective educational practice: level of academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, supportive campus environment/quality of relationships, and supportive campus environment/institutional emphasis.

Keywords: higher education, international students, student engagement

The number of international students on U.S. campuses has increased from 723,277 in 2010-2011 to 764,495 in 2011-2012 to 819,644 in 2012-2013 (Institute of International Education, 2014). The value these students bring to US institutions and communities is undeniable: increased diversity on campuses and communities, exposing American students to the globalized workforce they are likely to face after graduation, preparing the next generation of effective leaders, and bringing in different perspectives and beliefs, among others. Furthermore, it is critical to note that international students bring a significant financial contribution to the U.S. economy, nearly $24 billion in 2012-2013 (Institute of International Education, 2014). To provide international students the best educational experiences in the U.S., it is critical for practitioners, administrators, and faculty to learn how these students engage in various campus and classroom activities. In addition, it is important to know how international students’ engagement influences their satisfaction and academic success.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between student engagement, student satisfaction, and academic success of international and American students using National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data. Specifically, it investigated how institutional type (classification and control) and critical mass (percentage of international students and academic major) affect student
engagement (represented by five NSSE benchmarks) and how student engagement affects student satisfaction and academic success. The following research questions guided this study:

1. Do institutional type and critical mass affect student engagement?
2. To what extent can student engagement predict student satisfaction with the entire educational experience at this institution during their senior year?
3. To what extent can student engagement predict academic success during their senior year?

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks for this study are threefold. First, Astin’s (1999) Student Involvement Theory was utilized to frame the significance of student engagement, such as interacting with other students, interacting with faculty members, interacting with administration/staff, and participating in extracurricular activities, on student outcomes. Second, Pascarella’s General Model for Assessing Change (1985) was applied to examine the intersection of student background, and precollege traits, as well as structural and organizational characteristics of institutions on student outcomes. Finally, Critical Mass Framework was used to critically examine the differences between student characteristics, structural and organizational characteristics of institutions and student engagement among international and American students on their outcomes. In this study, the researchers adopted components of critical mass used in the studies that examined student sub-goups, such as females, Latinos, international students (Etzkowitz et al., 1994; Townsend, 1999; Townsend & Twombly, 2007; Hagedorn et al., 2007; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005).

Review of the Literature

Studies have been conducted on topics such as psychological problems and mental health of international students (Mori, 2001); special issues in counseling of international students (Aubrey, 1991); influence of culture of international students on their behavior in and out of counseling situations (Dillard & Chisolm, 1983); marital status, ethnicity, and academic achievement in relation to adjustment strains (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006); and factors affecting international students’ transitions to higher education institutions (Kwon, 2009).

Student Engagement

Why study student engagement? As Kuh (2003) indicated, hundreds of studies demonstrated that “college students learn more when they direct their efforts to a variety of educationally purposeful activities” (p. 25). Higher education literature offers many definitions of student engagement. One of the widely used in the literature to study student engagement in higher education institutions is the definition measured and provided by NSSE. Because of its history and national representations of participating institutions to NSSE, this study will use the definition.

Axelson and Flick (2011) suggested that level of student engagement at an institution of higher education is increasingly seen as a valid indicator of institutional excellence that is more meaningful than traditional education and has more easily measured characteristics. Student engagement of American students has been studied extensively (Astin, 1993; Chickering, 1969; Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Kuh et al. (2005) stated that “high levels of student engagement are necessary for and contribute to collegiate success” (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 4). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded that the “impact of college is largely determined by individual effort and involvement in the academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings on a campus” (p. 62), and that the best predictors of whether a student will graduate are academic preparation, motivation, and student engagement. Foot (2009) found common success strategies of international students changed as they adapted to academic climate and varied among students.
Student Engagement of International Students

In spite of ample literature on international students, little is known about their student engagement. Yebei (2001) examined international students’ group differences in their co-curricular engagement, and found that College Student Experiences Questionnaire measures were unidimensional, and upper-level international students had higher co-curricular engagement scores than first-year international students; however, upper-level international students were less satisfied with their college experience than first-year international students. Additionally, literature described direct relationships between student engagement and academic success. Parikh (2008), for example, explored and described a paradox where international students who seem to have lower than average campus involvement had higher than average GPAs. Additionally, Kuh (2003) reported that in the first three years of NSSE findings, international students appeared to be more engaged (p. 27). Thus, this study attempted to expand research on student engagement of international students further.

Grayson (2008a) found that international students were as involved in campus activities as domestic students; however, international students lacked academic support in comparison to domestic students. Additionally, Grayson (2008b) concluded that sense of coherence should be included in attempts to explain first-year achievement for international students. Both of the above studies were conducted in Canada. Song (2004) found that both domestic and international business students perceived that instruction sessions were highly effective and helpful for their research needs. Therefore, the present study deepened the comparison of international and American student engagement.

Finally, Zhao, Kuh, and Carini (2005) compared activities of international and American students in selected areas related to student learning, personal development, and satisfaction with college, including the degree to which they perceive their campus to be supportive of academic and social needs. They found that first-year international students were more engaged in educational activities than American students, and they reported more gains in desired college outcomes. By their senior year, however, the engagement patterns become more similar.

Academic Achievement/Success

There are many definitions of student academic achievement. It is commonly defined as the extent to which students are achieving their education goals, and it is often measured by assessment. Academic achievement has been extensively covered by the literature as well (Delgado, 2008; Duran, 2008). Delgado (2008) examined student demographics as they relate to academic achievement. Additionally, literature described challenges in the field of assessment of English learners’ achievement as the large-scale assessments intend to hold schools accountable for what students know on the basis of their performance assessment. Duran’s (2008) research suggested that an alternative foundation for assessments that provides more valid information about the learning capabilities and achievements must be developed. As Pascarella and Terenzini (2005, p. 397) stated,

[grade point-averages are the lingua franca of the academic instructional world, the keys to students’ standing and continued enrollment, to admission to majors and enrollment caps, to program and degree completion, to admission to graduate and professional schools, and to employment opportunities.

In addition, academic achievement or grades is a convenient quantitative summary of a prospective employee’s success in college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

A majority of existing literature on international students is centered on challenges they face adapting to the new host societies and the learning environment. Adapting to customs and traditions, campus life, and American society is often quite challenging for international students. Therefore, they are more likely than their American counterparts to feel lonely and isolated (Dillard & Chisolm, 1983; Mori, 2000), which at times reduces their participation in activities tied to success in college. Thus, Dozier (2001) described focusing more on academic achievement as one of the common coping mechanisms. Novena (2004) also suggested that academic success enhanced personal confidence and
status, helping students to fit in. In addition, Parikh (2008) described and explored a paradox where international students who seem to have lower than average campus involvement had higher than average GPAs. Hence, some literature suggested that to compensate for problems in social life, international students channel their efforts toward academics, which might happen at the expense of the student engagement.

**Academic Success of International Students**

Several studies were found on academic success of international students. Boyer and Sedlacek (1988), for example, studied the effectiveness of non-cognitive variables in predicting college grades and persistence for international students; they found that self-confidence and availability of a strong support person consistently predicted GPA. Further, Abel (2002) indicated that academic success for international students is dependent on their language proficiency, learning strategies, classroom dynamics, and social and educational assistance provided by the institutions.

Furthermore, Hagedorn and Mi-Chung (2005) found that international students in community colleges perform slightly better academically than American students. In addition, Westwood and Barker’s (1990) results indicated that overall achievement rates were higher and drop-out rates were lower for international students who participated in a peer-pairing program. Additionally, Haydon (2004) found that social integration and cultural adaptation directly and positively correlated to academic success. Finally, Stoyloff (1997) examined factors associated with the academic achievement of international freshman and proved that language proficiency and selected learning strategies correlated with students’ academic performance as measured by GPA, credits earned, and number of withdrawals.

**Satisfaction with Educational Experience**

In this study, student satisfaction is an intermediary factor for academic success. Student satisfaction with the college environment is vital as it “covers the students’ subjective experience during the college years and perceptions of the value of educational experience” (Astin, 1993, p. 273). It is a separate and significant educational outcome considering the time and energy students invest in attending college. Astin’s (1993) satisfaction measures included satisfaction with the total undergraduate experience and satisfaction with relationships with faculty, curriculum and instruction, student life, individual support services, and facilities. He found that satisfaction was enhanced by frequent interaction with faculty and other students, which ties into one of the benchmarks of effective educational practice: student-faculty interaction. Astin’s satisfaction measures were embedded in the NSSE instrument; thus, his definition and research on satisfaction are most relevant for this study.

**Methods and Data Sources**

This study utilized a stratified sample of the 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement data that comprises a 20% random sample of all first-year and senior-year international students who attended a U.S. institution and a 20% random sample of all first-year and senior students who were U.S. citizens and attended a U.S. institution. The data included the responses from the 2008 College Student Report (CSR) Survey. In 2008, 769 institutions participated in the NSSE survey with an average response rate of 37%; 67 institutions administered the paper version, 463 institutions administered the web-only version, and 233 institutions administered the web+ version. The 2008 CSR Survey contained 28 questions, including 109 items which represent good practices in undergraduate education that “reflect behaviors by students and institutions that are associated with desired outcomes of college” (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2011, *what is the survey about*). Sequential multiple regression models were employed to predict students’ overall satisfaction and academic outcome (measured by GPA). Student engagement (measured by several questions) was an independent variable; student satisfaction (measured by question 13: How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?) and academic success (measured by question 25: What have most of your grades been up to now at this institution?) were the dependent variables of the study.
variables in the models included the following: age, gender, nationality, race/ethnicity, year in college, institutional type/Carnegie classification, institutional type/control, level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment. Further details on methods and data sources could be found in work by Korobova (2012).

Limitations

There are several limitations for this study. First, NSSE’s sample included only 20% of students who have taken the survey; thus, only sample data, not the population data was explored. Second, NSSE data describes only an undergraduate student population; consequently excluding graduate international and American students. Third, not all institutions administer NSSE surveys; therefore, only data from those who chose to participate were used. Fourth, question 17 asks, “Are you an international student or foreign national?”; therefore, there is no way to distinguish international students from foreign nationals; consequently, including Legal Permanent Residents (or Permanent Resident Aliens) who are considered foreign nationals in addition to international students. Fifth, students are not asked to indicate their country of origin; thus, it was not possible to compare students by country or area of origin; hence, excluding possibility to compare to some previous studies that do examine population by country of origin. Sixth, NSSE does not measure language proficiency; hence, critical effect of language proficiency was not taken into consideration in this particular study, which has been linked to student engagement and academic success in some previous studies. Seventh, the question inquiring about the students’ majors is open-ended as opposed to multiple-choice, which might lead to some discrepancies and inaccuracies as it could have potentials issues with accurate grouping and generalizing. Finally, data is self-reported, which often raises questions of validity and reliability in quantitative studies as discussed above.

Results

Selective characteristics of international and American seniors can be found in Table 1. Twenty percent random sample of all first-year and senior international students who attended a U.S. institution and 20 percent random sample of all first-year and senior American students who attended a U.S. institution were utilized. Results from the descriptive statistics revealed that 66,056 respondents, international and American students represented 4.6% and 95.1%, respectively.

Benchmarks

Exploratory factor analysis was run for each one of the five NSSE benchmarks. It tested whether variables grouped for each of them hold for the sample. This sample was very specific as it included a disproportionally larger percentage of international students than the population of the 2008 NSSE respondents. Thus, there was a need to generate the constructs of the benchmarks for this specific sample.

Variables that measure benchmarks were selected based on NSSE benchmarks. Other components were extracted that measure benchmarks more accurately for this sample. Based on the results from exploratory analysis, five new benchmarks emerged and were constructed using the same technique as Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research (research center that administers NSSE) used to construct the original benchmarks (Table 2): Benchmark 1: Level of Academic Challenge; Benchmark 2: Student-Faculty Interaction; Benchmark 3: Enriching Educational Experiences; Benchmark 4: Supportive Campus Environment: Quality of Relationships; Benchmark 5: Supportive Campus Environment: Institutional Emphasis.
Table 1
Selective Characteristics of International and American Seniors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selective Characteristics</th>
<th>International</th>
<th></th>
<th>American</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 or younger</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-23</td>
<td>868</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>22,369</td>
<td>67.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-29</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>4,819</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>2,934</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-4565</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>2,634</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 55</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>11,708</td>
<td>35.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>957</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>21,367</td>
<td>64.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Native American</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian, Asian American or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>1,327</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>2,163</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (non-Hispanic)</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>24,264</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican or Mexican American</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>820</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>676</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>754</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to Respond</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>2,239</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Classification: Control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>883</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>20,531</td>
<td>61.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>675</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>12,639</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,558</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>33,174</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student Engagement

The results of this study indicated that for Benchmark 1, \( p = .059 \) or \( p > .05 \), meaning there were no statistically significant differences in variables measuring this benchmark between international and American students during their senior year, international students scored slightly higher in this benchmark. For Benchmark 2, \( p = .440 \) or \( p > .05 \), meaning there were no statistically significant differences in variables measuring this benchmark between international and American students during their senior year, American students scored slightly higher in this benchmark. For Benchmark 3, \( p = .009 \) or \( p < .05 \), meaning there were statistically significant differences in variables measuring this benchmark between international and American students during their senior year, international students scored higher in this benchmark.

For Benchmark 4, \( p = .470 \) or \( p > .05 \), meaning there were no statistically significant differences in variables measuring this benchmark between international and American students during their senior year, American students scored slightly higher. For Benchmark 5, \( p < .001 \), meaning there were statistically significant differences in variables measuring this benchmark between international and American students during their senior year, international students scored significantly higher.
Table 2
Inter-Item Correlation Mean and Reliability Statistics for the New Benchmarks for Students during Their Senior Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benchmarks</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark 1 Level of Academic Challenge</td>
<td>.834</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coursework emphasized: synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coursework emphasized: making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of their conclusions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coursework emphasized: applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coursework emphasized: analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory, such as examining a particular case or situation in depth and considering its components</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark 3 Enriching Educational Experiences</td>
<td>.831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had serious conversation with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark 5 Supportive Campus Environment/Institutional Emphases</td>
<td>.801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional emphasis: helping you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional emphasis: providing the support you need to thrive socially</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark 2 Student-Faculty Interaction</td>
<td>.768</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received prompt written or oral feedback from faculty on your academic performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark 4 Supportive Campus Environment/Quality of Relationships</td>
<td>.708</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality: your relationships with faculty members</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality: your relationships with administrative personnel and offices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality: your relationships with other students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student Satisfaction
It was determined that 74 (2.3%) international students evaluated their entire experience at their current institution as poor; 353 (11.0%) as fair; 1,615 (50.2%) as good; and 1,177 (36.6%) as excellent. Alternatively, 1,234 (2.0%) American students evaluated their entire experience at their current institution as poor; 6,651 (10.6%) as fair; 30,055 (48.0%) as good; and 24,672 (39.3%) as excellent. The mean of how international students and American students evaluate their entire educational
experience at their current institution was good, with American students evaluating it slightly higher than international students.

The regression revealed that 11 predictors of satisfaction with the entire educational experience were found significant with \( p < .001 \). The strongest predictor of satisfaction with the entire educational experience was Benchmark 4 with standardized coefficient \( \beta = .432 \), meaning that it can be predicted that students enrolled in institutions with a supportive campus environment as it relates to quality of relationship had higher satisfaction with the entire experience compared to students enrolled in institutions without such a supportive campus environment. Additional predictors and details could be found in Table 3.

### Table 3

**Regression for Prediction of Satisfaction with Entire Educational Experience**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>( \beta )</th>
<th>( p )</th>
<th>CI Lower</th>
<th>CI Upper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>.012</td>
<td>.159</td>
<td>-.004</td>
<td>.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (female)</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>.070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality (international)</td>
<td>-.045</td>
<td>-.011</td>
<td>.205</td>
<td>-.115</td>
<td>.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Control</td>
<td>.049</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>.079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRU Extensive</td>
<td>.159</td>
<td>.067</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>.115</td>
<td>.202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRU Intensive</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td>.012</td>
<td>.182</td>
<td>-.012</td>
<td>.063</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA Liberal Arts</td>
<td>.105</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>.140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA General</td>
<td>-.086</td>
<td>-.030</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>-.137</td>
<td>-.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Institutional Type</td>
<td>.045</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>.141</td>
<td>-.015</td>
<td>.104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of International Students</td>
<td>.014</td>
<td>.030</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>-.168</td>
<td>-.018</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>-.327</td>
<td>-.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>-.054</td>
<td>-.031</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>-.088</td>
<td>-.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math and Sciences</td>
<td>-.017</td>
<td>-.010</td>
<td>.261</td>
<td>-.046</td>
<td>.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-professional</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>-.002</td>
<td>.831</td>
<td>-.081</td>
<td>.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark 1</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.137</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark 2</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.035</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark 3</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.371</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark 4</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>.432</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark 5</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.138</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*\( p < .001 \)

### Academic Success

It was determined that 33 (1.1%) international students reported most of their grades up to now at their current institution as C- or lower; 78 (2.4%) as C; 139 (4.3%) as C+; 208 (6.5%) as B-; 587 (18.3%) as B; 643 (20.0%) as B+; 662 (20.6%) as A-; and 864 (26.9%) as A. Alternatively, it was determined that 584 (0.9%) American students reported most of their grades up to now at their current institution as C- or lower; 1,628 (2.6%) as C; 2,984 (4.7%) as C+; 4,846 (7.8%) as B-; 12,609 (20.2%) as B; 12,764 (20.4%) as B+; 13,015 (20.8) as A-; and 14,035 (22.5%) as A. The mean of the grades up to now of international and American students at their current institutions was B+ with international students’ grades being slightly higher.

The regression revealed that 10 predictors of academic success were found significant with \( p < .001 \). The strongest predictor of academic success was Benchmark 4 with standardized coefficient \( \beta = .123 \), meaning that it can be predicted that students enrolled in institutions with a supportive campus environment is as it relates to quality of relationships have higher academic success compared to students enrolled in institutions without such supportive campus environments. Additional predictors and details can be found in Table 4.
Table 4
Regression for Prediction of Academic Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>CI Lower</th>
<th>CI Upper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.151</td>
<td>.095</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>.118</td>
<td>.184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (female)</td>
<td>.354</td>
<td>.110</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>.289</td>
<td>.419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality (international)</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.917</td>
<td>-1.161</td>
<td>.179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Control</td>
<td>.263</td>
<td>.087</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>.189</td>
<td>.337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRU Extensive</td>
<td>.164</td>
<td>.034</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.058</td>
<td>.271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRU Intensive</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>.070</td>
<td>-.007</td>
<td>.177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA Liberal Arts</td>
<td>-.151</td>
<td>-.042</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>-.238</td>
<td>-.064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA General</td>
<td>-.079</td>
<td>-.014</td>
<td>.210</td>
<td>-.202</td>
<td>.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Institutional Type</td>
<td>.042</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.573</td>
<td>-.104</td>
<td>.188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of International Students</td>
<td>.035</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>.056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>-.438</td>
<td>-.023</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>-.826</td>
<td>-.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>.045</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>.279</td>
<td>-.037</td>
<td>.127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math and Sciences</td>
<td>.222</td>
<td>.068</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>.150</td>
<td>.293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-professional</td>
<td>.198</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>.030</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>.376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark 1</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.089</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark 2</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.075</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark 3</td>
<td>-.002</td>
<td>-.036</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>-.003</td>
<td>-.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark 4</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>.123</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark 5</td>
<td>-.004</td>
<td>-.081</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>-.006</td>
<td>-.003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.001

Conclusion

Benchmarks

The study covered the interrelationship among the variables that measure the five NSSE benchmarks of effective educational practice for international and American students during their senior year. For the present sample for benchmark 1, international students in this sample did less of “number of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more,” “number of written papers or reports between 5 and 19 pages,” and “number of reports of fewer than 5 pages” activities compared to other activities. For benchmark 2, international students did less of “tutored or taught other students (paid or voluntarily)” and “participated in a community-based project (e.g., service learning) as part of a regular course” activities compared to other activities. For benchmark 3, international students did less of “worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.)” and “discussed ideas from your readings of classes with faculty members outside of class” compared to other activities. For benchmark 4, international students did less of “practicum, internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment” and “community service or volunteer work” compared to other activities. Finally, for benchmark 5, international students felt that institutions provided more of these conditions “quality of your relationships with other students,” “quality of your relationships with faculty members,” and “quality of your relationships with administrative personnel and offices” that compared to other conditions.

Personal observations of international students by the researchers, as professionals in the field, support these findings above. First, during their senior year, students in the sample institutions are offered more coursework emphasizing analyzing ideas ($M = 3.27$), synthesizing ideas ($M = 3.09$), and making judgments about values and applying theories to practice ($M = 3.05$); spend more hours per week preparing for class ($M = 4.20$); and work harder then they think to meet instructors’ expectations
Second, they work more with other students on projects in and out of class ($M = 2.78$), contribute to class discussions ($M = 3.14$), make class presentations ($M = 2.86$), and discuss ideas from class outside of class ($M = 2.87$). Third, seniors tend to work on papers and projects that require integration of ideas from various sources ($M = 3.36$), talk more about career plans with faculty ($M = 2.51$), and receive prompt feedback from faculty on their performance ($M = 2.86$). Fourth, they spent less time on co-curricular activities ($M = 2.24$); participate in learning communities ($M = 2.50$); and study abroad ($M = 2.34$). Finally, during their senior year, students are less concerned with institutional emphasis on providing support to succeed academically ($M = 3.00$), socially ($M = 2.26$), and helping cope with non-academic responsibilities ($M = 2.03$).

New benchmarks that held true for the present sample were benchmark 1, level of academic challenge; benchmark 2, student-faculty interaction; benchmark 3, enriching educational experiences; benchmark 4, supportive campus environment/quality of relationships; and benchmark 5, supportive campus environment/institutional emphases. It is important to note that the new benchmarks included different variables from the original NSSE benchmarks and NSSE’s active and collaborative learning benchmark did not hold true for the present sample. Examination of the new benchmarks revealed that international students scored higher compared to American students in level of academic challenge, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment/quality of relationships during their senior year, while American students scored higher in student-faculty interaction and supportive campus environment/quality of relationships. This echoes Zhao, Kuh, and Carini’s (2005) study that found international students were more engaged than American students in some areas and less engaged in others; thus, informing practitioners in which areas international students require more support to be successful.

As professionals in the field (and former international students themselves), the researchers observed throughout their extensive careers in American higher education that international students tend to study in groups, often in their native language as opposed to English; study longer hours; and often study more on weekends when American students work or travel home. It may be that these study strategies proved more effective for them. Additionally, international students tend to interact and connect more with international faculty, particularly from countries or areas of the world where they are from. A previous study conducted by the researchers (Korobova, 2010) suggested that interaction with bilingual faculty has a positive correlation with academic achievement. This is partially explained by the enhanced level of student-faculty interaction that occurs when such communication takes place. The critical mass piece plays in here indirectly, meaning that representation of bilingual faculty contributes to bringing comfort or familiarity within the education environment.

Student Engagement

The researchers examined if there was a statistically significant difference between international and American students in the levels of student engagement as represented by benchmarks for this particular sample during their senior year. Independent samples t-test revealed that for the present sample there were no statistically significant differences in variables measuring level of academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, and supportive campus environment/quality of relationships, and there were statistically significant differences in variables measuring enriching educational experiences and supportive campus environment/institutional emphasis for students during their senior year. International students scored slightly higher on enriching educational experiences and supportive campus environment/institutional emphasis. This echoes Zhao, Kuh, and Carini’s (2005) study that found “by their senior year, international students tend to be more adapted to the cultural milieu and generally do not differ from American seniors in their patterns of student engagement…” (p. 224). Presently, there is evidence that colleges encourage more international student engagement through various initiatives, orientations, and programs to encourage cross-cultural interaction (U.S. News & World Report, 2012).

This evidence supports the researchers’ personal and professional observations. International students during their senior year tend to have more serious conversations with students of different races or ethnicity and students who are different from them in terms of their religious beliefs, political
opinions, or personal values, also confirmed by NSSE findings. In addition, they value more institutional emphasis on helping them cope with their non-academic responsibilities and providing the support they need to thrive socially.

Thus, this study found that international students scored slightly higher than American students on enriching educational experiences and supportive campus environment/institutional emphases during their senior year. Specifically, international students have more conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than their own and with students who are very different from them in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values. Additionally, they feel more strongly than American students that institutions they are enrolled in emphasize helping them cope with their non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.) and provide the support they need to thrive socially.

Student Satisfaction

The researchers investigated the levels of satisfaction of international and American students for their entire educational experience at this institution during their senior year and examined if there was a statistically significant difference in the level of satisfaction between international and American students during their first and senior years. The level of satisfaction of the largest proportion of international and American students for the present sample was good (50.2% and 48.9%, respectively) followed by excellent (36.6% and 39.4%, respectively) during their senior year. T-tests revealed that there were statistically significant differences in levels of satisfaction between international and American students during their first year, but there were no statistically significant differences in the levels of satisfaction between international and American students during their senior year.

It is also important to note that international and American students may have different definitions of satisfaction with the entire educational experience. For American students, this might mean they ask themselves whether they are treated equally and with respect and whether they are satisfied with the level of customer service at this particular institution of higher education. The notion of customer service has been imbedded in U.S. higher education in the recent past and is now a compulsory component of it. International students, on the other hand, might come from cultures where such customer service does not exist at all or where such customer service is a norm. Thus, their interpretation and definition of satisfaction with entire educational experience could be completely different from their American counterparts. Definition of satisfaction may also depend on enrollment in public vs. private institutions. In private institutions, students may have the philosophy of “I am paying for this and I deserve it” and in public institutions have a philosophy of “I have to work to earn it.” Therefore, engagement levels of these students might consequently be different as well.

The present study found that international and American students similarly evaluated their entire educational experience at this institution between good and excellent; however, American students evaluated it slightly higher than international students. Further, academic success measured by grades was between B+ and A- for both groups of students; however, international students evaluated it slightly higher than American students.

Academic Success

The present study described the academic success of international and American students during their senior year as measured by most of the grades up to now at this institution and examined if there was a statistically significant difference in the academic success between international and American students during their first and senior year. The largest proportion of the grades of international and American students in the present study were A, A-, B+, and B (in that order) (26.9%, 20.6%, 20.9%, 18.3% and 22.5%, 20.8%, 20.4%, 20.2%, respectively) during their senior year. T-tests revealed that there were statistically significant differences between grades of international and American students during their first year, and there were no statistically significant differences between grades of international and American students during their senior year. Again, an explanation for this may have to do with adaptation and assimilation.
International freshmen had higher grades than American freshmen, while the grades of international and American seniors were similar. Some of the international students who have a special connection with the researchers revealed that immediately after their arrival they spend more time studying to succeed academically and to compensate for a less vibrant social life. However, as time goes on and they get involved as much (if not more than) their American peers, they spend less time studying and their grades experience slight dips equaling the grades of American students. It is important to note that by no means should grades be the only measure of academic success. However, grades were used for this study as they were provided by NSSE.

The study also found that the best predictors of satisfaction with the entire experience at this institution and academic success measured by grades were the five benchmarks of effective educational practice: level of academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, supportive campus environment/quality of relationships, and supportive campus environment/institutional emphasis. Thus, it can be predicted that the more a student is involved in such activities and the more these conditions increase, the higher student satisfaction and academic success is for both international and American students. Further, both institutional type and critical mass affect student satisfaction and academic success.

Significance of the Study’s Findings

Results of this study provide specific recommendations for practice and policy. In terms of practice, this study more fully informs administrators, faculty, and staff about what international students do while they are in college primarily during their senior year, thus informing them about how to intervene in order to improve international students’ experiences while studying in the U.S. In order for international students to remain on U.S. campuses, they must continue to express high levels of satisfaction with their educational experience. Thus, a supportive campus environment as it relates to quality of relationships, institutional emphasis, high level of academic challenge, and high level student-faculty interaction are critical for satisfaction with their educational experience, in that order. More attention should be directed to students enrolled in private institutions; students majoring in humanities; students enrolled in BA General institutions, MA I and II institutions, and other institutions; and males as they tend to experience lower satisfaction with the entire educational experience (as was demonstrated in Table 3 earlier). Specialized workshops, individualized counseling, online tools, and mentoring and pairing programs are among other strategies that should be designed, implemented, and offered for students representing these particular groups based on these findings and professional organizations’ latest recommendations.

Additionally, findings could be used by international students themselves and their parents to inform them about which effective education practices could improve their student engagement and, consequently, their academic success. Specifically, once on U.S. campuses international students should seek out higher level of academic challenge and strive to arrange for meaningful interaction with their faculty. Additionally, they should pursue enriching educational experiences, such as having serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own; having serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values; participating in practicum, internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment; getting involved in community service or volunteer work; and participating in a learning community or some other formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together, faculty in order to have higher student satisfaction and academic success.

Furthermore, professional organizations such as NAFSA, IIE, AIEA, and others may want to create interest groups focused on international student engagement, satisfaction, and academic success. They could also offer sessions at regional and national conferences and online workshops and webinars. Due to the specialized profession of international educators and the fact that institutions often have only one or two international educators on staff, the most effective professional growth opportunity (and at times the only one) is sharing experiences with each other through professional networking. It is important, however, to note that these workshops should be based on institutional types as this research
found differences between institutional types. As a result, strategies should differ as well depending on institutional types. Specific take-aways for professionals include implementing activities focusing on international students’ relationships with faculty members, administrative personnel and offices, and with other international and American students. In addition, they need to advocate within their individual institutions to ensure institutional emphasis on helping international students cope with their non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.) and providing the support they need to thrive socially.

References


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The Experiences of American International Students in a Large Irish University

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Abstract
Growing numbers of American students are travelling overseas to study abroad and enroll in full degree programs. Despite this trend, relatively little is known about the experiences of United States (U.S.) students abroad. The aim of this research was to examine the experiences of American international students in Ireland. Findings suggest that while U.S. students experience some adaptation problems, overall, they adapt well to studying in Ireland. Subtle differences in long-term and short-term international students’ levels of social support and academic satisfaction were also detected. This research has important practical implications for facilitating the adaption of U.S. students abroad. At a time when many governments and academic institutions are devising strategies to attract international students, this research is timely and necessary.

Keywords: international students; psychological wellbeing; sociocultural adaptation; cross-cultural adjustment.

The field of international education is dynamic and expanding rapidly. The U.S. is one of the leading host destinations for students wishing to enhance their education through an international perspective, with around 19% of all international students studying in American higher education institutions (HEIs). However, in recent years there has been an increase in the number of U.S. college students travelling overseas to pursue study abroad academic degree programs. Recent reports have shown that 273,996 American students participated in study abroad programs in 2009/2010 and approximately 43,000 students from the U.S. pursued full degrees at the postsecondary level worldwide in 2011 (Institute of International Education, 2012; Open Doors, 2012). Of this group, approximately 4,400 students studied in Ireland during the 2011/2012 academic year (Education Ireland, 2012). Study abroad programs have become a key component of American HEIs’ commitments to internationalization, and there is a belief among educators that such exchanges have many benefits for students, including enhanced adaptability, increased openness to cultural diversity and, in some cases, improved proficiency in a foreign language (Clarke, Flaherty, Wright, & McMillen, 2009; Dolby, 2007; Hunley, 2010).

Experiences of U.S. International Students
Despite the drive among global educators to attract larger numbers of American international students to their institutions, research has shown that some U.S. students experience difficulties abroad (O’Reilly, Ryan, & Hickey, 2010; Citron, 1996; Dolby, 2007; Pitts, 2009). Adjusting to a new academic environment has been shown to be particularly stressful for international students (Coates & Dickinson, 2012; Chung, Kelliher, & Smith, 2006). Pitts (2009) found that the academic expectations of American
students on study abroad programs in Europe were frequently unrealistic, with many students feeling shocked when they discovered that their academic responsibilities abroad were equivalent to those in their home country. Other studies have shown that U.S. students travelling to a country where English is not the first language sometimes face language difficulties which negatively impacts on their overall adjustment (Savicki, Adams, Wilde, & Binder, 2008). Language difficulties may also be experienced in Anglophone contexts. For example, American study abroad students who travelled to a country where the local language was English reported having difficulty understanding local accents and idiomatic expressions (O’Reilly et al., 2010).

As a consequence of experiencing linguistic demands, Citron (1996) found that American international students tend to retreat into their conational networks with other American students, leading to less cultural engagement. Cultural engagement has been extolled as a major benefit of studying abroad. Sociocultural adaptation, defined by Ward and colleagues (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992) as an individual’s ability to “fit in” or execute effective interactions in a host environment, is sometimes problematic for American international students (Kenyon, Frohard-Dourlent, & Roth, 2012; Savicki, 2010; Savicki et al., 2008). In one study, Kenyon et al. (2012) found that American students studying in Canada encountered difficulties familiarizing themselves with host country bureaucracy and expressed frustration at the unexpected nature of these difficulties. The sociocultural adaptation of American students may also be affected by prevailing attitudes toward Americans in the countries in which they sojourn. A number of studies have demonstrated that anti-American attitudes and stereotypes about Americans negatively affect U.S. international students’ adjustment (Dolby, 2007; Kenyon et al., 2012). For example, Dolby (2007) recounted that participants in her study had some unpleasant interactions about American politics with host nationals due to negative perceptions about their home country. As a result, students reported consciously trying not to appear as a “typical American.”

Social networks play an important role in international students’ adjustment. Research indicates that forming friendships with host nationals is important because students who do so ultimately adjust to college life abroad more effectively (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Trice, 2004; Zheng & Berry, 1991). However, research with American international students has shown that many students find it difficult to form friendships with local students (Kenyon et al., 2012; Pitts, 2009). Pederson, Neighbors, Larimer and Lee (2011) argue that such difficulties ultimately hinder their cultural experience and are associated with higher levels of homesickness. However, other researchers have emphasized the importance of maintaining such conational ties since these networks appear to provide comfort and stability for students (Afshar-Mohajer & Sung, 2002; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Pitts, 2009). Pitts (2009) found that U.S. study abroad students used their conational networks as a resource to help them make the cognitive, behavioural and affective adjustments necessary to succeed abroad.

A further significant stressor for international students is financing their sojourn. Despite assumptions that many international students who go abroad are wealthy, Pitts (2009) found that managing finances was of major concern to study abroad students. Financial stressors can distract international students from their academic studies, adversely affect their sense of stability, and threaten the status that students have become accustomed to in their home country (Akande, 1994; Clark Oropeza, Fitzgibbon, & Baron, 1991; Lacina, 2002; Telbis, Helgeson, & Kingsbury, 2014; Walker, 1999). It is important for educators to pay attention to students’ difficulties relating to finance, social support, perceived discrimination, sociocultural adaptation, language and academic adjustment, as such difficulties can have potentially detrimental effects on international students’ psychological and physical health (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Trice; 2004; Zheng & Berry, 1991). Hunley (2010) has shown that psychological distress is a central feature of students’ cross-cultural adaptation, specifically for American international students.

**Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is the model of cross-cultural adaptation proposed by Ward and colleagues (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Ward & Kennedy,
1992; Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Ward & Searle, 1991). This model distinguishes between two domains of cross-cultural adaptation: (a) psychological adaptation (i.e., psychological wellbeing or satisfaction in a new cultural environment) and (b) sociocultural adjustment. Ward and Kennedy (1993) propose that psychological adaptation can best be understood in terms of a stress and coping framework and that sociocultural adaptation is best explained within a social skills or culture learning paradigm. This framework has much strength; for example, rather than emphasizing the negative aspects of cross-cultural adaptation such as culture shock, it describes both social and affective components of adaptation, and views maladjustment as one outcome of the transition experience (James, Hunsley, Navara, & Alles, 2004; Oberg, 1960). Ward and Searle’s (1991) theory of cross-cultural adaptation is one of the most comprehensive models in this area and was thus chosen as a framework for this research.

This study explores the adaptation of both studying abroad for one semester or one academic year, and long-term degree seeking study abroad American international students. It is important to distinguish between these two groups as researchers have highlighted the need to take the characteristics of a sojourning group into account when investigating their experiences (O’Reilly et al., 2010; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). In terms of differences between the two groups, Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) propose that study abroad programs provide advantages that longer sojourns do not, including affordability, academic flexibility, and a time-frame and program that may seem less risky to students who are apprehensive about spending a longer period of time abroad. However, other research has shown that studying abroad brings with it particular stressors related to academic adjustment (Pitts, 2009). Compounding these problems, Pitts (2009) has proposed that study abroad programs do not afford students as many opportunities for intercultural growth, although the impact of this on American students’ experiences is unclear. Also uncertain is the role that social support plays in the adaptation of study abroad versus long-term American international students. For example, O’Reilly (2011) has highlighted how study abroad students are generally more likely to be part of a structured program and invited to attend events organized by the host institution. As a result of this, they may find it easier to make friends with conational and other international students; something which has been shown to be highly effective for study abroad students in easing their adaption, but not in gaining the maximum cultural benefit from the exchange.

The aims of this study are to examine the cross-cultural adaptation of American international students in Ireland using Ward and Searle’s framework, specifically by (a) exploring the experiences of study abroad and long-term American international students, and (b) comparing their experiences to those of a sample of host Irish students. The data used in this study were gathered as part of a larger research project exploring the psychological and sociocultural adaptation of a diverse group of international students in Ireland, the findings of which are detailed by O’Reilly et al. (2010) and O’Reilly, Hickey and Ryan (2013).

Method

Data Collection

Full ethical approval for this study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Board at the institution where this research was carried out. In accordance with data protection guidelines, an e-mail was initially sent by the institution’s international office on behalf of the researchers to a list of students who met the definition of an international student (i.e., not an Irish citizen, resident or of Irish nationality). An e-mail was also sent to all Irish students by the relevant administration office. This e-mail contained an invitation to take part in the study with a link to a secure online website, and a reminder e-mail was sent to students after one week. Participation in this study was voluntary. To increase the response rate, the survey was administered midway through the first semester of the 2009/2010 academic year at a time when students were not taking exams. The estimated response rates in this study were 18.76% for international students and 4.95% for host students.
Participants
For the purposes of this study, data from international students who identified themselves American \( (n = 150) \) were extracted from a larger data set \((29.58\% \text{ of the total sample})\). A random sample of 149 host students \( (\text{constituting } 17\% \text{ of the total sample of Irish students}) \) was also extracted. Of the 150 American participants, 99 were study abroad students and 51 were long-term international students (see Table 1).

As this table shows, the majority of study abroad \((71.7\% )\) and long-term \((68.6\% )\) students were female. Study abroad students were most likely to be undergraduate students \((71.7\% )\) and studying Arts & Celtic Studies \((51.5\% )\). On the other hand, American students enrolled in long-term programs were most likely to be postgraduate students \((82.4\% )\), and the majority of long-term international students were studying Arts & Celtic Studies \((29.4\% )\) or Life Sciences \((29.4\% )\). The majority of host students were also female \((63.1\% )\) undergraduate students \((79.2\% )\) studying Arts & Celtic Studies \((29.5\% )\).

Measures
First, all participants completed a socio-demographic questionnaire designed by the authors which included questions on gender, faculty, time of arrival, degree level and academic satisfaction. Second, all participants completed the Measure of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988) which assesses perceptions of social support from friends, family and a significant other. Responses to 12 items are scored on a seven-point scale and higher scores indicate higher levels of perceived social support. Next, participants completed the College Stress Inventory (CSI; Solberg et al., 1991) which comprises 25 stress items measuring academic, financial and social stress. Higher scores on this scale indicate higher levels of stress. Finally, all participants completed the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10; Kessler et al., 2002). The K10 contains ten items which asks respondents to rate how often they have experienced various forms of distress in the previous 30 days. Higher scores on this measure indicate higher levels of psychological distress.

Table 1
Socio-demographic Characteristics of American and Host Student Samples \( (N = 299)\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>American</th>
<th>American</th>
<th>Host (Irish)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Long-term</td>
<td>Study abroad</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M(SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>25.46(3.97)</td>
<td>20.85 (1.45)</td>
<td>24.11 (7.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>n(%)</td>
<td>n(%)</td>
<td>n(%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>35 (68.6)</td>
<td>71 (71.7)</td>
<td>94 (63.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16 (31.4)</td>
<td>28 (28.3)</td>
<td>55 (36.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>9 (17.6)</td>
<td>93 (93.9)</td>
<td>118 (79.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>42 (82.4)</td>
<td>6 (6.1)</td>
<td>31 (20.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts and Celtic Studies</td>
<td>15 (29.4)</td>
<td>51 (51.5)</td>
<td>44 (29.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business &amp; Law</td>
<td>10 (19.6)</td>
<td>26 (26.3)</td>
<td>26 (17.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering, Maths &amp; Physical Science</td>
<td>6 (11.8)</td>
<td>9 (9.1)</td>
<td>36 (24.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Sciences</td>
<td>5 (9.8)</td>
<td>4 (4.0)</td>
<td>10 (6.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Sciences</td>
<td>15 (29.4)</td>
<td>9 (9.1)</td>
<td>33 (22.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>51 (100)</td>
<td>99 (100)</td>
<td>149 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Time post-arrival refers to the number of months that have passed between participants’ arrival in Ireland (long-term and study abroad international students) or enrollment in the university (host students) and data collection.
International students also completed a measure of English language proficiency designed by the author. In addition, they completed the Index of Sojourner Social Support (ISSS; Ong & Ward, 2005). The ISSS is an 18-item measure which contains two subscales capturing socioemotional and instrumental support, and higher scores indicate better levels of social support. Two measures of social support were used to capture the specific levels of long-term international students’ social support (Ong & Ward, 2005) and to allow for comparisons between the host sample and international student groups. The Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS; Ward & Kennedy, 1999) was also administered to international students. The SCAS has 29 items measuring the amount of difficulty experienced in a number of everyday activities, and higher scores indicate higher levels of sociocultural difficulties. Finally, international students completed the General Ethnic Discrimination Scale (GED; Landrine et al., 2006). Each of the 18 items on this scale assesses the frequency of discrimination in a different arena and asks participants to rate the stress level of their experiences. These measures were chosen as they have been shown to be reliable and valid in similar studies with college students, including international students. The reliability of the scales in this study was very good as Cronbach’s alpha for the study instruments ranged between .74 and .97.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analyses were first carried out to provide an insight into international students’ experiences in Ireland. A series of one-way between-groups multivariate analyses (MANOVAs), between-groups analysis of variance tests (ANOVAs) and post-hoc analyses were then used to explore differences between long-term international students, study abroad students and host students.

Table 2
Mean (Standard Deviations) for American and Host Student Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>American Long-term n = 51</th>
<th>American Study Abroad n = 99</th>
<th>Host (Irish) Students n = 149</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographic</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic satisfaction</td>
<td>1-6</td>
<td>4.31 (0.97)</td>
<td>4.02 (0.66)</td>
<td>4.08 (1.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>5.62 (0.97)</td>
<td>5.86 (0.72)</td>
<td>5.51 (1.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant other support</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>5.52 (1.4)</td>
<td>5.66 (0.73)</td>
<td>5.48 (1.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family support</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>5.66 (1.23)</td>
<td>6.03 (0.96)</td>
<td>5.56 (1.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends support</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>5.66 (1.19)</td>
<td>5.95 (0.73)</td>
<td>5.5 (1.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support (ISSS)</td>
<td>1-90</td>
<td>58.79 (16.51)</td>
<td>56.40 (13.75)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental support</td>
<td>1-45</td>
<td>31.23 (8.92)</td>
<td>28.62 (7.95)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioemotional support</td>
<td>1-45</td>
<td>27.89 (8.4)</td>
<td>27.78 (6.93)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociocultural adaptation</td>
<td>1-145</td>
<td>50.86 (12.7)</td>
<td>49.93 (13.34)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination frequency</td>
<td>1-108</td>
<td>20.83 (4.39)</td>
<td>19.79 (4.97)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination appraisal</td>
<td>1-108</td>
<td>21.86 (8.54)</td>
<td>19.1 (4.22)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psychological Wellbeing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College stress</td>
<td>0-100</td>
<td>15.73 (10.6)</td>
<td>19.96 (11.52)</td>
<td>20.14 (13.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic stress</td>
<td>0-40</td>
<td>6.9 (4.96)</td>
<td>8.1 (5.49)</td>
<td>11.42 (7.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial stress</td>
<td>0-28</td>
<td>4.61 (4.94)</td>
<td>3.81 (3.8)</td>
<td>4.74 (5.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social stress</td>
<td>0-32</td>
<td>3.82 (3.5)</td>
<td>4.71 (3.48)</td>
<td>4.08 (3.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological distress</td>
<td>10-50</td>
<td>19.22 (5.61)</td>
<td>18.29 (5.83)</td>
<td>20.36 (6.95)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

Inspection of mean and standard deviation scores suggested that American international students were not experiencing significant adaptation difficulties. Subtle differences between international student groups were detected when these scores were examined, while differences between international students and their host (Irish) peers were also observed (see Table 2).

Results from the first MANOVA examining differences between long-term ($n = 40$) and study abroad ($n = 76$) international students on the measures of social support, sociocultural adaptation, college stress, academic satisfaction, perceived discrimination (GED frequency) and psychological wellbeing revealed there was a statistically significant difference between groups, $F (7, 108) = 2.392; p = .026$; Pillai’s Trace = .13, partial eta squared = .13. Long-term American international students had significantly higher levels of academic satisfaction than study abroad students (see Table 3). The second MANOVA examining differences between long-term international students ($n = 43$) and study abroad students ($n = 84$) on the subscales of the MSPSS, ISSS and CSI showed a statistically significant difference between groups, $F (8, 118) = 2.208; p = .031$; Pillai’s Trace = .13, partial eta squared = .13. Here, long-term international students reported significantly higher levels of instrumental social support than students on study abroad programs (see Table 3).

A third MANOVA comparing the experiences of long-term American international students ($n = 45$), study abroad students ($n = 87$) and host students ($n = 108$) on measures of social support (MSPSS), college stress, academic satisfaction and psychological distress revealed a significant difference between the three groups, $F (8, 470) = 2.917; p = .003$; Pillai’s Trace = .1, partial eta squared = .05. Significant differences were observed on the measures of perceived social support, college stress and psychological distress (see Table 4).

### Table 3
Differences between American Students on Long-Term and Study Abroad Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>American Long-term M (SD)</th>
<th>American Study abroad M (SD)</th>
<th>$F$ ($df = 1, 114$)</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic satisfaction</td>
<td>4.45 (0.85)</td>
<td>4.01 (0.66)</td>
<td>9.364</td>
<td>.003*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived social support</td>
<td>5.64 (0.86)</td>
<td>5.82 (0.74)</td>
<td>1.342</td>
<td>.249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sojourner social support</td>
<td>58.87 (15.85)</td>
<td>56.64 (14.63)</td>
<td>0.575</td>
<td>.450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived discrimination*</td>
<td>21.03 (4.41)</td>
<td>19.91 (5.08)</td>
<td>1.383</td>
<td>.242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociocultural adaptation</td>
<td>50.03 (12.22)</td>
<td>48.86 (14.14)</td>
<td>0.196</td>
<td>.659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College stress</td>
<td>14.75 (8.68)</td>
<td>15.96 (11.24)</td>
<td>0.354</td>
<td>.553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological distress</td>
<td>19.05 (4.94)</td>
<td>18.47 (6.17)</td>
<td>0.261</td>
<td>.611</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3 continued**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>American Long-term M (SD)</th>
<th>American Study abroad M (SD)</th>
<th>$F$ ($df = 1, 114$)</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socioemotional support</td>
<td>28.16 (7.95)</td>
<td>27.83 (6.92)</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>.810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental support</td>
<td>31.72 (8.36)</td>
<td>28.34 (7.87)</td>
<td>5.014</td>
<td>.027*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic stress</td>
<td>7.00 (4.85)</td>
<td>7.58 (4.56)</td>
<td>0.445</td>
<td>.506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial stress</td>
<td>4.05 (3.84)</td>
<td>3.71 (3.7)</td>
<td>0.224</td>
<td>.637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social stress</td>
<td>3.81 (3.69)</td>
<td>4.58 (3.37)</td>
<td>1.389</td>
<td>.241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends social support</td>
<td>5.73 (1.04)</td>
<td>5.95 (0.73)</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>.174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family social support</td>
<td>5.72 (1.21)</td>
<td>6.06 (0.9)</td>
<td>3.315</td>
<td>.071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant other social support</td>
<td>5.57 (1.35)</td>
<td>5.67 (1.07)</td>
<td>0.194</td>
<td>.661</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Frequency of perceived discrimination; appraisal of discrimination not included so as to avoid violating assumption of multicollinearity
Although no significant differences in levels of psychological distress were observed, $F(2, 277) = 2.933; p = .055$, there were significant differences on the measures of perceived social support, $F(2, 292) = 3.981; p = .02$, power = .026 and college stress, $F(2, 294) = 3.924; p = .038$, power = .021. Post-hoc analyses revealed that study abroad students had significantly higher levels of perceived social support ($d = .35$) than Irish students, while American students in long-term programs had significantly lower levels of college stress compared to Irish students ($d = -4.42$).

A final MANOVA examining differences between the American student groups and Irish students on the MSPSS and CSI subscales revealed a significant difference between the groups, $F(12, 528) = 5.916; p = .000$; Pillai's Trace = .24, partial eta squared = .12. Significant differences were observed on the measures of academic stress, and perceived friends and family social support (see Table 4). There were significant differences on the measures of perceived support from friends, $F(2, 290) = 5.795; p = .003$, power = .038 and family, $F(2, 291) = 5.095; p = .007$, power = .034. Study abroad students reported higher levels of perceived support from family ($d = .47$) and friends ($d = .45$) than Irish students. Results also showed a significant difference in levels of academic stress between groups, $F(2, 285) = 13.076; p = .000$, power = .84. Irish students reported significantly higher levels of academic stress than American international students in long-term ($d = 4.52$) and study abroad ($d = 3.33$) programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>American Study Abroad $M$ (SD)</th>
<th>American Long-term $M$ (SD)</th>
<th>Host $M$ (SD)</th>
<th>$F$ ($df = 2, 237$)</th>
<th>$P$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic satisfaction</td>
<td>4.03 (0.69)</td>
<td>4.4 (0.89)</td>
<td>1.02 (4.14)</td>
<td>2.532</td>
<td>.082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College stress</td>
<td>16.23 (10.93)</td>
<td>15.4 (8.69)</td>
<td>20.79 (14.17)</td>
<td>4.768</td>
<td>.009*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological distress</td>
<td>18.36 (5.87)</td>
<td>19.22 (5.67)</td>
<td>20.69 (6.75)</td>
<td>3.459</td>
<td>.033*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived social support</td>
<td>5.83 (0.71)</td>
<td>5.6 (0.9)</td>
<td>5.5 (0.93)</td>
<td>3.194</td>
<td>.043*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>American Study Abroad $M$ (SD)</th>
<th>American Long-term $M$ (SD)</th>
<th>Host $M$ (SD)</th>
<th>$F$ ($df = 2, 269$)</th>
<th>$P$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family support</td>
<td>6.07 (0.90)</td>
<td>5.68 (1.23)</td>
<td>5.56 (1.21)</td>
<td>5.887</td>
<td>.003*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends support</td>
<td>5.96 (0.73)</td>
<td>5.73 (1.07)</td>
<td>5.51 (1.07)</td>
<td>6.05</td>
<td>.003*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant other support</td>
<td>5.67 (1.10)</td>
<td>5.53 (1.42)</td>
<td>5.5 (1.47)</td>
<td>.469</td>
<td>.626</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social stress</td>
<td>4.71 (3.43)</td>
<td>3.75 (3.55)</td>
<td>3.95 (3.62)</td>
<td>1.673</td>
<td>.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic stress</td>
<td>7.74 (4.52)</td>
<td>6.72 (4.77)</td>
<td>11.19 (7.1)</td>
<td>14.16</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial stress</td>
<td>3.75 (3.73)</td>
<td>4.11 (4.31)</td>
<td>4.79 (5.48)</td>
<td>1.353</td>
<td>.260</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

The aim of this study was to examine the experiences of long-term and study abroad American international students in Ireland. One clear finding to emerge is that American international students reported mainly positive experiences. For example, long-term international students reported lower levels of overall college stress compared to host students. This is an important finding and one which should be highlighted as research on international students tends to emphasize students' adaptation problems. Some studies have shown that many international students adapt well to life in a new country (O’Reilly et al., 2010; Berno & Ward, 2004; Myles & Cheng, 2003; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002;
Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). Often, the positive aspects of cross-cultural adaptation are overlooked and an emphasis is placed on the negative aspects of international students’ experiences abroad.

In understanding the positive outcomes for American students, it should be noted that study abroad students reported having higher levels of social support compared to Irish students. A relevant factor is that most of the American study abroad students in the study institution are housed with other international students in on-campus accommodation or else tend to live with other international students from their home university in designated off-campus accommodation. This may be helpful in providing students with additional sources of social support and these conational networks are likely to have provided students with comfort and stability (Afshar-Mohajer & Sung, 2002; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). Typically, there are also a number of structures put in place in home and host institutions to support study abroad students. For example, at the institution where this research was carried out there is a dedicated administrative unit to support North American students on study abroad programs. Such resources are likely to impact on students’ levels of social support.

Typically, friendships with other international students and overseas ties act as a source of socioemotional support for international students while friendships with host nationals are a source of instrumental social support (Ong & Ward, 2005). The current study showed that American students in long-term academic stays had significantly higher levels of instrumental social support compared to study abroad students. That is, American long-term international students appear to have formed more friendships with host students which they were able to use as a way of obtaining tangible assistance and informational support. Thus, while living with other study abroad international students may have benefitted students in facilitating their access to supportive friendships with other international students, at the same time this may have reduced their impetus to engage with host nationals. Ultimately, this is something which Pederson and colleagues (2011) have argued hinders international students’ experiences abroad. However, while study abroad students may have missed out somewhat on the benefits of interacting more with host students, the lower levels of instrumental social support reported by study abroad students did not significantly increase their levels of sociocultural or psychological difficulties.

This finding may have been impacted by length of time abroad, as the long-term international students in this study were living in Ireland longer than their study abroad peers. Thus, they may have had more time to develop relationships with domestic/host students. Studies examining the relationship between length of residence abroad and international students’ adaptation have provided conflicting results. Although some studies have found evidence to support the hypothesis that length of residence and international students’ adaptation are related (Jou & Fukada, 1996; Zhang, 2009), others have found no support for this association (Ye, 2006; Wei, Heppner, Mallen, Ku, Kelly, & Wu, 2007).

The critical importance of considering the issue of international students’ academic adjustment has been highlighted here and elsewhere (Chung et al., 2006; Pitts, 2009). It is therefore noteworthy that this study revealed American international students had significantly lower levels of academic stress than host students. This finding does not accord with the general literature which shows that international students tend to experience academic adjustment difficulties which are attributable to several factors (Coates & Dickinson, 2012; Chung et al., 2006; Pitts, 2009). One possibility is that American international students are more able academically than general samples of host students. Relevant to this was the observation that there were differences in levels of academic satisfaction within the American international student sample. While study abroad students are often viewed as academic tourists with few academic stressors, findings from this study revealed American long-term international students are actually more satisfied academically than their peers on study abroad programs. This finding may be linked to the fact that study abroad students have to adjust very quickly to a new institution’s methods of teaching and assessment since their grades are frequently taken into account by their home institution. On the other hand, long-term international students have the opportunity to acquaint themselves over a longer time period to the host institution’s teaching and learning practices as well as to the expectations in the host institution. Indeed, this finding accords with the suggestion put forward by Pitts (2009) that American study abroad students often have unrealistic expectations about their academic responsibilities abroad. Another factor that may have contributed to this finding is the
different composition of the American students in short and long-stay programs. The majority of students sampled here in the former category were undergraduate students, while most of the American students in long-stay programs were postgraduates. Previous research has indicated that there are some differences between undergraduate and postgraduate students depending on what aspect of adaptation is being studied (Yanhong Li & Kaye 1998; Rienties & Tempelaar 2013). Thus, it may have been the case that differences in academic adjustment were to some extent linked with stage of study and further research is needed on this issue.

Although American international students appeared to be reasonably well adjusted inspection of their mean scores revealed they were experiencing moderate levels of sociocultural adaptation difficulties. This finding supports the results of Kenyon et al.’s (2012) study which showed that American students studying in culturally similar country to the U.S. encountered a range of sociocultural challenges. Another issue of some concern is that American international students reported moderate levels of distress. However, this finding must be interpreted against the backdrop of the relatively high levels of psychological distress reported among the host sample in the present study. The economic changes that occurred around the time of data collection are likely to have impacted on Irish students’ wellbeing. In 2009, Ireland was in the midst of an economic recession which was accompanied by a sharp decline in employment rates and increase in emigration. For example, data published by the Irish Central Statistics Office (CSO) revealed that in 2009, for the first time since 1995, more people left Ireland than moved there.

Finally, while results from this study revealed that American students reported relatively low levels of discrimination in Ireland, a small number of American international students had experienced some form of discrimination since arriving and found such experiences stressful. It is likely that these American students were subject, like many American citizens abroad, to shifting levels of anti-Americanism that are linked with politics and world events (Dolby, 2007; Kenyon et al., 2012).

Practical Implications and Limitations

Although this study had many strengths, there are a number of limitations which must be considered. In the first instance the majority of study abroad students in this study were undergraduate students whereas most long-term international students were studying at postgraduate level. Although this pattern also reflects the composition of international students in Ireland (Educational Ireland, 2012), it is possible that the significant differences observed between long-term and short-term international students were attributable to variations in stage of study. One further limitation is that this study was conducted at one HEI in Ireland. As institutional culture has been shown to have a strong impact on the learning culture of international and host students, research with students from a selection of HEIs may produce different findings (Campbell & Hourigan 2008). It also should be noted that effect sizes for some of the statistical analyses indicate that the magnitude of the differences between mean scores are small. Finally, participants were not asked about their reasons for studying abroad. It may have been the case that there were differences between students who self-selected to study abroad and those who were required to do so.

The results of this research have important implications for those involved with preparing American students for travelling abroad to study, as well as service providers in the institutions to which American students travel. Given that American international students were experiencing moderate levels of sociocultural adaptation difficulties, service providers should consider organizing workshops focusing on differences in cultural practices with groups of American international students and host students planning to go on an exchange to the U.S. In addition to focusing on sociocultural challenges, these workshops might focus on differences in academic environments which would be helpful for study abroad students experiencing low levels of academic satisfaction. Yeh and Inose (2003) propose that skill-training workshops and cultural exchange groups foster a sense of community for international students. Such workshops might also provide American study abroad students with an additional source of instrumental social support through facilitating interaction between international and host students.
However, it is important to point out that O’Reilly (2011) found international students sometimes do not perceive any benefits from participating in such programs and feel host students do not engage sufficiently with these programs. This points to a need to adapt peer mentoring programs to make them more attractive for host students and to try to facilitate students’ interactions in more fun and creative ways. Predeparture attempts by service providers to raise American international students’ awareness about some of the sociocultural issues relevant to their host country such as differences in humor, accent and interaction styles among host national young adults would also be helpful.

At the receiving end, assumptions regarding the academic commitment of American study abroad students need to be reviewed. Specifically, any perception among teaching staff that study abroad students from the U.S. are likely to be less than committed to their studies should be addressed. Furthermore, teaching staff need to be informed about the types of international students taking their courses and made aware of any issues that are relevant to their teaching and assessment, such as addressing their concerns about expectations and standards. Given some international students in this study reported experiences of discrimination, a presentation to staff at the host institution on the normalization of anti-Americanism in recent years and the impact of perceived discrimination on the psychological adaptation of international students might be helpful. Similarly, outlining to American international students before their departure that, while discrimination is not widespread, they may interact with individuals who have negative perceptions about the U.S. and educating students about how to respond in such situations would be helpful.

Conclusion

It is likely that over the next few years, increasing numbers of American students will opt to spend some time abroad as an international student. Thus, it is important to have an understanding of American international students’ adaptation experiences. This study shows that while there are some subtle differences within the international student population, many American students in both short and long-stay programs adjust well to student life in Ireland. However, it also shows that some American students experience some challenges and that there are a number of practical ways in which educators can address these challenges in order to facilitate American students’ cross-cultural adaptation.

References


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**About the Authors:**

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**TINA HICKEY** has published extensively in journal and book form in the areas of education, language learning and reading in a second language. Awarded a Government of Ireland Fellowship (2008), she has served as President of the Reading Association of Ireland, of which she was made an Honorary Lifetime Member in 2011. She is a board-member of IJEBE and JICB and is currently Scientist in Charge of a Marie Curie funded project in education.

**DERMOT RYAN**, PhD, is a trainee psychologist with the Longford/Westmeath Psychology Service and the University College of Dublin Doctoral Program in Clinical Psychology. His PhD project was the first longitudinal psychosocial study of asylum seekers. His research interests include psychological adaptation among migrant populations and cultural competence in mental health services. He was a founding member of the Psychological Society of Ireland’s Culture and Ethnic Diversity Special Interest Group.
Book Review

International Student’s Survival Guide

Davey, G. (2008). *The international student’s survival guide: How to get the most from studying at a UK University*. London, UK: SAGE

**Reviewed by Ian McDonald**, Birmingham City University (UK).

This guide, by Gareth Davey, is aimed at both those considering studying in the UK and those already doing so, with much of the material relevant to both groups. Whilst clearly aimed at students, the publication will also be useful to members of staff who work, or are looking to work, with international students. The book will help staff develop a greater appreciation of the issues and concerns international students face whilst studying abroad, for example, cultural differences between the UK and students’ home countries and the processes international students have to go through to gain entry onto UK degree programmes. This is important as staff may lack sufficient training about how to best support international students, this book provides a helpful guide to understanding key issues which affect international students.

The book is broken down into thematic chapters which are logically organized, beginning with a chapter on ‘Choosing and applying for your course’ and ending with ‘Life after graduation’. One of the key strengths of the book is that it is immensely practical and goes into incredible detail, for example, in Chapter 2, ‘Leaving home and arriving in the UK”, there is a step-by-step guide to all of the procedures and processes a new student would encounter on arrival at a British airport. Similarly, there is a short section on staying safe in the UK, which gives practical tips and details of how to contact the emergency services in the event of an emergency. As well as explaining the practicalities and the many positive aspects of studying in the UK, Davey does not hide from the fact that there may be problems and dangers too. There is a brief section on culture shock, which deals with the topic honestly and openly. Similarly, the author is not afraid to remind his readers of that a possible consequence of failing to adhere to British Law is deportation.

Chapters 7 and 8 are particularly important as they examine current academic culture in the UK, for example, the organizational structure of universities, teaching styles and student expectations for participating in seminars/lectures. These issues are vitally important due to the far more social constructionist teaching style that exists in the UK, which can be a shock to international students used to a more traditional teaching style, where the faculty is the all knowledgeable, unquestionable ‘transmitter of knowledge’. The main element which is lacking are actual accounts of the experiences of international students who have studied in the UK. Including direct student testimonials would add an extra dimension and provided a helpful addition to the views of the author himself.

Overall, this book is a good resource for prospective students to help make informed choices. It will also provide a valuable resource to members of staff who seek to better support international students studying in the UK.
International Student Experience in Australia


*Reviewed by*: Jennifer Bernard and Krishna Bista, University of Louisiana at Monroe (USA)

This book introduces a theoretical framework and research tools for evaluating the experiences of international students from the Indian subcontinent as they adapt to one university in Australia. Gunawardena and Wilson focus on the importance of understanding and molding student services to each individual cultural group and meeting specific needs based on communication, learning style, personal preferences, and grade level. For example, some English language learners have been put in classes below their grade level because of their lack of competency in English (written and spoken).

In chapter one, the authors focused on the background and cultural differences of international students studying in Australia. The authors suggest that the recognition of student needs is not fully understood therefore, the best academic support is not always available in the classroom. In chapter two, the authors suggest that the most important factor for international students is the individual and personal growth in a cultural and academic setting.

In chapter three, the authors offered examples and an extensive review of literature in the field to support the importance of integrating different cultures into a school curriculum. This integration in the curriculum provides educational benefits to domestic and international students. Another aspect this book highlights is allowing international students to use their "voice"—share their perspectives at the university with faculty and other students. The author presented voices (obtained from interviews, observations, and classroom situations) of students from the Indian subcontinents and their academic staff from one Australian university featured in this book.

In chapter four, the authors also presented cases studies and specific situations regarding international students traveling to study abroad. International students who make friends and have a supporting community can ease the transition into a new environment. Clubs and societies are mentioned in the book for facilitating international students to make new friends in the community. In chapters five and six, the authors pointed out differences in classroom interaction, differences in academic practices, and differences in academic environments. Students who have an International Baccalaureate background (students who study globally standardized examinations) have an easier time interacting and fitting into new classroom environments. The authors bridged the gap between cultural differences and how non-native English speaking students may not comprehend Australian classroom activities.

In conclusion, this book can be used as a useful resource for educators interested in international higher education, study abroad and comparative education. This book was primarily based on international students in Australia.
International Students and Community Involvement in Tiffin, Ohio

Julie Arnold  
Director of International Affairs and Studies  
Heidelberg University (USA)

Rachel Crooks  
Director of International Student Advising  
Tiffin University (USA)

Joe Moore  
Director, International Cultural Center  
Tiffin City Schools (USA)

Situated in northwest Ohio, Tiffin is a small community of 18,000 residents and is the proud home of two institutions of higher learning: Heidelberg University and Tiffin University. Over the last several years a unique collaboration has developed among the two universities and the community’s International Cultural Center (ICC). As most things do, this partnership began with a single idea and has blossomed into an ever-growing number of events and activities. Working closely together, these three entities have made concerted efforts to integrate the international student body into the greater Tiffin community. In doing so, the city has become “internationalized” in ways that have provided mutual benefits to the community and the international student population.

Who We Are

Heidelberg University (HU) is a private institution of higher education and prides itself on its strong liberal arts education and pre-professional programs. Heidelberg has an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 1,100 students with another 200 graduate students. Among its stronger academic programs are biological and environmental sciences, business, psychology and criminal justice, education and music.

Founded in 1888 and with a total enrollment of about 5,000, Tiffin University (TU) offers professionally-focused academic programs and grants the following degrees: Associate of Arts, Associate of Business Administration, Associate of Criminal Justice, Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Business Administration, Bachelor of Criminal Justice, Bachelor of Science, Master of Business Administration, Master of Education, Master of Humanities, and Master of Science. On campus and online courses offered.

The International Cultural Center is a resource center devoted to providing opportunities for residents in the community to better know, understand and appreciate the peoples of the world. It was created in 2003 and funded through the collaborative efforts of the National Machinery Foundation, the Kalnow family and Tiffin City Schools. The annual budget is supplemented by donations from local businesses and organizations.
Our Students

Cultural diversity in our community is somewhat limited. For that reason, when international students from more than 40 nations move into Tiffin each fall, we see it as a win-win for both the community and the students. Beyond their academic goals, students traveling to the U.S. to pursue their studies are also generally looking for ways to fine-tune their English language skills and to become familiar with American culture. While the universities excel in providing the academics, the local community is better suited to offer students a wider range of real-world opportunities to practice their language skills. It is also an ideal setting for experiencing authentic American culture, something that’s simply not possible within the confines of a college campus.

Whether high school exchange students or international students at one of our universities, when these young people come to live in Tiffin, they are choosing to become part of our community and that’s a win for the residents of our town. Whether it’s through informal person-to-person interactions at a store or restaurant, or in a presentation for a service club or a class of fifth graders, we all benefit by being able to learn about and from these students.

Involvement in the Community

Among the most active partnerships have been those with the local K-12 schools, both private and public. Each fall we send classroom teachers a letter listing the home countries of our international students and inviting the educators to look for opportunities to incorporate cultural components as they design their lessons. During the year we receive numerous requests for students to visit classrooms. Often the guests are invited to talk about their homeland, holidays, food and daily life, but they have also been asked to share their talents in art classes (Chinese brush painting, origami, crafts), introduce a new game or sport in physical education classes, judge presentations in an international business class, share new perspectives in a current events class, and, of course, visit language classes.

Initially, most of our activities were designed around classroom presentations, but this has expanded dramatically in recent years to include non-profits and charitable organizations, as well as local businesses. As we continue to develop new ideas, we find that community partners are eager to be invited to collaborate. In early 2012, with an international student population on the rise, we met to discuss opportunities to showcase and honor the students who had traveled thousands of miles from home to study in Tiffin. This idea of selecting Tiffin out of all of the study locations around the world resonated with the group, and the slogan, “We Chose Tiffin” was born. This phrase is quite fitting, too, as the city of Tiffin itself is known as the “Education Community.”

Each fall, Tiffin hosts the “Tiffin-Seneca Heritage Festival,” and this is where we decided to unveil our new slogan as well as showcase the international students themselves in the festival’s annual parade. Wearing “We Chose Tiffin” T-shirts with the name of the student’s home country, our students proudly marched in the parade, passing out candy and carrying their flags and a banner with our slogan.

Following the parade, the students volunteered at a booth where they assisted guests with applying international flag tattoos. The response was overwhelmingly positive from not just the students, but from community members as well. Many people commented that they had no idea that Tiffin had such cultural diversity and that the students came from so many countries. This fall will be our fourth time in the Heritage Festival parade, and each year our group grows; even returning students are excited to walk in the parade and visit with the community again.

Having been warmly received by the community at the parade and festival, we felt energized to do more to integrate the international students into the community. We turned our attention to developing a reception to formally welcome the international students to the city. In 2013, we hosted more than 200 community members and students at the first annual “Tiffin Welcomes the World” reception. Guests were welcomed by the mayor and our state representative from Ohio’s General Assembly.

The city of Tiffin has limited diversity and this is true of the types of restaurants available as well. When we presented an idea for a German Suppe und Brot event to a local restaurant owner, she was excited to partner with us. When the tickets for the soup and bread event sold out in just a few days,
we were all thrilled. Guests enjoyed samples of four authentic German soups and homemade breads, and the evening included a short presentation about German food and culture. Both the patrons and restaurant owner were so satisfied with the event that another was planned for the spring of 2014. This time the dinner featured Saudi Arabian cuisine. Everything—from menu consultation to entertainment in the form of traditional dances—was done by Saudi students from the universities. After two such highly regarded events, we have developed a great relationship with the restaurant and the owner has invited us to schedule a full calendar of five themed dinners this year.

Another wonderful community partner has been our local public library. As most libraries do, our local branch has regularly scheduled story hours for children as well as book discussion groups for adults. Building on that success, we asked about introducing a cultural component into these activities. Now several times a year, we invite international students to share a story from their own culture with the kids. This is typically accompanied by a cultural craft or game. Although we liked the idea of a book discussion groups, we were told that attendance was minimal, so we proposed a new idea: an international panel discussion.

Our first panel consisted of four Saudi Arabian students and we were pleasantly surprised at how well attended and well received it was. The evening was advertised as an “everything you always wanted to know about Saudi Arabia but didn’t know whom to ask” event and that seemed to do the trick. By the end of the discussion, community members were asking questions such as, “So, if I wanted to have you over for dinner sometime, would that be something I could do?” We could not have been happier. Even sensitive topics regarding the criminal justice system and the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia were handled with care. We believe the audience gained a better understanding of the beliefs that are behind some of the laws and practices that are perceived as unusual to many Americans.

In light of the positive community attendance at the Saudi panel, we scheduled a second panel discussion. This time the focus was on Venezuela, selected due to the ongoing crisis at that time. At this event, the panel featured a retired professor to provide the historical background of the situation, three university students from Venezuela and a longtime Tiffin resident who is a native Venezuelan. In an attempt to present both sides of the situation, we were fortunate to be able to conduct a live interview via Skype with a pro-government supporter living in Venezuela. While emotions ran high, it was again very informative for the community members, and many of the attendees expressed sympathy for the students who had family suffering through the crisis. Though scheduled for only one hour, the conversation lasted for nearly two. People simply didn’t want to leave.

What’s in the works for next year? We are planning world coffee, tea and cocoa tastings at a local coffee shop and we are organizing a downtown cultural festival that will feature ethnic foods at local restaurants, and international games and crafts for kids as well as ethnic musical entertainment. We continue to develop our event calendar and programs to celebrate the diversity present in our community, and in turn, sharing this cultural richness with residents young and old.

While not every community has an International Cultural Center, there are ample opportunities to establish and nurture relationships among the universities, the international students they host, and organizations and groups in the community. It goes without saying that the international students themselves benefit from being involved in organizations beyond the college campus. We believe that a true American cultural experience does not take place within the confines of a dorm or a classroom, but rather in the homes and places frequented by community members.

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