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# Understanding the international student experience

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Running Head: THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE

UNDERSTANDING THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE

by

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Thesis

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Eastern Michigan University

in partial fulfillments of the requirements

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MASTER OF ARTS

in

Educational Psychology

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, who always provided me with support and love from miles away. Without your support, I could not be here to accomplish my goals. You have given me the wings to fly, and believed in me no matter what. I could not have been luckier because I have such great and special parents like you. You were the biggest inspiration and motivation for me, and I cannot thank you enough for all your encouragement.

And to my husband... You are my soulmate, my best friend and supporter. You were always there for me when I felt lost. Your presence in my life is a gift for me. You shared my laughter, you shared my tears. You loved, encouraged, and helped me in all I do, just like we had promised. It was such a year that we have been through the difficult and the easy, which taught us how to be a family.

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I have been fortunate to receive professional guidance and academic support from wonderful educators. Dr. Valerie Polakow, you have opened up a new window for me as your class was one of the most informative classes that I had ever participated in. Without your guidance and feedback, I could not make this thesis happen. Dr. Alane Starko, thank you for all your patience and support throughout this research process. You have always encouraged me and provided me with detailed feedback, which made me a better learner. Dr. Pokay, I cannot believe that two years just passed. I remember the time that I received the admission letter from you by email, when I was in Turkey and dreaming about coming here. Thank you for your support before my arrival and during my study. Dr. Carpenter, thank you for your support at the times when I could not have needed help more. I truly appreciate your care and encouragement, which motivates me to attain my goals in the academic field.

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## **Abstract**

Although there are many international students in U.S. higher education institutions, they still experience problems related to social and academic life, as the international student experience is not adequately understood. This may be because of a general lack of awareness relating to the international experience, which can often increase the magnitude of the international students' problems. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to provide an overview of the experiences of international students from their own perspectives. Six international graduate students were interviewed for approximately one hour in order to understand their stories in the U.S. Each participant's story was presented as a case. The participants' academic, social, and personal experiences were of great interest in this study. Based on the participants' experiences, everyday life issues, different learning cultures, pursuit of success, social interactions, and personal growth emerged as the thematic findings of this study. These might contribute to the existing body of literature, helping enhance international students' academic and social experiences abroad. Investigating the international student experience may have a positive influence on faculty members, international student offices, and international students themselves.

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## **Understanding the International Student Experience**

International students from different countries throughout the world go abroad to study and most of the time, they are faced with challenges before, during, and after the application process that are quite different from domestic students' experiences. Getting prepared to apply by taking numerous exams, applying to the intended program by sending documents overseas, and waiting for the response of the institution after the application cause international students to experience stress before they even start their classes. However, coming to the United States, even after success with the application process, is not the end of the story for international students. It is just the beginning of a whole new story in terms of both their academic and social lives.

According to the *Open Doors Report* published by the Institute of International Education, the number of international students in the United States who were enrolled in programs at colleges and universities during the 2009-2010 academic year, the latest year for which the institute has data, reached 690,923 (Chow, 2011). However, despite the huge number of international students in the United States, they still experience problems related to social and academic life. This may be because of a general lack of awareness relating to the international experience, which can often increase the magnitude of international students' problems. As an international graduate student, I became interested in the student experience and wanted to document and present their experiences from their own perspectives. The findings of this study might contribute to the existing body of literature, helping enhance international students' academic and social experiences abroad. Investigating the international student experience may have a positive influence on faculty members, international student offices, and international students themselves.

## **Statement of Problem**

The success of international students depends on many factors: sociocultural adjustment language competency, communication with the citizens of the new country, and strategies for getting used to the new environment (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Even simple things in daily life, such as food, can be a challenge for international students, since they may experience food shock, encountering and being unfamiliar with the local food in the new country. Such a simple issue can matter for the international students because, as Brown and Aktas (2011) suggested, food is related to the well-being of individuals and their cultural identity. Additionally, Erichsen and Bolliger (2011) discussed issues like isolation, culture shock, and alienation. Since these issues may impact the newcomers' psychology, international students may experience serious problems related to their well-being. When considering the enhancement of both academic and social experiences, all factors must be investigated, because academic and social experiences affect each other. International students are a part of both the academic and social community in the country where they live and study; however, the larger academic community may not adequately understand them, which could lead to feelings of alienation. Moreover, the social and cultural problems regarding their experiences may affect the academic productivity and well-being of international students negatively. Therefore, it is important to create awareness of possible negative factors affecting international students' academic success and social satisfaction among faculty and peers, and negate them by revealing the commonalties in their academic and social lives.

## **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to provide an overview of the experiences of international students in their own perspectives. I hope that the information revealed by this study will be helpful for instructors and international student office staff, who can assist international students by modifying the design of courses and the delivery of instruction, as well as providing personal support. The study focuses on international graduate students without consideration of age and maturity. These factors may have some influence on international students' success, but they are not within the scope of this research.

Success in the construction of meaning in their academic and social lives is of great importance to international graduate students. This study is intended to give voice to these international students and reflect their experiences from their own perspectives so that peers, instructors, and international student offices can benefit from the findings to enhance the learning and teaching environment, raising general awareness of the successes and difficulties of international students. In order to attain this goal, qualitative research methods were chosen, as they allow the researcher to reflect the insights of the participants.

## **Research Questions**

Three major questions were explored in this qualitative study:

1. What are the international students' experiences with their professors, classes and other students?
2. What are the challenges, if any, that international students experience in both their academic and social lives?

3. What are their perceptions regarding the changes, if any, that they have experienced in their personal, social and academic lives after their time in the United States?

### **Delimitations and Limitations of the Study**

There are some limitations of the study. This study does not include comparisons between the international students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, as all the participants of the study are perceived as members of the international student community as a whole. In addition, a gender comparison is not explored for the same reason.

Because the purpose of this research is to document and analyze personal experience, it focuses on the reflective stories of a small sample of international students. The sample of this study is not representative of all international graduate students in the United States, as convenience purposive sampling techniques were used. Thus, the results of the study are not intended to be generalized to the whole population of international students, even though the study may reveal some commonalities in the experience. A further goal of this research could be conducting follow-up interviews in order to gain more insight about the international student experience, with the passage of time.

## **Literature Review**

A review of current literature will articulate a basic rationale for this study with information about the historical, cultural, and adjustment experiences of international students (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). In order to keep track of the selected resources, the source sheet approach suggested by Clark (2007) was used to take notes and organize each source. This review will illustrate how my research fits in the big picture of the existing literature about the international student experience (Mertens, 2010).

### **Higher Education and Addressing International Students' Needs**

The existence of international students at institutions of higher learning in the United States is not something new. After World War II, the ideas of diversity and internalization of education were promoted by the colleges and universities in the United States (U.S.). The U.S. became a popular destination for international students, where they increased the cultural diversity (Rose-Redwood, 2010). Rose-Redwood (2010) emphasized that there were over half a million international students attending U.S. colleges and universities by the year 2000. Rivzi (2011) argued that education, skills, and conventions of the West were acknowledged by international students as valued norms and they are willing to adopt them. Therefore, international students chose the U.S. as a destination for their experience abroad because they thought they would pursue those globally accepted norms and values. Although many international students who went abroad for study were interested in learning about a new culture and contributing to their area of study, the presence of international students became an economic factor in Western higher education institutions as well (Ninnes & Hellsten, 2005). For instance, during the 2003-2004 academic year, the U.S. economy received around 12 billion dollars a year through the expenses of international students (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006).

These included tuition, accommodation and other living expenses (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006). By 2011, this number rose to 21 billion dollars (Institute of International Education, 2011). As Western values and norms for academic and daily life emerged with the rise of globalization, institutions of higher learning turned teaching and learning into a product and advertised it in the international educational market (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). The combination of globalized values and institutional marketing can explain Non-Western international students' high demand for studying abroad and its popularity among Non-Western countries.

Although the teaching and learning practices provided in the U.S. are globally disseminated as norms, there is not a standard timeline for the time it takes the student to fit in the U.S. higher education system. Should international students fit in immediately after they start their programs? Wouldn't that mean that international students were already familiar with American practices and they would not need to adapt? In other words, to what extent do the institutions of higher learning address the needs of international students to help them better adapt? One of the major aspects of learning is the curriculum that is used. Jones and Killick (2007) described curriculum as embracing all kinds of involvement that influence international students' development during their studies in colleges or universities, rather than a formal educational program. However, if the curriculum does not welcome international students, they may feel marginalized, which will impair their academic development (Jones & Borwn, 2007). Trice and Yoo (2007) explained that curriculum might decrease international students' academic satisfaction if the curriculum does not address their needs. In addition, if the curriculum does not have an international focus, international students may feel that their professors do not change their delivery of instruction and assignments according to the international students' needs (Trice

& Yoo, 2007). In another study, faculty perceptions and practices were investigated to see if they were aware of the needs of international students in their programs. Trice (2005) explained that some faculty members were much more aware that they should address international students' needs, whereas other faculty members were not:

Several consciously altered their roles as advisors and research supervisors when working with this population. They spent more time explaining tasks and concepts to these international students, provided extra supervision in the beginning, or even became more personally involved in their lives as these international students struggled to adapt to life in the United States. In the classroom, several used overheads, spoke more slowly, and avoided colloquialisms to assist student with comprehension. (p. 76)

Faculty awareness and cultural sensitivity can be important and encouraging in assisting international students to be more productive. For example, assessment styles in the U.S. may be different from those that international students are used to, and may lead faculty members to adopt a deficit approach while assessing an international student. In other words, international students may be considered as eccentric or mistaken because of their different attitudes or perspectives (Brown & Joughin, 2007). To be perceived like this may be discouraging for international students. As Brown and Joughin (2007) pointed out, international students need to adapt to their new environment; however, there may be some conflicts in expectations between professors and international students. Another example of mismatch may occur during class discussions, as international students may not be able to contribute when they feel that the U.S. point of view dominates other approaches, and they may hesitate to talk about a topic that they do not understand (Tatar, 2005). As Otter (2007) indicated, the role of universities is to expose international students to more global perspectives and help students step out from preset values

to become global citizens. This requires developing a global philosophy, the skills needed to understand, and sensitivity to international students' perspectives, thus enhancing their experiences in the U.S. universities.

### **Social and Cultural Aspects of Learning**

International students come to the U.S. from a variety of different cultural backgrounds, and they are faced with new experiences with both academic and social practices. As Mills (2000) asserted, we live in the boundaries of our own milieu, and our perspectives are limited by what we learn from the group of people that we live with. For this reason, it can be difficult for international students to make sense of, and get used to, the cultural differences in their new social and academic lives. As Pai and Adler (2001) indicated, culture can be defined as “that pattern of knowledge, skills, behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as material artifacts, produced by a human society and transmitted from one generation to another” (p. 22). Culture shapes people's thinking, interpretations, beliefs and behaviors, since culture causes people to internalize some standards and sets of values (Pai & Adler, 2001). Hence, it is important to acknowledge that international students who come from different cultures can have different mindsets, expectations and behaviors. Although the educational systems of many countries have been shaped by Western-inspired and standardized practices as a consequence of globalization, those new standards are subject to the interpretation of local teachers and administrators, as they may clash with national or local traditions (Anderson-Levitt, 2003). Thus, even though the new practices may be adopted by educational institutions around the world, they are still interpreted through the various cultures. As a result, most international students still come from different educational paradigms, despite the reforms in the teaching and learning in their own countries.

Generally speaking, the majority of the international students experience challenges when they first come to their new environment because their perceptions and communications were shaped by their cultures. For instance, Brooks (2011) asserted that, whereas only a quarter of Americans were afraid of saying wrong things when they were in a social situation, this number went up to 65 percent for Japanese people. In such a case, it could be hard for the student to express her ideas in a class discussion, while domestic students lack this constraint. Nieto and Booth (2010) gave another example of how culture could impact student learning by indicating that some instructors may assume that an international student in their class is simply lazy or unwilling to participate in discussions, while he or she may come from a culture that emphasizes interpersonal harmony rather than competition. As emphasized by Greenfield et al. (2006), a student who comes from a collectivist society may wait for directions to follow instead of asking questions, may need to fit into the surrounding culture rather than feeling comfortable standing out, or may be more passive than a student from an individualistic society. Clearly, when teachers and international students come from different cultures, there may be problems regarding communication and learning (Hollins, 2008). Sometimes, it may be difficult for an international student to understand what is required to answer a question because it simply does not exist in his or her culture. Similarly, Brooks suggested, “Culture imprints some patterns in our brains and dissolves others” (Brooks, 2011, p. 152).

Learning is a social and cultural construct that cannot be narrowed down to an academic process only. How learners process mentally and how learning occurs are complex issues. Palinscar (1998) indicated the importance of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory in education and suggested from this perspective: “...mental functioning of the individual is not simply derived from social interaction; rather, the specific structures and processes revealed by individuals can

be traced to their interactions with others” (p.351). Therefore, as individuals learn in certain social contexts and then internalize the way they learn, it can be argued that international students come with cognitive constructs and learning habits from their previous environment. From the point of view of social learning theory, McLeod and Wainwright (2009) argued that individuals bring their own perspectives about the relationship between their behaviors and the results of their actions to their new social and cultural environments. Their perceptions and assumptions of the new situation will be affected by their past. In such a case, it may be difficult for international students to decide how to behave and make sense of what is going on in a new environment.

### **Sojourner Adjustment**

An important factor in adapting is identified as the Sojourner Adjustment. International students come as sojourners to the U.S. for mainly academic reasons, which they may not be aware will also require more than intellectual effort. Brein and David (1971) defined the term sojourner: “The term sojourner includes different types of travelers such as international students, trainees, technical assistants, tourists, businessmen, military personnel, missionaries, and professors” (p.215). Will travelling for miles and then arriving at the intended destination assure that sojourners will attain their goals easily? As Berry (1997) asked:

What happens to individuals, who have developed in one cultural context, when they attempt to live in a new cultural context? If culture is such a powerful shaper of behavior, do individuals continue to act in the new setting as they did in the previous one, do they change their behavioral repertoire to be more appropriate in the new setting, or is there some complex pattern of community and change in how people go about their lives in the new society? (p. 6)

Considering the backgrounds of international students, it may be expected that they will experience some adjustment issues after coming to the U.S. because international students come from places where political, economic or demographic situations are different than those in the United States (Berry, 1997). The adjustment of international students is not a straightforward process, as this process is related to many factors. These factors may involve stress, social support, English proficiency, length of residence and self-efficacy (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Brown and Holloway (2008) suggested that feelings of stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness dominated the positive aspects of the sojourners' experiences, especially in the initial stage of their residence.

The adjustment process is challenging, as international students struggle to cope with the culture shock. Oberg (1960) defined culture shock as an "occupational disease" which causes anxiety because of the foreign ways of manners and expressions that are different than the cultural signs provided in the previous environment (p. 177). In this case, international students can be described as people who try to walk in the dark surrounded by fog, because when they come into their new environment, they lose the familiar signs and clues that used to guide them. In addition to the issues stated above, sojourner adjustment is also influenced by financial problems, new educational practices, different cultural norms, or feelings of homesickness. Issues are made worse by the stress caused by new experiences (Church, 1982). International students may need time to show their full potential because of such problems. International students' adjustment process evolves over time as they experience life in their new environment. Winkelman (1994) suggested that international students experience four phases of culture shock: (a) The honeymoon or tourist phase, when the sojourner is fascinated by the culture; (b) The crisis phase, when the sojourner experiences serious emotional, academic or social problems; (c)

The adjustment or reorientation phase when the sojourner tries to figure out how to adjust to the new culture; (d) And finally, the adaptation, resolution or acculturation phase when the sojourner is able to resolve problems and manage the adaptation to the new culture. Although these phases may be experienced differently by each student, one can realize how complicated the adjustment process of a sojourner may be from these stages of culture shock.

### **Guidance and Help Matter**

As indicated by the research, international students experience problems regarding their academic and social life, so their psychological well-being may be under threat. Hyun, Quinn, Madon, and Lustig (2007) indicated that many international students who participated in their study experienced stress and emotional problems, which impacted their well-being or academic standing negatively. Although each student's experience is unique, often times Western European international students experience fewer adaptation problems than other international students because of the cultural similarity to the U.S. (Tomich, McWhirter, & Darcy, 2003). Similarly, other factors, such as having a functional level of English, being assertive, and being confident in academics influence the adjustment of international students. The more they know the language, the more assertive they become, and the more confident they feel in their study areas, resulting in better adaptation to their new environment. (Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002). International students who come from different cultures may not yet even know how to be assertive, which may cause them to experience loneliness (Poyrazli et al., 2002). As international students come to the U.S. to attain their goals and dreams, they feel pressure to meet academic expectations, which may lead them to experience depression caused by self-criticism ((Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002). In such cases, the role of social networks and faculty guidance can be vital for international students' well-being. One

study by Tseng and Newton (2002), focused on student well-being and significant findings pointed to having a successful academic life, being able to make future plans, and feelings of satisfaction and happiness regarding student life abroad as predictors of student well-being.

Despite the complexity of international students' life abroad, they may not be aware of the need for help and try to deal with everything alone. For instance, international students may think that getting help from counseling services is culturally inappropriate and may resist seeking help because of their negative perceptions (Chen, & Lewis, 2011). Another important aspect of international students is the relationship between them and their advisors. Advisor support can positively impact international students' feelings of belonging to their new academic environment (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013). Although faculty support is very important for international students, the relationship between the student and faculty member can sometimes be challenging. Research indicates that some international students may feel that they were not receiving adequate feedback or advice, and they feel isolated, bullied, insulted, or unwelcome by their advisors (Rice, Choi, Zhang, Villegas, Ye, Anderson, Nesic, & Bigler, 2009). Some others report the mismatch of research concerns while studying with their professors (Rice, Choi, Zhang, Villegas, Ye, Anderson, Nesic, & Bigler, 2009). In another study, the sources of conflicts in the student-advisor relationship were a lack of objectivity, lack of time, and different expectations with regard to international students' responsibilities (Adrian-Taylor, Noels, & Tischler, 2007, p. 108). Hence, faculty members, advisors, and international students may encounter some challenges in their relationships. Yet the communication among advisors, faculty members, and international students is of great importance, as guidance provided by faculty can be extremely important and helpful.

## **Summary**

In brief, this study focuses on what international students go through when they come to the United States. The existing literature mentions topics related to the way international education has become a market and how it affects international students' choices of the institutions. International students may be faced with additional challenges while trying to fit in to the Western education system, as reflected in the literature. Another topic that the literature just reviewed mentions is the ways learning is influenced by the social and cultural factors. In addition, sojourner adjustment was reviewed in the literature, since adaptation problems related to culture and living abroad are of great concern in international students' lives. Homesickness, loneliness, financial issues, and stress may be major problems that international students experience, which could affect their adjustment. Guidance and help received from faculty and advisors is important to enhance the student experience, according to the existing literature. Because international students may experience problems and may not be able to show their full potential in their studies, getting help and guidance is essential for international students' adjustment and well-being. Findings reviewed in the literature discussed provide a framework for this study.

## **Method**

### **Research Paradigm**

A qualitative research approach was chosen for this study, to gain a deep understanding of the student experience. Since the goal of this study is to understand international students and interpret their stories, an inductive approach has been followed, allowing themes and patterns to emerge from the stories of the participants. A qualitative approach was a good fit for this study since qualitative research is about how people make sense of things, interpret, and behave.

Therefore, as Merriam (1988) explained:

Qualitative research assumes that there are multiple realities-that the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction and perception. It is a highly subjective phenomenon in need of interpreting rather than measuring. Beliefs rather than facts form the basis of perception. (p. 17)

For this reason, the researcher does not hypothesize, use any treatments, or control what participants may say, since observing and grasping the experiences of the participants from their own perspectives matters in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). Because an inductive interpretive approach was required to document and analyze lived experiences, this study has been framed within a qualitative interpretive paradigm to reach the perceptions and behaviors of the international graduate students (Glesne, 2006). In this case, what the international students think, how they interpret their experiences, and what their actions are, are of great concern for this study. In qualitative research, one of the important things is to present the specific aspects of the world that are being studied by providing a coherent story, which reflects the emerging themes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). To achieve the goals of the research, in-depth interviews were conducted as the primary data gathering method to reach participants' points of

view. Glesne (2006) indicated that researchers in a qualitative study are very active as they ask questions to collect data while recording. Thus, instead of saying “data collection,” it is possible to use the term “data production” (Glesne, 2006, p. 47). It is important for the researcher to balance his or her relationship with the participants as an interviewer. As Seidman (2006) described, each interview is an impression of the dispositions of the participant and the interviewer, and the ways they communicate. Seidman (2006) also pointed out that the interviewer should be both distant enough in order not to dominate the participant’s voice and responsive enough in order to make the interviewer comfortable. By doing so, the researcher gives participants freedom to express themselves during the interview without any manipulation or domination by the researcher herself.

Another important aspect of the interviews is their design. Compared to structured interviews, open-ended and semi-structured interviews reflect a broader perspective and more in-depth understanding of the participants (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Since the focus is on the participants’ perspectives and experiences, it is important to make sure that they are able to express themselves comfortably during the interview. Even if it is crucial to have effective and vigorous interviews, this is not the only concern of a qualitative researcher. How the interviews are reflected in the study is another important aspect of the research. Instead of reporting facts from the interviews, thick and rich descriptions should be utilized to help the audience feel and understand the participants’ experiences (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Conducting interviews with the participants enabled the researcher to understand and conceive of the perspectives of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). In order to confirm and support the key themes that emerged from the interviews, as well as to analyze the participating international students’ experiences, verbatim statements from participants’ answers

were used. In brief, qualitative researchers are highly interested in the research process as well as the result. Subsequently, the interpretations are developed during the research, and in-depth interviews are one of the most effective methods to gather data in qualitative research.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study are international graduate students who are currently studying or have recently studied in a college or university in the United States. Undergraduate international students were not included in the sample, because the maturity factor might influence the results of this qualitative study. The participants were recruited from the researcher's existing network of international students and were selected based on their willingness to participate in the study. Thus, this qualitative study has relied on purposeful, convenience sampling. Among the six interviewees in this study, two are male and four are female. Diverse participants from Vietnam, Turkey, India, Bhutan, China and Cameroon were interviewed about their experiences in three Southwestern and Northeastern universities where they studied in the U.S. The real names of the participants were not used in order to protect their anonymity. Instead, the participants were asked to name themselves so that their real names would not appear in the study. I met the participants in quiet locations that the participants chose in order to conduct the in-depth interviews.

### **The Interviews**

Six face-to-face interviews were conducted with the selected international students. Using qualitative interviewing methods allowed the researcher to interact with the participants through conversation (Lichtman, 2009). The interviews were done to gain information about the participants, gain a holistic view of these international students' perceptions, and gain in-depth understanding of their experiences. The interviews were audio-recorded. The interviews lasted

approximately 1 hour with each participant. Participants were reminded that they could have breaks any time they wanted during the interviews if they felt the need. During the interview, I took notes even though the interviews were audio-recorded.

The interviews were open-ended and semi-structured, and included questions about demographic characteristics and background of the participants. Open-ended questions were used so that the participants could elaborate, rather than give short answers. Some of the semi-structured questions were:

1. Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself?
2. Can you tell me about the time that you decided to study in the U.S.?
3. Can you describe how you fit into American culture?
4. Can you describe the learning culture in your previous institution back home?
5. What are the changes, if any, that you realized in your personal, academic or social life?

However, the preferred style for the interview questions was unstructured, to give voice to the participants, and to ask follow-up questions based on what the participant said during the interview, in a conversational style. As emphasized by Fontana and Frey (1994), open-ended interviews lead to understanding participants' points of view insightfully. Follow-up questions, based on the participants' responses were asked.

Seidman's (2006) three-step approach to interviews was followed and the interviews focused on three areas that reflected the context of the participant experience, details of the experience, and the meaning of the experience. For this reason, the interview started with the context of the experience as background information. Then, the interview continued with the specific details and examples of the experience. Finally, the interview focused on what these experiences meant to the participant. The questions of the interview evolved during the

interview. This kind of an interviewing structure was followed to let participants reflect upon their experiences (Seidman, 2006). When participants talked about their background and general experiences in the U.S., they were asked more detailed questions about their experiences and the meaning they gave to them, if any. After the interviewing process, I transcribed the audiotaped interviews. Having the transcriptions of each interview enabled me as the researcher to refer to the data more accurately, and to analyze based on verbatim input. After analyzing the participant stories, thematic findings presented themselves based on the commonalities in the participants' experiences. Also, some recommendations were provided in light of these thematic findings.

### **Trustworthiness**

The reason for choosing international student experiences as my research topic is both personal and professional. Since the research topic is related to my personal experiences, I am aware of my own subjectivity as a qualitative researcher. However, my ideas about the issues were not just limited by my own experiences, because I reviewed the literature related to this topic and met with many other non-participant international students, which allowed me to see others' perspectives as well. I perceived my role as an insider as a helpful characteristic to build empathic understanding of the issues and have deeper communication with the participants. As Peshkin (1988) indicated, I acknowledged subjectivity as a component of the research, questioned, and reflected upon my own subjectivity during all the phases of the research.

Multiple data sources were used to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. In-depth interviews with the participants were the main data sources used, since they provided rich and holistic participant perspectives. In order to reach *structural corroboration* by having various types of data sources to support the findings of the research (Eisner, 1998, p. 110), numerous actions were taken. First of all, a variety of scholarly articles, books, and documents related to

the study were reviewed, which supported the research and helped me to contextualize the study within the existing literature. Also a pilot study with three participants was conducted before starting this research. This helped me to gain more insight, enhance the research design and decide on the aspects that could be included in the interviews. In order to guard against inaccuracy of the data, the interviews were fully recorded (Robson, 2002). I used a reflective journal to become more aware of my own values, purposes, preferences, experiences and subjectivity, to both acknowledge and reflect upon them (Peshkin, 1988). In addition, narrative analysis of the transcribed interviews provided an in-depth understanding of the stories of participants, which helps the reader relate to the stories (Cho & Trent, 2006). By doing so, my goal was to ensure *referential adequacy*, that helps the readers make sense of the themes that this study addresses, while helping the reader construct meaning while reading (Eisner, 1998, p. 114). In addition, I had the goal of *consensual validation* of the themes and interpretation of the participants' experiences by supporting them with various critics and resources (Eisner, 1998, p. 112). Therefore, member checking was used as a technique to increase the quality of this study by letting the participants review the narrative analysis and make sure that they were understood well and to check if the interpretations of the researcher were accurate (Pan, 2008).

This study was approved by the Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects. An *informed consent* form was given to each of the international students before each interview so that they could read the information about the study and sign if they decided to participate. The prospective participants were advised that their participation was completely voluntary and they had the right to quit whenever they wanted. After getting the informed consent forms signed by the participants, the interviewing process started. In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, they were asked to assign themselves pseudonyms so that their real names would

not be used in the research. There were no foreseeable risks of the research but if the participants felt uncomfortable or emotional, they were informed that they were allowed to have a break or completely quit the interview without any negative consequence.

## **Narrative Analysis**

In this study, six international graduate students from different countries of origin are profiled. One of the participants, Veee, was from Cameroon and she was a Ph.D. student in education. Gracia was a student in business school and she was from China. Another participant was Wang, a master's student in the counseling program, who was from Bhutan. Oscar was from Turkey and he graduated from a master's program in engineering in the U.S. Joe was from India. He was a master's student in chemistry. Anita was from Vietnam and she graduated from a master's program in the U.S. with a concentration on literature. Although each international student has his or her own unique personal characteristics and life, there are some commonalities in what it is experienced in the U.S. as an international graduate student.

### **Veee**

An international graduate student from Cameroon, Veee is currently studying in a doctoral program in education at a university in Michigan. She also obtained a Master's degree from the same university in Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). She obtained her Bachelor's degree in bilingual language, French and English, in Cameroon, and had three years of teaching experience there as well. Veee met her husband, who is also originally from Cameroon, in Michigan and now Veee is the mother of a nine-month-old baby boy. Her baby is with Veee's parents in Cameroon, and she misses him a lot. She had a Fulbright scholarship and she returned to Cameroon after graduating from her Master's program according to her contract with Fulbright. When Veee applied for the doctoral program and decided to come to Michigan again, she needed to leave her baby in Cameroon. She lives with her husband, and wants to take her son to Michigan when he grows older. With excitement in her voice, Veee explains how she decided to come to the U.S. for study:

I didn't think of traveling out because really, I'm not from a very wealthy family, [I come from a] very humble family and so I couldn't make it and I thought even if it were to happen [coming to the U.S.], it would be after maybe a long time when I must have started working and saving my own money to be able to do that. But a friend, thanks to her, always encouraged me to go to Internet and search through websites of embassies in Cameroon. Search through websites and you can find scholarships and interesting educational programs with funding.... So then I found this program, the Fulbright scholarship program at the American embassy website...so I felt like this dream could actually come true. Why not try?

Finding the scholarship program introduced her to a new world where she could realize her dreams. However, the way to her dreams was full of challenges as well.

A scholarship helped Veev to study abroad. However, Veev says she was worried as much as she was excited when she was admitted to the first interview session. She says, "It was very competitive and when I went to the embassy for the first session, we were 80." She confesses that she thought she could not make it. She explains her feelings "...these people are so interesting and very intelligent so I don't think I can measure up to them." Although she says that she was stressed out and anxious, she made it and got admitted to the second interview session. She explains she went through different requirements such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and GRE (Graduate Record Exam) for language proficiency and graduate admissions. By the time she attended the second interview she says the number of candidates diminished: "I got exciting and we were reduced to fifteen. So then went for the interviews and we were further reduced to five" and then she adds: "So that's how I got here.... Unreal but I came [to the U.S]."

**Culture shock.** Coming to the U.S. was the beginning of Veee's experiences as an international graduate student. She says she was shocked by the many challenges that she encountered while trying to adapt to her new life. Veee gives examples from her initial experiences in the U.S. to explain her social life when she first started her new life:

During the orientation, the briefing at the embassy in Cameroon, we were told that, Americans are a lot more similar to us than different.... So I knew we will be the same, we just need to ask to be informed so as to do the right thing and be at right places at the right time but when I got here [the U.S.], I was very disturbed and uncomfortable when many people were surprised that I could speak English so well.

Veee explains some facts about her country, Cameroon, to prove why she can speak English and French very well: "I come from a British colony. My country was colonized by the British. First by the Germans, and then the British and finally by the French." As Veee is an English-speaking Cameroonian, her English is very good, which was something that she needed to explain to others.

Although Veee is an English-speaking Cameroonian, she still experiences challenges regarding her interactions with others. She elaborates on this issue more and tells a story about how she was misunderstood when choosing her meal as vegetarian or non-vegetarian.

I chose non-vegetarian and when we were at the table, I realized there were some little indicating cards. If you were vegetarian, you had a carrot on the card. If you were not vegetarian, you had a rooster. Now, I call it a rooster because I learned...but in Cameroon, it's called a cock. A cock crows in the morning: Cock-cock! And you wake up. It is called a cock. We teach children in school, this is a cock, this is a hen and the babies are called chicks.

Growing up in an area where she could interact with animals frequently, one of the things that Veeve misses in her new life in the U.S. is to be surrounded with animals. Veeve looks nervous and hesitant but continues telling her story:

I saw it [the rooster image on the indicating card] and I was so excited. I showed my friend [and said]: ‘Oh my God! I don’t remember the last time I ever saw a cock.’ It’s been awhile and they [her friends] were like: ‘Oh, how could you say that?...It’s not a cock!’ I was surprised and I got angry and I was like ‘What’s wrong with you people?’ You always think everything I say is wrong, incorrect, it’s inappropriate.

By the end of the story, Veeve says that her friends finally understood what she meant and explained to her why they reacted in that way: “...they told me ‘You are referring to something else when you use that word.’” Veeve says she felt terrible after understanding what that word meant in American English. She says:

Oh my God. I felt so embarrassed and so out of place and so out of culture.... Okay, it’s a rooster and I looked so stupid on that table, and so odd. How could I be thinking about that? I apologized and I told them that is not what I meant. I was just talking about this bird here. I felt bad, really bad that I sounded...raw but that was not what I meant.

Veeve asserts that after this kind of a discouraging experience, she questioned her life in the U.S. She elaborated more on how she was afraid of experiencing negative interactions with others based on her initial experiences: “I was afraid that people might not think well about what I say or about how I think.” She says she considered herself very different from the others, especially Americans. “...[T]he way I spoke was different, and the way I reacted to certain normal things was different.” As a result, Veeve says, she became hesitant to interact with others

for some time when she first came to the U.S. because she thought she was different and could be misunderstood easily by others.

Talking about some of her experiences makes Vee emotional as she speaks. She mentions that the first reactions of some Americans to her were hurtful. The frustration that she still feels is visible on her face while she gives an example: "...[T]his man, who walked up to me and asked me if my family was comfortable living on the trees." Vee seems angry and sad. She seems like she goes back to that moment, and she continues: "In the twenty first century, somebody is asking me if my family is living on trees!" She says she tried to make this person understand how that question and mindset was ridiculous.

I'm like 'Would you live on a tree?' That was my question back to him. 'Would you live on a tree?' And he was like 'Oh, hell no!'...And he said 'Well, from Tarzan movies I see he lived on a tree.' And I'm like 'You reduced Africa to Tarzan! Yeah!' The whole continent to a movie, a cartoon you watch on TV. Is that your image of the world'?

Vee says this was not a good initial experience when she was trying to adapt to the life in the U.S. and she confesses that she was very surprised to encounter such attitudes. She asserts, "So I felt a little disappointed with that and shocked. Shocked that somebody would ask me that now..." She seems disappointed with the perspectives of some Americans about her country.

**Lonely and homesick.** One of the biggest challenges for Vee was to be far from her family. It is not easy to leave home and come to a country that is miles away. With emotion, she tells more about the time she realized she would be far from her family and old life:

Coming to America is always exciting. You going to America, the great America and then when you come to America, you're like "okay, really, I'm away from my family." I can't see my parents,...go to farm anymore. It was so hard not going to the farm.

Veev says she was missing her old life back in Cameroon a lot when she was new in Michigan. She was missing the food in Cameroon and was having a hard time as she was trying to get used to the food in the U.S. Veev says she got her appetite back after some time when she got to know more about other cuisines such as Mexican and Italian.

As a person who is used to a warm climate, she tells how weather in Michigan affects her mood. "Snow every day and it is cold- like freezing cold. It gets to weeks and it gets to months. Gosh, how do we handle it? So it plays on your emotions and your morale." She misses her old life, family, and social connections back in Cameroon. Veev gives an example of how she experienced loneliness and homesickness in her new life in Michigan.

It was hard going to families [in the U.S.] because here, the notion of family is very, very, very close, very secluded. Family is just family. So I remember my first Christmas here. I thought it was going to be like back home where you cook some food and take to your next door neighbor.

Then, Veev explains how she felt lonely and isolated when she realized that Christmas would be different and lonely:

I was the only one...in the whole apartment building. Everybody left and I was so lonely. All the food I cooked was just sitting there and nobody eating it. It was hard. Everybody had gone to families so when I emailed some classmates [to ask], '...can I join you?'...nobody said you can come join me and my family. So I felt like this is just a family thing. So that's when I realize that holidays and feasts like Christmas and Thanksgiving and New Year and Easter, it's family. Friends are not really involved...

She feels very emotional while talking about her first lonely Christmas in Michigan and points out how she felt homesick when she couldn't contact her family as often as she wished when she needed them. She said:

There is not Internet at home [in Cameroon] for me to Skype freely so I have to always struggle to call and each time I called I was laying a complaint or I was crying about something. Those few months, the first time was really, really hard. And that Christmas, there was nobody and I cried because I'm sitting here with food on table, nobody to eat with and my family is away and at times when I want to call, they are sleeping.

Vee's face is down. She seems like she is going to cry if she talks more about how lonely she was that Christmas. It was such a painful time for her that she still remembers.

One of the things that Vee really appreciates is the way that the Office of International Students (OIS) is organized, providing activities: She thinks that having social interactions helped her to adapt more. She said, "I always appreciate the OIS did their coffee hours" and adds:

You always walk into the student center and you feel like these people who are like me and they are all strangers...like me...let's talk about our experiences with our host country and encourage each other and help each other.

Yet, Vee emphasizes that it was difficult for her to meet up with new people on other occasions apart from the activities provided by the Office of International Students.

**Special bond with other international students.** Vee is very honest about her experiences and confesses that she was not sure if she could make friends with Americans when she came to the U.S. at first. She explains why:

They [Americans] don't think like me. They don't act like me. So I don't want to step on anybody's toes. I better just look for African friends. Not African-Americans, no. African friends, international students like me. We relate more because we're all strangers here. So I wanted more international friends, especially from Africa.

Veev thinks that it was a safe choice for her at that time when she was new in her new environment. She says, "Fulbright students are all international students so that was my family." Then she adds what makes this relationship so special:

We had this support group, just Fulbrighters, where it was just okay to talk about anything. Talk about Americans and laugh about Americans and things like that. We could talk about them freely in that group because we were international students and we were looking at America and Americans from the same perspective, through the same lens. So it was comfortable with them.

Although she managed to widen her network of friends by having some American friends later, Veev indicates that her bond with other international students is much stronger.

**Learning culture.** Academic challenges were present for Veev when she was trying to adapt to her new environment and academic life in Michigan. One of the main challenges for her has been to change her mindset about knowledge. She says:

[In Cameroon] knowledge is power, so you don't share what you know because you want to have power over what you know. You want to be able to challenge your classmates about knowledge that they don't have and ... the same mentality in the way we write and we study and we work because very often, it's not just about not wanting to cheat by peeping into the other person's paper but it's because you want to guard your knowledge.

Vee continued describing how guarding knowledge was common in her previous institution by explaining how she and her classmates used to write during the exams. “Very often we write like in a very guarding way. So we write like this,” while illustrating how she used to write during exams by pretending that she was writing and covering the imaginary paper with her one arm. Vee compared and contrasted the learning culture that she experienced in the U.S. and Cameroon with a serious expression on her face, saying:

It is very different here. We share knowledge. I had a very, very hard time dealing with aspect of peer review in the classrooms where I have to write my paper and give to my classmates ... and we go through and help each other. I was like, no! I shouldn't be reading your paper and knowing what you're writing about so much so that I never gave honest review of that paper. I wasn't very helpful to my classmate because I felt I was judging her knowledge.

Vee continues explaining how she was struggling during the peer review activities in the U.S. She says she gave useless feedback to her classmate because she was saying, “...your paper is okay, it's perfect.” Then she adds, “I got really good feedback” in contrast to her attitude. She explains that she questioned herself and wondered if she was selfish. She expressed her feelings about her struggles without having eye-contact with me and in a manner that suggested she still questions herself:

This person is really helping me. Feedback I am getting is very helping me to improve my paper but I am not able to give the same feedback to my classmate. So I started, because I had this self-conscious that was judging me. I had this self-critique of my approach. It was a challenge to me to try to switch...so I found it really hard but I tried, I tried...

Vee looks preoccupied with thoughts and continues with another aspect of the U.S. learning culture that she needed to adjust to: the teacher-student relationship. She drew a clear picture of how the teacher-student relationship was in Cameroon:

The teacher walks into the classroom as sole proprietor of knowledge who was coming there to sit like a sage on stage and dispense knowledge and we sit down there like empty vessels and we are just receiving everything, we don't critique the knowledge we have. It doesn't spur the attitude of creativity, critical thinking. No! We were not taught to think critically, we are taught to receive and regurgitate the same information.

Vee also says that it was not easy to ask questions back in Cameroon. She indicates the teachers in Cameroon were not open to questions as they might be thinking that the student wanted to show off knowledge or challenge the teacher. Vee also asserts that she is not used to asking for help when she needs it because the teachers back in Cameroon were not easy to approach. She says: "...after class, you can run behind him [teacher] and you're begging 'Sir, can you help? I don't understand this chapter,'... if he wishes he will then tell you... 'I can help you.'"

Vee continues indicating the characteristics of the teacher-student relationship that she experienced in Cameroon: "There is nothing more than teacher-student, superior-inferior, master-slave kind of relationship. Hierarchy." Vee says her previous experiences in the Cameroonian learning environment influenced her academic attitude here in the United States, so she needed to adjust.

She asserts that teachers and students in the classroom in the U.S. are very comfortable, as they can call each other by their first names and can eat in the class. Also, American students

dress comfortably for the class while Veev says she was trying to wear very neat clothes as she thinks that reflects professionalism. She explained that she was initially shocked and uncomfortable with such attitudes in the academic environment. For instance, Veev stated that even if her professors insisted that she could call them by their first names, she said, “I can’t, I’m sorry. I don’t come from there” and emphasized again, “No way, I am never going to do that so I kept calling them by their last names, Dr. A, Dr. B.”

**Academic challenges.** One of the things that Veev mentioned is that she tried hard to learn proper citations while doing academic work. She explained what she went through:

I had problems with citing sources because I thought when I write something and knew about it, it belonged to me. So I didn’t know I had to reference where I read that thing from and the person who wrote it...so I kind of struggled with that but...how did you know it where I read it...it wasn’t always easy because there were some things I wasn’t even conscious of how I got to know them.

Also, Veev said that she struggled with the direct writing style that she was required to have in her new academic environment. She elaborated more on that: “[Back home] we don’t say things as they are...we have to go around it [the idea that is written] with the hope that you [reader] understand where we were trying to go.” Veev indicated that it was hard for her to be precise and “give examples and move on to the next point” while writing. Thus, getting used to a new writing style to be successful in academic writing was challenging for Veev. She thought how she wrote related to her culture, too: “I am the kind of writer who goes around and around because of the way my culture is.”

Veev describes how she experienced a lot of stress:

I had educational stress because of trying to manage my time to meet up with the different class requirements and class readings and due dates for assignments. I had a problem with time management because I felt like...I have to finish it [one paper or assignment] before I can look at another one and I will be late with the due dates so I didn't know how to start and stop...distribute time.

Veee adds, "I felt like this is not the only class I'm taking. I have other classes; does the teacher not understand that?" Also, Veee says she wasn't feeling comfortable enough to meet the academic requirements and ask for help, which was another stressor. She says:

I just felt like I was still inadequate for the classes. I just always felt like I was lacking somewhere with the class requirements in terms of reading, in terms of meeting u[p] with activities or class assignments.... It took me a while to realize that I could ask for an extension for the due dates. So I really struggle trying to meet up with the classroom requirements.

Since Veee has received a Fulbright scholarship, she also feels the pressure to be successful in order not to lose her scholarship. She explains how she feels, "Fulbright... It has its own conditions you have to fulfill...you must maintain a certain GPA.... I couldn't afford to lose the scholarship at all. I had to make in a certain level." Veee says she finally attained her goals but it was never easy for her. She needed to overcome many challenges and stress on her way to success.

**Cultural dissonance.** Veee expresses that she had to change a part of her values and needed to develop skills that helped her to fit in her new environment better. She honestly says she will never quite fit in the American culture as she thinks she will always be different.

However, she acknowledges that she tried hard to be accepted by others in the U.S. society, which makes her question herself and ask if she has abandoned her own cultural values:

I have disowned my country or myself somewhere in order to be able to fit in somewhere properly and be able to do what I have to do. Be able to fake the self and subtle me...and it made me feel bad. I felt like 'What am I doing and you are forgetting where you are coming from, who you are.' It's like...I have to do it in order to be able to prevent prejudice and stereotyping and to be accepted. That was a big thing.

Veev seemed a little uncomfortable while expressing her feelings. She said, "That was a really big thing as an international student to be accepted" and told how much she sacrificed to be socially fit in: "I found myself in situations wherein I have to pretend or be a certain person. It's not the most comforting experience. In order to feel accepted, you need to give off some of you."

Veev thinks she realized her dreams by coming here. However, it was challenging for her psychologically too, since she was questioning her actions and values while living in Michigan.

### **Gracia**

Gracia is an international graduate student from China. She did some part of her undergraduate study in Accounting at the same university in Michigan where she is now continuing her studies in Accounting at the Master's level. Gracia has been in the United States for four years now as an international student. Working in a small Chinese restaurant most of the week, Gracia's days are busy and tiring. She says she is working too much and she does not have much free time and that is why she meets me in that Chinese restaurant for our interview. She talks to the restaurant owner in Chinese and explains that she will have a break so that we could start the interview. The Chinese restaurant owner replied to her and they talked for a while in

Chinese about something in the kitchen. The restaurant was silent, there was nobody there yet. Gracia is not very talkative and her voice is low, but she is very precise about her experiences as an international graduate student in the U.S.

**Loneliness in the class.** As an international student, Gracia says she couldn't fit into the class as easily as domestic students were able to. She says she couldn't be a part of the class because her English is not good enough to understand everything that has been said during the class. For example, Gracia says, "You didn't understand even the joke the professor talk in class related to the topic you don't understand" to refer her experience that she couldn't be a part of the class. She nods her head as if she is acknowledging something and adds: "You just laugh when they laugh but you don't really know why they laugh." It was difficult for Gracia to make sense of the moments that the class shares together. Gracia indicates that it was also hard for her to have good friends in the class who would want to pair with her in collaborative studies. She explains: "If the native students have to pick a teammate, obviously they don't really tend to pick me." She elaborates on why she thinks like that by explaining her situation in the class:

They [American students] are very nice but to be honest, I feel like some of them don't want to be team member with me but the professor will assign you a team member. I think they just have to accept it.

Gracia looks disappointed with a broken smile on her face. She tells me she still does not feel comfortable with working collaboratively and explains the reason why: "I feel like my work didn't get respect at all." She feels stress because she says: "It's a team work and you don't want to everyone lower their grades because of you..." She admits that she is still having difficulties with working collaboratively. Gracia says that she is trying to do her best but she does not want

anybody to notice that she is trying so hard because she wants her peers to think that she is already at a certain level academically, because she is afraid of being left alone. She says:

I work very hard but I don't really tell everyone I've worked really hard in front of native students. Maybe they cannot feel how hard you've worked because we start with different level like their expectation is much higher than you give it to yourself. I have to raise it.

Since Gracia feels that she could be excluded by her classmates at any moment, she works hard without showing how she struggles. However, her loneliness in the class does not diminish.

**Let me be me.** Probably, the most demoralizing challenge for Gracia was the attitude of one of her professors towards saying her real name, which is in Chinese. Gracia tells how her experience with this professor was demeaning:

One of my professor tell me I have to pick one English name. I totally hate it. Why? I feel like why cannot I be myself? It's like he suggest to me to pick one but I was like 'I'm okay, you can just call me my last name.' He was like 'Oh, that's rude'...give his value to me. If I'm okay, telling you to call me my last name then you should be okay, right? I don't really like that class and the professor's style in that way. I feel it's kind of childish but back to that time, I was like, 'Why?' Because in my culture, it's okay to call last name or full name or you know just first names. He [the professor] was like, 'You have to pick one English name.' I was like, 'No!' I was just keeping my Chinese name like I asked him to call either my real Chinese name or my last name but I refused to...pick one [English name] for him [she speaks fiercely]. That was the worst experience.

Gracia gets emotional while telling her worst experience. Her face goes down and there is a sour look in her eyes. She thinks this was a very unwelcoming experience for her, which made

her feel cultural dissonance as she feels she needed to abandon who she was. Then she tells the rest of the story about what happened after:

He just called my first name with bad pronunciation. I feel like it's your problem if you cannot pronounce my first name but it is okay for me even if you cannot pronounce it very well. I can still accept it. I don't mind.

Gracia is okay with the "bad pronunciation" of her name since she thinks this is much better than picking a name that does not fit her identity. She describes how she felt about what she went through: "Probably, that's the worst experience...it's very small but you have to go to that class every week and you have to face the professor every week. So it's kind of not good experience." Gracia still questions herself about what happened and she compares her decision of insisting on using her real name to the decision of a Korean student in the same class: "One of the Korean girls, she picked an English name...I kind of feel he compared us and think Korean girl did something better than me. That gives me very, very bad feeling." All Gracia asked for was to be herself by using her real name, which put her in a difficult position that she still tries to overcome.

**Academic challenges.** Gracia honestly explains that she experiences many academic challenges in her graduate studies. Language is the biggest factor for that impacts her academic struggles. Gracia explains: "You can feel the language gets more harder and then you have to study hard, especially paperwork." She continues, "I have to write a paper and it's going to be very challenging. It's still very challenging for me now." Gracia says she eventually accepted that she needed to ask for help, especially in academic writing. However, she says her self-confidence decreased because of the academic challenges until the time she realized that she should seek help. Now she goes to the Writing Center on campus, and going there helps her,

although academic writing in a language other than her own is still difficult for her. She explains why she didn't seek help earlier:

In Chinese culture, it's kind of hard to open your mouth to ask for help. It's like shame like other people can do it but you cannot. If I ask for help, it's like I admit I have lower ability than other people. It's not a proud thing...to ask for help easily.

Because it was culturally not appropriate to ask for help from others, Gracia says she had to overcome the challenges by herself. When she couldn't figure out something about her writing assignment or couldn't hear what somebody said in the class, she says she never asked for help. Even now, it is only the Writing Center from which she seeks help. Also, Gracia compares her professors' availability back in China and in the U.S. She says, "Here, a lot of professor they only have their office time, office hour you have to make appointment but in China, you can just walk in...like a restaurant. Walk in to ask any questions."

Because it is not easy to ask for help for Gracia, she says she could benefit from a more casual relationship with her professors without making formal appointments. Language is already a challenge for Gracia but the pace of speech and different accents are other challenges which make things even more difficult for her. She explains:

Professors speak very fast...I cannot follow like you have to record everything in the class and then replay it later to confirm whatever I get is correct. The other challenge, once you prepare for your study in China, you listen to very Standard English, American English. But here [the U.S.], the professor can come from a different place too. Some of them come from China, some of them come from India or Arabic. You have to know the different accents. I did not think of those problems before I came here so it's really hard to understand them even if I've recorded with those accents.

Gracia says that some professors did not help her with her problems about understanding what they were saying. She says, “Back to that time, I felt like they are cruel like they don’t want to help me out, they don’t understand me. Some of them [professors] tell you, you have to set the same standards as American students.” However, she says she now realizes that these challenges and her professors’ strict attitude contributed to her development. She explains: “...but later, I feel actually they do something good for me, eventually, I want to be the same as American student here.”

One of the most important reasons for Gracia to succeed is her parents, because she wants to give back to her family by being successful. She explains her feelings:

Because my parents paid my tuition, I want to earn money and pay them back as soon as I can but right now, with this economy here, I was not really sure if I could find a job after I graduate. I really want to do my best to pay my back because they are getting old; they need money to stay on for the rest of their life. You know, for senior person, they worry about the housing issue, what if they get sick and they don’t have money to see a doctor. That’s a really realistic problem. That will be my first consideration and it’s mostly related to financial.

All in all, Gracia struggled in her academic life much but never gave up meeting up the same standards with her American peers in class, as she wanted to succeed in her studies.

**Lonely and homesick.** Gracia says that she was very emotional and experienced homesickness, especially when she first came to the U.S. She remembers her old days in a boarding school that she attended in China and her two years college experience in Shanghai but Gracia says that her experience in the U.S. is totally different. She compares how she felt back in Shanghai and how she felt after coming to the U.S.:

I didn't stay with my family but I didn't cry because I can go home whenever I want but once I came here, I realize it's not easy to go back home. So I cry for the first time of my life because of homesick.

For the first time in her life, Gracia was very far from her family. She says she misses them a lot.

Gracia explains that it is hard for her to interact with her parents from miles away. She says:

Because of the time difference, we can only make appointment like tell your parents when you want to be chatting in advance. We make a time and then sit next to the computer on each side and then chat..... At the beginning, they were really worried. They worried how well you eat, can you sleep well...they worry about those...

Along with the issues such as homesickness and not being able to talk to her family anytime she needs, Gracia's social life is not very bright in the U.S. She asserts that she tends to be friends with other international students, who are mostly from her home country, rather than Americans. She explains more about her social life in the U.S.:

Because of the language barrier, I don't really like go out with friends very often, but later if it's more easy like you can feel like the same.... But at the beginning I feel it's a little bit hard because I don't know what they [Americans] are talking to me, they don't know what I was talking about.

In addition, Gracia says she used to seek for familiarities among her friends when she first came to the U.S. She says: "At the beginning, I tend to just make friends with international students like me. They come from China and we can talk in Chinese.... Common topic is how weird America is..."

She says it was initially hard for her to build friendship with Americans and become social because of the cultural differences. Yet, Gracia says she started to feel more comfortable

in interacting with Americans after becoming more relaxed and focusing on the similarities. She explains:

...Americans, they like salad. If I say you...like salad, I like soup but that's because you come from different places, our lives are different but now we can feel we all the same...especially emotionally related [topics] like consider the family, it's a lot of things just like what's in common.

Gracia says that her social skills improved eventually after experiencing those challenges, and now she has friends from many cultures, including a few Americans as well. However, she still does not believe that her friendship with Americans can be sincere, as she feels like she should always be nice to everyone in order to be friends. Therefore she says, "I feel like if I'm nice to somebody, they have no reason to be very rude to me. At least, they have to...pretend to like me, right?"

**Culture shock.** Coming from Shanghai, Gracia finds some aspects of daily life in Michigan very difficult to adapt to. For instance, transportation is one of the biggest issues in Gracia's new life, as she does not think that transportation in Michigan is good enough. Gracia says she has to depend on her car now, which she did not have at the beginning. She especially says, "In Shanghai, you can take the bus every five minutes but here if you miss one you have to wait 30 minutes to 45 minutes. I was not used to that." Coming from a city where taking a bus is convenient, she explains her feelings towards the transportation system in Michigan: "I hate it, I still hate it." Although Gracia has a car now, she still cannot forget the times she struggled with the transportation problems, which made her life difficult.

Not only the transportation but also the food is different and difficult to adapt for Gracia. She says: "I don't like eating cheese at all...the portion of food is way too big for me. I don't like

American food at all.” Working at a Chinese restaurant makes her life easier as she can find Chinese food. Yet, she indicates that not having food that she could really enjoy was a big problem when she first came to the U.S. Therefore, Gracia says it took some time for her to adapt to her new life in the U.S. because of these daily life issues.

### **Wang**

Wang is an international graduate student in a counseling program at a university in Michigan and she is from Bhutan. She says this is probably her final year in Michigan as she plans to go back to her home country after graduating. Wang says she searched a lot in order to select a program of study and university before she came to the U.S. She says that meeting a few professional counselors from the U.S. was a milestone in her life because she was inspired by them, and decided to study in the U.S. However, Wang indicates that things were not easy for her from the very beginning. She says that she had landed in North Carolina at first, before she came to Michigan, and then problems emerged about her admission, even though she was initially admitted to the graduate program. She made her way through the U.S. She explains what happened:

I had bachelor’s in three years whereas in the U.S., it’s four years standard program. So I had problems there [North Carolina] so I was like ‘What to do now?’ I was already in the U.S. and I couldn’t spend time in doing another year of Undergrad course because it’s again expensive.

Wang takes a deep breath and continues to explain the rest of her story. She says “Those people [in North Carolina] got me in touch with one of the professors in our program [in Michigan]...and she helped me and in one week, I finished my Graduate admission, and I was here in Michigan.” Wang says how stressful this experience for her: “I was very luck that she

helped me...otherwise I don't know what I would be doing." Therefore, even her first experience in the program where she was initially admitted and came to enroll did not go smoothly.

Wang says it was disappointing for her to experience such problems in the first place because she says she prepared herself for a long time to apply for the graduate program. Wang names all the examinations that she needed to pass to apply such as TOEFL and GRE. She says it took so much time to take those exams because they are given just twice in a year in her country, Bhutan. So, disappointed but able to resolve her problems, Wang made her way to the U.S. and started her graduate program in Michigan.

**Housemate problems.** Wang says she experienced problems related to accommodation because she couldn't find a place to stay comfortably in her first year. She explains how hard it was for her to live with housemates that she did not know and could not share much:

I had three other roommates and it was kind of unbearable to stay there because there was one girl I didn't get along with, which was kind of difficult to manage being around. So I had two other roommates who were in the house and sometimes I would see them, sometimes I won't see them. So I wasn't used to that kind of surrounding where you live with people who are just housemates.

What Wang had expected was a friendlier relationship since she was used to a family-type living environment. She explains more:

I didn't have that experience before in my life. I lived in a hostel mostly, dormitories with so many people. But you live as a family. You get to know them as friends and even though you don't know them from the beginning, gradually get to know them and become like friends and family so that has been my experience.... But it didn't turn out that way because people have their own boundaries so they don't want to get close, and I

understand. I don't want to force friendship on somebody else. So I think in the beginning, I had issues living with somebody, some other people there, which I am happy it's over. I finished my lease and then moved on with my other friend in a new house.

Wang asserts that she was feeling uncomfortable and unwelcome in the house where she was living, and it was a stressful experience for her. She says it took more than a year to move in to another place, where she could finally have some peace.

**Learning culture.** Wang says she was not aware of different kinds of academic practices before she came to the U.S. What she used to be familiar with was more traditional teaching methods. When Wang talks about how the learning culture she had experienced before coming to the U.S., she refers to two countries, Bhutan and India since she experienced both. She describes the learning culture that she experienced in India as very structured and traditional:

[There are] mostly exams, exams like you study, you do exams and there would be numerous exams over the year like you have your quarter final, your mid-final, your midterm and then you'll have your final exams and in between them you do so many tests. So all of them accumulate to your progress towards the end... Exams, that's how they assess you.

Wang says that she wasn't aware that there could be a variety of academic activities until the time she came to the U.S. She says her experience in her graduate program in the U.S. is not only about exams as in India. She explains, "You have project, you have group work" as an example of different assignments. Wang confesses that she became aware of other ways of making progress and learning after she came to the U.S. and experienced the learning culture. She says:

I wasn't aware that there is other ways of doing assignments and making progress. You think that this is the only way and this is how people will see if you are a good student, you have to have a good G.P.A. or good marks on your exams. Whereas here, they [teachers in the U.S.] have different ways of assessing if you are a good student by doing presentations, by doing project works, by being a good group member, and also getting good G.P.A. and getting involved but there [in Bhutan or India], there's like one way only. It's just one type.

Also, Wang explained that not only the assessment style that she encountered with in the U.S. was different but also how these projects or papers were prepared and submitted was different. She says: "Here [the U.S.], when we do our assignments, we do it all online." This was also something that Wang needed to adjust to because she never did online assignments before in her previous institution. All of these experiences were new to her and Wang says it took a while for her to adapt.

**Academic challenges.** Although Wang tried to prepare herself before starting her graduate program in the U.S., she says she still experienced many challenges during her study. One of the biggest challenges for Wang is academic writing in English. She explains:

...I was not used to having APA style.... [G]etting used to the whole APA style took me weeks and months to figure out, to get used to writing that and using academic writing format was so difficult because I think when I used to do assignments and projects back home it was not the academic writing it was just formal writing. It was so much easier...and here, everything was so difficult.

Wang emphasizes how she tries hard to succeed: "I felt really sad because...I really had to work hard. If I normally spent at home...one week for a certain thing, I had to do that double

amount work and hard work here.” She seems unhappy while describing her concerns. With a sad look in her eyes, she explains how language was a challenge that played with her self-confidence:

No matter how much English you know, it’s not as good as the Americans. It’s not as good as how most Americans need to speak or write. So I had that concern and...I let down myself because I thought I am good at this and they you come here and then you no longer good at it. Because everybody is good here, we become more like average.

Wang says she realized that she studied harder when she came to the U.S. when she compares to her previous studies. She says, “I appreciate myself for all the hard for I do. Before, I wouldn’t be so bothered because I wouldn’t put in a lot of hard work. I just knew those things and I didn’t study too much [back home].” Noticing her efforts to succeed makes Wang proud now, however, it was not easy for her to accept that she was struggling as a competent person, especially when facing those challenges for the first time.

**Feeling excluded.** Another point that Wang emphasizes that she was feeling excluded, especially from the American students in her class. Although it is not easy to talk about her feelings, she continues:

...[T]he first day, you go to class and you choose a certain spot and you sit there. You probably be the only one sitting there all the time without any American students sitting next to you.... You are a different person in the class so you think everybody might be interested in being friends with you. They might be but they don’t show it and they don’t come and say ‘hi’ to you.

Wang continues describing her experiences seriously:

A lot of times, you doing group work. If the teacher says get into pairs or make your own group, then you probably be the only person in one group. No one else is helping you in a group or you don't have group mates. People don't unless your teachers say, "You and you, get together." And it's very difficult for you to get a group.

One of the things that Wang points out is her feelings of the reasons of her exclusion from native students. She tells more by giving examples:

[A]n American makes a joke. The context is so different that I don't understand because I've never heard about that before. Or if they are talking about a TV show I've never heard. If they are talking about a holiday that I've never heard. So I think all of that, all of those differences made me feel very excluded because I was like 'I don't have any point of reference to laugh about certain thing because I don't know it.'

Wang says she tried to improve her social skills and understanding by trying to learn about the things that she heard from Americans:

For example, I hear a new word in the class and I go home and learn about it. So if they talk about a Hanukah, maybe three years ago, I didn't know what a Hanukah was. So I go home and I type Hanukah then I learn that a bit. So it's funny and if they say a word that I didn't know in English, I'll go home and I'll check it out and next time they talk about it, I'll know what it means. So I think that way, I felt very excluded.

Although Wang says learning about what she couldn't understand after the conversation in the class was over did not help her at the exact moment, she learned from those experiences too.

Moreover, it was never easy for Wang to ask for clarification when she didn't understand something, which didn't help her to break out her exclusion from others. She says: "I think of

course I don't want to look stupid and embarrassed...I never used to do that before because in the beginning, it's kind of scary. You are new and you don't want to feel embarrassed."

**Support and help.** While facing the challenges, Wang says she lost her belief in herself sometimes. In such moments, she says she needed some encouragement and understanding. Therefore, her family's support was very important for her although they were miles away. She says:

I want to...make the best out of it [her studies]. My family back home, they give me a lot of credit for all the hard work I put in. They say 'just don't give up, just keep trying, we know that you can do' so that kind of faith and support coming from them just means a lot.

Along with her family's encouragement, Wang says she needed to get support from her professors as well. However, she says her relationships with her professors were not very helpful at first because neither she nor the professors were aware of what their relationship needed. Wang says she first thought of her professors in the U.S. similar to her professors back home, where the teacher-student relationship was too strict and traditional. Therefore, Wang says she was hesitant to communicate with her professors in the U.S.:

I didn't realize that you could go up to them and just have a chat, and from that chat, you don't know what they're going to say to you or what they want to learn from you or what...opportunities knock on your door. We feel like it's scary to talk to them like that so I wasn't aware that they were available for us and they're meant for us and get paid for us. I didn't realize that. That's why I think at the beginning I was kind of like "Oh, should I be saying this to my professor? If I'm saying this, am I oversharing? Am I crossing my boundaries?"

Wang tells what she discovered about the professors in the end, which changed her attitude towards her professors: “ [A]sk them [professors] and they are there to help you, or they can ask somebody else to help you from the class...that was helpful and also different from what I am used to.” Besides, Wang indicates that there are not many international students in her program, which makes international students’ experiences a learning process for both her and professors. She says:

A lot of international students are in the business program.... I think business professors are more used to having them [international students] around and they design the classes according to them. Whereas for me, there have been very few international students in the counseling programs... I think it is like a phase, transitioning phase for professors.

In addition, Wang puts a smile on her face and points out how the professors in her program try to make international students a part of the learning culture:

They’re [professors] getting used to having international students in the program so they’re trying to be aware when giving examples. They give examples that everybody can relate to, not just American culture, for example, about a certain holiday and we are not used to, and certain language and certain joke. We are not used to that so now they’re getting that feel of international students so they’re trying to adjust themselves.

Yet, Wang still thinks that professors who are coming from international backgrounds understand international students much better. She says:

American professors would not be aware of that and I think just because the visa rule, immigration rules will kind of scare them a little bit. So I feel they’re not used to it and they won’t be able to cope with the stress. That’s why I’m happy that I have an academic

advisor who is international herself. I think if she wasn't there, I'd freak out. I wouldn't have help. I wouldn't have guide, guidance and just to go for silly questions.

However, Wang says she is glad she realized there is nothing to be afraid of when contacting her professors, either international or American, because communicating with them was helpful for her. Along with her family's support, help of her professors enhanced Wang's academic experiences.

**Social interactions.** Wang experiences loneliness, and isolation from her American peers. She says she used to hesitate when communicating with others in the U.S.: "I had my own preconceived notions about what to say, what not to say. I was totally wrong." Because Wang was not sure how to talk to people from other countries, she says she was always in need of communicating to someone from her own country of origin. She explains:

You don't have your family support [in the U.S.] and you don't have friends around, especially me. I'm the only student or only person in Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor area from Bhutan. So I have no sense of community, no sense of connection in terms of culture and in terms of having somebody from your old country.

Wang says she was looking for someone who has a familiar background so that she could share more. She talks more about how hard it was for her:

I have nobody in the beginning so that was very difficult to deal with. I was like even if there is one person from Bhutan, I would survive, just to talk in your language sometimes and that kind of bonding. So, I used to miss that a lot. I still do. I don't have one person from Bhutan; I want to talk something that we can understand.

In addition, she also thinks that building relationships with Americans is also hard for her. She explains:

You don't know how do you make friends in America because...I'm from Asia. I know how I can make friends with Asian people. It's kind of easier. You understand certain body language, you understand certain norms. There are certain behaviors...that you know whether that person is interested in making friends with you or not. And here, you don't know what is the norm. Whether it's a handshake or whether it's a hug or whether it's a goodbye or is it exchange of phone numbers...

Wang continues explaining the reason why she thinks that making friends with Americans is a challenge for her:

[E]very American will be like 'Oh, hi! How are you? Oh, talk to you later. See you, bye. We'll keep in touch.' And then, they never keep in touch. So I was kind of confused with that. What does that mean, somebody will say 'I will talk to you later' but then that person doesn't even have your phone number or is not even on Facebook with you.

Although Wang says her understanding of Americans improved over time, she says she realized the concept of friendships may not be the same as back home:

In the beginning I was very confused about what that meant but then, slowly, you get to know the culture. Then, I realize it's just being polite of them saying "Talk to you later, see you later" but it doesn't mean anything. I think here, they make friends fast but it may not be as like friendship-friendship.

Therefore, Wang still thinks that her friendships with her American peers are not as deep as her other friends, who are back home. She does not regularly meet up with Americans or feel connected to them. That is why Wang thinks that her friendships with other international students more real. She expresses her feelings:

I think in my social life here is like very international students mostly. I cannot say that I have a lot of friends from the American culture. I think I do have some friends but they are not friends that I would go grocery shopping with or go for shopping or do stupid things together. They are not that close friends.

Wang thinks that she now understands the local people more and she tries to enhance her social life even if others do not seem interested. She says now she understands that most of the Americans are not very open to others because they are not familiar with communicating with people from different countries. Hence, Wang tries to be the first person to start conversation with others. She says she tries hard to be accepted by others and have a good social network. Wang says she tries to behave in a way that she will be accepted, but she is also afraid to be assimilated. Yet, she thinks she does not totally fit in the American culture. Wang says, "I have mixed feelings about it. I do it because I have to do it. All the things I do to fit in the culture is, I have to do it because I have to live in this society." Then she looks confident and summarizes what she means: "I don't feel I necessarily own the American culture. I don't believe in it but I would take part in it because I have to..." Wang seems like she is organizing her thoughts, "I have a lot of faith in my religion and my own culture. I don't want to lose that. I think home is home. There is nothing bad about the American culture. It's just not your culture. That's it."

### **Oscar**

Oscar is an international graduate student from Turkey, who now works as an engineer in a company in Michigan, having graduated from the Master's program in mechanical engineering. He says he is very happy with his job and has settled down in Michigan. Before he started to work in this company, he was studying and working at a university in Oklahoma. When Oscar talks about his life before coming to the U.S., he says he was not satisfied with his old job back

in Turkey where he was working at a private company. He had to travel a lot for business, where he felt like he became disconnected from research and innovations. Oscar believes one should attach importance to personal and professional development for success. Therefore, he says he wanted to keep himself updated and decided to pursue a Master's degree to become more professional in his major so that he could apply for better jobs. He had the opportunity to travel in Turkey a lot as well as travelling to a few foreign countries because of his job. He thinks his travelling experiences helped him while he was searching for the possible opportunities as he had a general idea of what institutions in Turkey, or in the foreign countries that he had visited, might offer him in terms of his graduate studies. Oscar always wanted to come to the U.S.; however, he could not make it through because he started to work immediately after he graduated from college. While searching for graduate programs abroad, he noticed an opening in a university in Oklahoma where he could get a research assistantship, which made his dream come true. It was a big decision, which he says he was aware would change his life for the better.

**Motivation to study in the United States.** Oscar asserts that he had motivation to study in the U.S. for various reasons, which made him think it was worthwhile to come to the U.S. One reason was the general knowledge that he gained from the media through American movies and the news about the U.S. He explains:

U.S. is in everybody's life, you know. Since you hear about U.S. from TV, especially movies most of them are made in U.S. Of course you can't understand everything from movies, especially the actual life in U.S. But you have an idea about the United States.

Oscar wanted to improve his English language skills by studying in the U.S. and adds that he became even more interested in the U.S. after realizing the place of the U.S. in academia. He says:

In university, a lot of researches, scientific research, were going on and they were all written about professors from U.S. Even professors in my university back in Turkey, they spent there at least 5 to 10 years to have their Master's or PhD degrees. And they came back to Turkey and served as professors. And my friends as well, they were all thinking about going to U.S at least to get their masters degrees. I saw from my professors, they had better English and knowledge when they spend time in U.S. And that was very beneficial for their academic life.

Therefore, coming to the U.S. and being successful became a passion for him. Oscar says it was a very big step for his life and he aimed for the best by coming here. He explains his excitement: "It's a big thing, so I was very very excited when I found the opportunity for coming here." Oscar says he always knew that the best universities were in the U.S., and he still believes that after experiencing graduate studies. The research opportunities and being paid as a research assistant made studying in the U.S. even more attractive for Oscar. He tells how he is fascinated with such opportunities that institutions in the U.S. provide:

It is not easy to get a paying position such as assistantships back in my home country because either government or private companies do not invest money in research. When you compare money invested to research in U.S. and my country, in U.S. it's million times more than my home country. So the technological developments even take place in U.S. because of the investments on research are huge.

As a result, Oscar says he resigned his job after he was admitted to his graduate program, and decided to take a big step for his career by coming to the U.S.

**Learning culture.** Oscar says the role of students in his previous institution was passive since the learning process was teacher-centered. What Oscar experienced in the U.S. was

different since he had to learn to be an active student. He describes how the classes work in his home country: “In a normal day in the classroom, professor comes to the class and just gives lecture and leaves.” Oscar elaborates more on his previous experiences:

There was no weekly meeting to review your progress, or any projects. Since the majority of studies are all theoretical, professors spent more time just to prepare content and curriculum instead of spending time on student projects and involvement. So students were not very active in class... you find yourself in a situation that you are only preparing for exams. You are not involved to projects and gain hands on experiences.

Oscar compares the two different learning cultures he experienced in the U.S. and Turkey:

During the class, you were just listening to your professor; sometimes you even fall asleep because of the long theoretical and boring sessions.... When I was in a class in U.S., since I had always either a project or assignment to deal with, I was always in an interaction with my professors to catch the deadlines, to do weekly meetings to review my work. When you are involved in something, you will always be more interested in the situation. So it will keep you awake.

In addition, Oscar says that he needed to adapt himself to the demands of his program, which he was not used to. He explains:

Especially in engineering majors in U.S., students are more involved in projects and professors have budget to get the project done in a timely manner. So there is always a challenge for both students and professors to catch deadlines, to come up with good solutions and then it is more result oriented here. I was not familiar with that.

One of the things that inspired Oscar to adapt better is the professors in the U.S. institutions. He shares his observations about the attitude of professors that he started to get used to in the U.S. with excitement:

I was very surprised when I saw professors were a lot motivated and passionate about their job. And then they were always willing to help students to give them better learning experiences. And better knowledge. I saw my professors have written books; even we used it for our class. And the same book had been used in other universities in U.S. So I was very impressed when I thought that my professors are contributing to the actual life that other people can benefit. They were not just doing theoretical part and going home but they were contributing to the actual life. That motivated me a lot and I really wanted to be like them.

**Perseverance.** Oscar says he wanted to accomplish a lot and become successful. Therefore, he proudly explains that he worked hard from the very first day he came to the U.S. However, it was not easy for him to drive on this challenging road. Oscar mentions that he experienced many challenges while he was getting used to the life in the U.S.:

As an international student, you have to deal with a lot of other stuff when you first come to U.S. such as finding a proper accommodation, getting a phone line, getting a social security number, driver's license, registering for electric and water services, and so on.... That takes also your time because you are in a new system. And you are human too, you are trying to make a life here too and bad things happen sometimes. And it may be harder to solve than when you are in your home country.

He says that this influenced his academic performance sometimes:

So your performance decreases in your academic life and you do not pay attention [to] your classes that much. Then you may find yourself in a situation that your professor think you may not be a good fit for this position or passionate for this position. I remember I got 89 out of 100 and got B from that class because the professor was comparing students in terms of their performances. It was discouraging for me.

In addition to the daily life issues in a country in which he was new, he says that he was always struggling with financial issues:

Also, money was a challenge in order to cover my expenses. I was also driving a campus shuttle as a part time job beside my assistantship since I was not making enough money. That was also affecting my performance also that my professors were not aware of. I made my way here all by myself. It wasn't easy and since you are international, you cannot loan money and feel comfortable with all your academic life. So, economic challenges make it harder.

Oscar does not seem comfortable talking about the financial issues. He quickly sums up: "I was overwhelmed with all those tough situations like money, daily life issues and academic issues. And as a foreign person, you have to deal with everything on your own." Yet, all the hard work contributed a lot to his growth. He asserts that he accomplished a lot and explains: "I did a lot of work here and improved my skills, my experiences a lot...and that's also the reason why I work in U.S. right now." Oscar worked in two jobs during his program of study in the U.S. and successfully graduated with a high GPA. Since he now works in a professional company after graduation, he says he attained his goals, and it was worth persevering during the difficult times.

**Social interactions with Americans.** Oscar says he is normally socially active in his home country and he tried to be social in the U.S as well. Although Oscar says he had a good

social life as an international graduate student, his social interactions were not always easily established. Oscar says he finds interacting with Americans quite challenging. As he was in need of having social interactions, he says he tried to make friends.

Since my language was not perfect, I wanted to interact and socialize with people to improve my language. If I am here, I should improve my language by experiencing with real American people, right? But I realized that one of the challenge with Americans was they were not very open to internationals.

Then he indicates that there were challenges for him: "...I had difficulties make friends with Americans, especially when I was new." Oscar continues talking about his experiences with the Americans that he tried to interact with:

Most of my office friends were Americans. And that was a challenge for me to build relationships with those people who belong to different culture. The way they think, the way they live, their habits are different. And they think that you were like one of them and you were not coming from a different culture like everybody is the same. I physically look like them but I'm from a different culture in deed.

Oscar gives an example to clarify what he means:

For example, they [Americans] think that everybody celebrates Halloween in their American culture but I have never seen and celebrated Halloween before coming here. Here, Halloween is big but in my country, culture, we don't have it. So when they talk about it, you have no idea about what they talk and can't join them. Or contribute something. And they assume that you know everything about their culture so they don't explain you anything. And you have to figure out everything on your own.

He looks a little bit nervous while telling those challenges. Oscar asks: “How can I know if they [Americans] don’t tell me what it is?” to point out the reason why he thinks that Americans’ attitudes are not open to people from other cultures. Yet, Oscar thinks that his part time job helped him to build relationships with Americans and helped him to interact more:

I was actually lucky about the social life here because of my part time job. I was driving a shuttle and all other drivers were American students. And there were senior drivers too, who were not students but had families, all settled down there. They invited me to their homes, we came together in many events such as Thanksgiving, annual bus driver’s competitions, and also we played games together with my American friends.

Oscar indicates that having relationships with Americans made his adaptation to the life in the U.S. easier:

I saw how they [Americans] were living, what they were talking about and that made me understand the life in the U.S. more like where to shop, where to go, just by listening to the conversations between them sometimes or doing something altogether such as barbeque.

Because interacting with his American friends in casual settings was a good experience for Oscar, he thinks that this kind of experiences could help most of the international students. He says: “I think I was lucky because I had a part time job and I used this job to make better connections with American people. Not many of international students don’t have an opportunity, chance like that.”

**Social interactions with other international students.** Oscar says he became friends with many international students during study, which made him know more about other cultures.

Although Oscar thinks that he benefits from his social relationships with Americans, he thinks that other international students are much closer to him. Oscar explains why he feels that way:

[Y]our relationships with Americans never goes deeper. You can have fun with them but there is not something more. Most of them [Americans] don't even know what you mean what you talk about when it comes to serious stuff. So I always felt international people closer to me because they really understood me better since we have similar feelings like being in a new country, new culture.

Oscar elaborates more on his perspective about his friendship with other international students. He talks enthusiastically:

You go through similar experiences, you gain experience together in this new environment. We all come from different countries but we have something in common that we all need to adapt to a new system. So we understood each other better.

Oscar also asserts that he enjoyed meeting with people from different cultures, which increased his cultural awareness:

I met many international people from different countries and cultures such as Indian, Chinese, Vietnamese friends. And I had a chance to learn their culture that I didn't have any idea before I came to U.S. I also had a chance to learn many different things from these international friends that collapsed down my prejudices and stereotypes about different cultures.

Oscar gives an example to show how much he enjoys these interactions: "When I talk to an Indian friend, for example, I am able to talk about their culture and language. And they feel very happy when you know something about their culture and able to answer to their questions."

Then, Oscar continues explaining how these experiences contributed to him positively, and made him feel better:

This [knowing each other] brings closeness between you and that person so you can have closer friends. Having these kind of good relationship with both Americans and international students, it really helps you to deal with loneliness here in U.S. You do not feel alone since you have friends to call, talk and share your feelings and problems. So it became easier to get rid of your issues when you did not feel alone. You know that you have a place in your new environment here.

In addition, Oscar says that having friends from all over the world introduced him to new things. He asserts that he attended the activities provided by the Office of International Students:

There were some cultural events such as Cultural Nights where many international students perform songs, dances and show their colorful cultures. Besides there were events where every different country bring food and sell. That gave me an opportunity to make more friendship with different people, taste different food, interact with different cultures.

Oscar says he tried to represent his own culture too. He says he attended to a food event and prepared some traditional Turkish food to share with other international students. Oscar explains feelings, “When you are in a different country, you feel that you are in need of representing your culture to other people and playing as a bridge, cultural bridge.” Hence, Oscar says his friendships with other international students enriched his life, and he is glad to have those friends in his life.

## Joe

Joe is an international graduate student from India. Joe thinks his studies are an important part of who he is, and introduces himself through his academic achievements. He earned his Bachelor's degree in pharmacy in India. Joe proudly mentions that he presented ten posters while he was in his undergraduate program back in India. He is now a Master's student in Chemistry at a university in Michigan, and about to graduate in a month. Joe says he is going to continue his graduate studies as he is admitted to a Ph.D. program at a university in Indiana. As he spends most of the day in the library, he meets me there in a study room. He sits tightly, looks a little uncomfortable. Joe keeps his voice down while talking as if he does not want to disturb anybody although there is nobody around in the study room. He is not very talkative but he opens up slowly, and shares his experiences as an international graduate student.

**Learning culture.** Joe is quite fascinated with the learning culture provided in the U.S. institutions, which is quite different than what he experienced in India. Joe says, "I heard that the U.S. is really good in terms of funding if you have the potential and if you're a deserving candidate." He compares it to India: "If you talk about India, the quality of education is comparably very low. No resources and research and no such highly qualified professors." Then he elaborates on the learning culture that he used to experience in India:

That's absolutely different from here and that's what I feel is one of the most negative points of the Indian education. So there [India], the classes are more theoretical and it's not practical. No practical education at all...not that useful and purely it was theoretically based because exams were even completely theory. Everyone is suffering there with the same thing, they [students] have no practical knowledge. They [students] know the

theory, they know everything but whenever it comes to practical thing, they don't know anything and that's what matters in this world.

Coming from a different background, Joe says that what he encountered was totally different from the education in India when he came to the U.S. He explains while still critically comparing Indian and American education:

We had like seven to eight courses,...it was almost impossible to manage those things and we had classes from morning to evening and from Monday to Saturday.... No time to do anything else. No time to learn practical things and that's what I feel: Compared to this country, the education system is completely different. Here, you have classes maybe once or twice a week.... Here you get time to self-study, to explore the things, to work on your resume, to apply for the jobs, to do some other stuff, to improve your skills, to refine your other skills.

Joe thinks that his past experiences would not promote meaningful learning at all because he does not remember anything about the theories he studied. He says it was not easy for him to fulfill the requirements of his new program in the U.S., however, he says what he learned contributed to him. One of the things that Joe finds different is the style of the given assignments. He says:

They [teachers in the U.S.] give you the whole week...you have to show, do everything on your own. You are on a completely independent study. You are given this task, you have to find a way how to do it and you have to analyze everything on your own, you have to come up with final result. They'll give you time but it should be completely independent so it's quite challenging. In India, studies are not that challenging. It's very obsessive like you never get time to do anything else but the homework and everything

will be from the book. You don't have to explore everything. You don't get the time even but you don't have to do that.

Therefore, he says he learned to be an independent learner and focused on his learning beyond the theories [in the United States].

Another difference that Joe notes between the learning culture in India and the U.S. is how competition occurs or does not occur in class. He asserts:

If someone is my classmate, and if there is no competition between me and him, then definitely we are good friends. That's an issue in India like everyone in the class, they're barely good friends. I mean they are friends in general, like they talk, but from inside, they don't have that love or affection. The reason is they are competitors of each other. In U.S., what I like is they [teachers] never show grades. I mean, they never tell your grades to anyone else. They'll tell you what it is...that brings you close to the people. There's no competition in the class. You are competing with your own.... In India, they [teachers] literally display everything...and that really creates hatred in the minds of people.

In order to describe the impact of competition among students on their friendship, Joe elaborates on this issue by comparing the learning culture in India to the U.S.:

People really support each other here... People support each other! No one try to pull you back. The reason is that because they don't compete because they don't know how you're doing and in India, it is so different. No one to help you at all or to support you at least from your friends when it comes to education. Other things are fine but when it comes to studies, no one is going to help you. You have to make your own way.

Joe emphasizes that his previous institution was very strict. For instance he mentions he used to visit his home once a year only because of the absenteeism rules. He says, "That's crazy,

even if you are absent one more day, you are charged with some fine.” When it comes to relationships with the professors, Joe says there is a big difference in the U.S. from what he experienced in India. He gets quite emotional and frustrated while explaining:

Another big difference in India and this country education system is professors here are very professional, very, very professional.... They don't care about how many girlfriends you have or if you have any or not. They don't care about how you look. They don't care about how you eat. What class [social class] you are part of. In India, everything matters. In India, if you are good in studies, it's not enough. It's not enough. To get good grades, you need to have good relationships with professors. Here [the U.S.], you don't need that. People keep everything in their mind. If you had some bad encounters, then they may fail you even if you are reaching the top, they'll pull you back.

Joe looks both frustrated and disappointed while explaining all of these. Then he sums it up: “They [teachers in the U.S.] don't care about anything else, just care about what you are doing in that course.” Hence, Joe says academic honesty in the U.S. inspired him to accomplish more and show his potential to his professors.

**Motivation to succeed.** Joe is very ambitious about his studies. Being successful in his area of interest is the primary focus of his life. He says, “I have always been the person to passion” and then he emphasizes that being successful is very important to him. He tells more about his perspective of success:

For me success is one of the biggest motivating force because I wanted everyone to accept he's from that country and he's like, superior. He's one of the best.... This is...always the motivating force behind me and I can do anything, I can work 24 hours, I won't sleep just for that.... The success has a big-big role in my life.

Joe says his father always encouraged and motivated him to study abroad. Now, Joe is glad that he fulfilled his father's high expectations of him as a future Ph.D. student. He says:

My father always pushed me, pushed me hard to give me all the support and still, he was the only person to push me for Ph.D. He was like, "I don't want a single penny from you just I want this doctor [title]."

Moreover, Joe says he always keeps himself motivated to learn more and accomplish more. He says, "Even if I don't know anything about it [an academic topic], I'll just explore everything on my own. I'm independent.... I'll do everything on my own but I will make it, I will make it." Then he continues passionately, "Success is the biggest thing in my life. If I get some award, I don't think about anything else other than my work because I want to prove myself day by day, every day in front of the people." Joe says he feels so happy when he accomplishes something important to him: "Whenever you really push hard, whenever you do hard work, when you get that result, then that happiness is incredible. That's I would say the best happiness of this world." In addition, he says he learns not only from his failures as well as his success:

...[F]ailures are important because if you keep getting success, then you don't value it at all. If you get the failures, then you realize 'okay, now, this is difficult' then, you put more effort, you push more hard next time, keep trying, this is a process in which you improve yourself.

Joe gives an example of how hard he tries to be recognized and prepares himself to the future:

Today, I failed in getting in MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] ...I know it is difficult. I applied and got rejection but I still have that burning fire inside of me and this process of failure, failure, failure.... You can reach that level one day you deserve it, but

now I don't deserve it. But one day, because of my hard work, I will improve myself enough so that I'll deserve it, to get it. So that's what I feel success is important for sure but with failure, success after your very hard work: that is the biggest thing.

Joe says he also seeks for perfectionism in his studies. He wants to do the best. Joe explains how his studies are important to him:

I like excelling in the thing [his study topic]. If I get the one thing, the one award, the first rank in the class or if I score...100% in a test, that motivation I get from that is the biggest feeling in the world...I just cannot see myself in the second position.... I want to reach the top.... So for me, now, the work is everything because I'm used to it, and what give me the maximum pleasure is this.

Joe has a purpose, which is to be distinctively successful in his graduate studies. Therefore, he never gives up, and continues studying hard as he never lets himself down.

**Obstacles to success.** Although Joe says he has always been passionate about his studies, his way to success was not easy. For instance, money was a big issue for Joe and he is glad that he got the opportunity with good funding options. He says it would be almost impossible to come to the U.S. and start his graduate program. "To take that much loan...that much money in India for an average person takes a life just affording the fees alone," says Joe. However, he experiences more challenges while trying to be successful in academics. Joe says language is a barrier for him, which creates challenges. He honestly explains how he feels around native students: "I feel inferior because when I'm sitting among 15 people, I'm the only Indian and they all are Americans. Definitely, I feel inferior I don't know why. So definitely, language is a very big barrier." However, he says he never lets himself down as he sees role-models who also came from India and became successful in the U.S.:

I met a guy from Harvard University and he...completely speaks in typical Indian accent but what matters in this country [the U.S.] is what you have inside...If you're really good at that [what you do], they will give you the award. I've seen this country, I really appreciate it so much.

Joe says that he tries to remain positive in spite of the language barrier because he was working hard to show his potential at every opportunity. He says, "I was able to understand what I was taught by my professors and I was able to express everything on the paper." Yet, he confesses that presenting in front of the class is not easy for him. He explains:

When it comes to presentations, academic presentations of course you will struggle...because in India, we never had those speaking classes. Here [the U.S.], people have speaking classes in high school..., they have English as their native language. They [American students] have English, they have those speaking classes in high school so they know, they are trained in a way to speak openly in public.

Joe explains the times he struggled and how he feels about presentations because of both the language barrier and his lack of experience in presentations:

First, is the stage fear and other thing is a language barrier, combining both, you have a lot of issues but slowly-slowly, you come to that comfort level. Not great but you are above the required level so that's what's important.

Another thing that Joe mentions is how he works hard to communicate with his professors and advisor: "I can still feel the difference of language. When I talk to them [professors], sometimes I get stuck, like words don't come to mind. I have to talk to them like multiple times in a day, every day." Joe also emphasizes that students need to be independent learners here in the U.S. by studying on their own. He explains how he tries hard:

I appreciated it on one hand [the education system in the U.S.] but I also feel that you have to do so much stuff on your own. Professor will just cover one chapter in one hour or even in a half hour.... You have to really catch them up because the classes are just one or twice a week so they cover so much of material in that one week.... You got very good in self-study, here there is more stress on self-study in this country.

Joe says he patiently and determinately worked for success and thinks that he accomplished a lot although he struggled.

**Language barrier.** Joe says that the biggest challenge for him in terms of his relationships with others is language. He tells more about the language challenge and its impact on his social life:

[D]efinitely, language is a very big barrier I think...I'm shy in opening up. If I know English very well like them [Americans], definitely, I would be very comfortable speaking anything. I won't hesitate at all but because of language, I'm shy in opening up.

Joe elaborates more on the times that he feels uncomfortable while speaking:

If I know that person, if she is from my class, it's fine and I can sit and talk...but other people whom I don't know, I'm definitely hesitant the first time because I don't know if they understand me or not.

Joe's communication problems are mostly caused by his lack of confidence in his English skills. He talks about the reason why he finds language as a key factor which prevents him to communicate with others more. He says, "If you are comfortable with language, you are fine with everything." Joe continues:

If you can speak English like them [Americans], then you can learn their culture, you can learn all their interests, what they do. Their interests are different from yours but you can

learn them by just listening to them. But if English is a barrier, then you don't understand everything, you cannot express yourself that well in English.

Joe says language is a barrier that prevents him from building sincere and deep relationships with especially Americans. Language is like an invisible wall that socially separates Joe from others.

**Social interactions.** Joe describes himself to emphasize he is not the social type. He says, "I'm kind of reserved person. I don't talk to everyone. I'm not very social actually." Then Joe adds quickly, "I used to be more reserved but now I'm open. I can talk to people now." After a while, Joe talks about his friends and social relationships. He says, "American friends I have are mostly from Chemistry because I spend most of my time in my Chemistry department." Then he says that he has Indian friends also and elaborates: "...I stay in that community [Indian community]. I stay in a building where so many Indians stay..." Although he says he has some Indian and American friends, Joe indicates that that he didn't make many international student friends. He explains: "International friends, I don't have so many. Maybe because I never go to student center and I'm not a part of those multicultural or OIS [Office of International Students] thing." Joe explains how he gets to know other people in the U.S.: "Teaching assistantship helped me a lot because I started having some friendships..." He emphasizes that he was teaching in Chemistry laboratory and that was a good opportunity for him to develop networks. He tells more about that:

If the student is from Geology or Physics or Biology, they have to take some Chemistry courses just as a prerequisite. So I teach them and that's how I learn about them. Since they are from non-Chemistry background, they are zero in Chemistry and I feel privileged to teach them.

Joe says that he focuses on his studies more than anything, so he does not socialize with people much. He says, “If I know people from other departments, they are again related to science.” Yet he does not feel close to those people with whom he built friendship. He explains:

When I talked to them, I talk to them mostly about science. But sometimes, when we talk about some other things too, it’s not that close friendship. It’s just like when you see outside and say ‘hi’ or ‘bye’. Only...two people from the lab, I keep on talking to them even after the semester but...then they go, then they don’t have to take any other Chemistry courses,...they are not that close friendship. But it really helped me at least knowing the people.

Joe continues telling more about his friendship with the people in the laboratory where he works: “They’re still in contact, still in touch, they email me whenever they need help and I’m still helping so many people...I just meet in the café or meet anywhere in the building.” Joe thinks that his assistantship was the key for him to meet people. However, Joe also says he does not consider those relationships as personal relationships as they are not close friends that he could meet other than academic reasons. He explains, “...I just prefer my own group” when he wants to hang out.

Joe indicates that no matter how important his American friends are to him, his friends who come from the same country have a more special place in his life. Joe explains, “I have some American friends and they are really important right now.” Then he adds: “...still, Indians are a little above. When it comes to comparison between the two [Americans/Internationals and Indians], I feel Indians are a little closer than others. Because the people you stay with you talk the most to them.” As a person who is more interested in academic life than socializing, Joe says he experienced loneliness at the times he didn’t work:

In summer of last year, I felt lonely and I am used to doing a lot of work. If I don't get work, then I feel bored. Last summer was the first time I was here in the U.S. and those three-four months...I started doing something like gym and playing something and watching movies but nothing worked after one and a half months, was crazy time. Some people leaved to India, I didn't have so many friends too so it was kind of boring time. Joe says, "...this country is a little lonely, I mean in India you have so much people" and says that he sometimes misses the crowd on the streets of India.

**Personal change.** Joe believes that his perspective broadened and he became more mature after coming to the U.S. He explains how he learns more than just academic subjects: "I am exposed to so many people in this country so I am learning more other than my studies too." Joe emphasizes his mindset and attitude towards certain issues dramatically changed after he experienced the U.S. culture. He says, "I struggled, I struggled a lot. I desired something big, achieved it so my perspective definitely changed, got refined." Joe explains that he came to the U.S. with his preconceived thoughts about certain aspects of life, which made him biased. Therefore, Joe says he is now more open-minded and is never rigid about his own opinions as he tries to understand others as well.

Joe still remembers how his father advised him before Joe came to the U.S.: "I heard that Americans [are] indecent. Don't do bad things. Don't take drugs and those things. Try to avoid that kind of already attractive thing. But once you get into that, you cannot get out of that." Therefore, he says he was quite skeptical about other people's lives and he was holding onto his own values. Yet, he acknowledges his life style has changed in some aspects. Joe explains: "I used to think...don't drink, don't smoke, don't do that thing. It was the worst thing in my eyes before. Now, I do, I take drinks. So my thinking got changed." Joe elaborates on that:

“...drinking is definitely a part of this culture. That’s the American culture that taught me this because if I would have it in India, definitely not for this life for sure because it is still not that socially acceptable.” Joe thinks that he fits into the American culture with the little things that he changed about himself. He says, “I’m a little bit fitting in American culture more and more, day by day...” For Joe, coming to the U.S. was a very important decision for him, as he experienced not only academic progress, but also personal growth and change.

### **Anita**

Anita was an international graduate student from Vietnam, who now works as an instructor at a university in Michigan. She earned her Master’s degree in Southeast Asian studies from a university in Wisconsin. Anita’s journey to the U.S. started with a job offer from a university in Wisconsin for short term. She says she first came to the U.S. during the summer program to teach Vietnamese there, which broadened her horizons, even if it was for eight weeks only. Anita says she started to think about studying abroad as a young teacher after she went back to Vietnam. However, having inspiration was not enough for Anita to study abroad since she needed financial support. She applied for different universities in different places including the U.S. and U.K. One of the places she applied was a university in Wisconsin, where Anita taught Vietnamese during summer, and she was offered an assistantship there. Although her prior interest was U.K., Anita says she decided to choose Wisconsin because both the program and the funding opportunities were good for her. She explains how having an assistantship was important for her to attain her goal about studying abroad: “Assistantship! That means I can study and I can get tuition waived so I don’t have to pay for tuition and so that’s why I applied for graduate school.” Anita says she couldn’t realize her dreams if she didn’t have an assistantship because it costs a lot. Therefore, Anita appreciates the opportunity she was given as

a teaching assistant so that she could both work and study on campus. She is an optimistic person who does not let the dark invade the bright sides of her experience in the U.S. as she thinks that she tries hard. Anita says that she couldn't afford continuing her studies after she got her Master's degree and had to go back to Vietnam for a while:

I didn't get enough funding so I just went back to Vietnam but then I came back here. I do not want to say everything happens for a reason but I was really upset when I didn't feel accomplished when I was there [Vietnam] but it's just like when the door is supposed to close, you just have to close the door because I am supposed to open another door.

Anita is now happy with her current job and life in Michigan, and she thinks that coming to the U.S. was a milestone for her.

**Learning culture.** Anita thinks that the academic atmosphere she encountered in the U.S. was different than the one in her home country in many aspects. One of the different aspects that she needed to adapt when she started her program in Wisconsin was the student-centered approach, which allowed the students to have meaningful learning experiences:

I would say the big difference that I see between U.S. education and with the education in Vietnam especially is the students get the opportunity to really work and sometimes we even have to decide what am I'm gonna do with my education.

Anita describes the academic environment in the U.S. as a research-oriented and professional environment where nobody judges people according to their private lives. She gives the example of clothing: "It's like whether you wear a beautiful dress or not, it doesn't matter because people can see what you can do and then that's how the quality that the people see in you and that's how the education system here evaluate your quality." She also says that both students and professors

in the U.S. are genuinely interested in their studies as their work is their passion. Also, Anita explains that professors and students in the U.S. are supported by getting adequate funding in order to provide them with good working opportunities.

Another aspect that Anita finds different is how the classes in the U.S. require higher-order thinking skills, which was unfamiliar for her when she first came to the U.S.:

[In the U.S.] You really have to come up, you really have to initiate your idea and sometimes you have to come up with something new. Something which is completely different from what has been done before. So it's different from Vietnam. Sometimes in Vietnam, the students may have to do a lot of learning by heart.

Anita highlights that students in Vietnam are more used to following the teacher rather than interpreting what they learned in their own creative ways. One of the differences that Anita notices is the flexibility of the curriculum in the U.S. Therefore, she says students can take “the required classes that they have to take but at the same time, they can also have the optional courses that they can take. For example, I can actually take a music class because I'm interested in that.” Anita says that involving in a more flexible education system was a good experience, in that she could develop better skills. However, she says she needed to understand first and adapt to the new education system in the U.S. as well, which brought its own challenges.

Anita mentions that the teacher-student relationship in the U.S. is different from the way it is in Vietnam, which requires certain communication skills and awareness. She says explains these skills to enhance the quality of the relationships as advice to other international students:

I feel that the professors here in the U.S. are more approachable and probably more as a friend and you feel comfortable. Well, I mean, sometimes when they're busy, you cannot but they will probably tell you directly that they are not available. They are the

inspiration for me, they encourage me but...at first I was very shy and that's the culture I grew up with so I would be very shy at first and then I didn't really approach the professor which I think probably like the way American students would approach to their professor. But I think I learned from that. You have to be not just positive but to be assertive. You really have to speak up. Make communication. Otherwise they don't know what you mean.

Anita underlines that professors in the U.S are approachable and there is nothing to fear to communicate with them. She says, "Be yourself, be creative and try to make as much as you can and then there's no stupid question. For example, you can always ask a question if you don't understand" and indicates how preconceived thoughts on one's behaviors such as not asking question are unnecessary in the U.S. learning environment.

Moreover, Anita mentions how it was difficult for her to open up and be closer with her professors in the U.S., since the teacher-student relationship is stricter in Vietnam. She says, "In Vietnam, we were taught not only in class, but also at home to respect the senior and to respect the teacher, so the relationship between the students and the teachers in Vietnam are different." Anita stresses that she had difficulties calling her professors by their first names when she was new in the U.S. because, for her, the way she addressed her professors was a means of showing respect:

When we talk to the teacher in Vietnam, you would say something like Mr. and Mrs. and...we don't call people with name only but we would say teacher 'A' and teacher 'Z' and here [the U.S.], it took me forever to call the professor without saying [the title] 'Professor'.

Anita says her prior experiences influenced her perceptions about teacher-student relationships in general, and it took a while for her to develop new communication skills when she came to the U.S. She asserts that realizing how she needed to behave and communicate in her new environment eased her experiences as an international graduate student.

**Remaining positive despite the challenges.** Anita explains that there were some challenges that she encountered in her academic life but she says she always tried to remain positive while trying to cope with her problems. One of the challenges for Anita was academic writing:

Maybe the challenge, the personal challenge for me is when I write my thesis. And I think, my advisor is very understanding and he also supported me. He tried to tell me that it's very common for any students when he or she has to write...

Anita describes the kind of challenges she experienced in academic writing: "I cannot just start [writing], I just stay...just get stuck in one part." Anita asserts her advisor helped her a lot to overcome these difficulties in writing, and the support of her advisor relieved Anita a lot. Anita describes how she perceives challenges on her way to succeed:

I know that there would always be some kind of stressful things that we all have to deal with but it's just like a test that we are given, a challenge that we are given that we have to overcome.

Anita tries to develop a philosophy that encourages her not to give up. In her very modest opinion, she says, "I would not say that I am not successful but I just think, my case is a very ordinary one and maybe I just have some of the common experience like other students..." Then she continues with the same modest and optimistic stance:

I'm living in this culture [American culture] and I don't have to think whether I am successful or not but I would say, this is life that...I should work it out that I should live and I should go and I should manage it as much as I can.

Anita emphasizes that she realized there will always be challenges for anyone but the important thing is to be confident that success will come. She asserts in a very encouraging perspective, which belongs to a person who struggled and accomplished: "...you don't have to be boastful about how good you are but I should not put myself down...everyone should know that we, each of us, has our own value and how important each of us could be." Anita explains that she learned that she needed to let other people in academia know about her too. She explains, "I think, here, what I have learned is you don't have to show up, but there are a lot of things that you should show people how important, how nice it is..." Anita says she used to be hesitant while sharing her ideas with others, however, she says she learned to express herself and discuss many academic issues with others in time, which is an important skill.

**Social interactions.** Anita describes herself as a calm and shy person who does not need to have so many friends. Instead, she prefers to have quality friends. Yet, coming from Vietnamese culture, she needed effort to have social interactions with others, which made her learn from her experiences. Anita explains how other people approach her and her thoughts about that:

Being here somehow I know that I'm different already. For example, if you walk on the street or if you are at some public place, then people notice you and people talk to you. They'd probably say 'Are you from China?' by default. I know I am different...

Anita describes how she was when she was new in her social environment in the U.S., “I was shy to even express myself.” Her shyness made it difficult for Anita to develop a wide network:

I am not a party person. I can talk to people one by one or sometimes at the party. I am not the one who start the conversation and I would probably say the American friends would start the conversation first. So I would say I’m kind of introvert and shy person.

She describes how speaking with a different accent made her communications difficult:

When I first came here, because I think I speak more with a British accent/Australian accent because we study a lot of textbook from England, from Australia and so when I came here sometimes I found it hard to make myself understood. But I think I learned from it.

Anita asserts that she establishes her relationships through her studies about Vietnam. She says she mostly communicates with Americans who are interested in Vietnamese culture and other Vietnamese people in social activities. Anita explains: “I don’t have too many friends. I have some certain friends that I’m with so probably some Vietnamese friends that we would hang out together for some Vietnamese related activities.” She indicates that she felt like she needed to share her culture with others, which was also related to her study area and job. She asserts that representing her own culture made her realize many things about her own culture. She says, “I actually learned a lot about myself and my country when I represent. Often times, sharing about her culture is the way that she socializes and makes friends. Hence, Anita prefers to interact with people from her home country or Americans who communicate with her because of their mutual interest in Vietnamese culture. It is better for Anita to keep her network small by involving people whom she can trust.

**Setting boundaries.** Anita explains one of the things that she has learned from her experience in U.S. social life was setting boundaries. She shares a negative experience that she went through with a person that she met at school, who was also married to a Vietnamese woman. Anita says because that person was married to someone from Vietnam, it brought extra closeness to their relationship. However, their friendship did not go well as Anita wished:

He has some alcoholism problem and once he got drunk, he also worked at the center [on campus], once he got drunk he called to the office and left a threatening message on the phone, which was recorded so he was fired. So he got even more drunk and he got into a lot of trouble. Sometimes, he approached me for help for someone would just listen to him. One day, he went to my office, I was all by myself when he came to talk. I knew that he was drunk but I didn't know what to do. I was really frightened...but I couldn't tell him 'If you don't leave, I'm gonna call 911' but I didn't know at that time that I should do that.

This experience was a shock for Anita. She was just hoping for some close friends but things didn't work out as she thought. "At first, she was very nice and she invited me over and I really like it because you are in a country far from home so you would cling to any Vietnamese people that you know..." She explains her disappointment: "You find somebody that you share something with but then sometimes, it's hard when you get too close. Then you cannot put any boundary." Anita realized that she trusted them so easily because she was far from her family and was in need of social interactions. Anita says:

Sometimes it can be stressful...you think that you really have to communicate with people and you really want to be close to be friends but then I think here in America,

people have some kind of privacy issue and then we [foreigners] just don't know how to keep it all the good level at the good distance.

After having experienced rough times in her social life, Anita explained: "I think, probably the most important thing that I have learned is to know that I am important to myself." She compares herself with Americans and points out that Americans are more direct in their relationships. Anita says relationships may be difficult to handle if she does not set boundaries directly as she experienced, unfortunately. She says it was a sad but important lesson for her, which she will never forget.

## **Thematic Findings**

This study involved six participants from Cameroon, China, Bhutan, Turkey, India, and Vietnam. The journey of each participant was presented through the narrative analysis. Although their stories regarding their experiences as international graduate students were unique, they also shared some commonalities. Participants' diverse responses regarding their experiences were not only educational but also emotional, which points out that their issues were not limited to the academic experiences. The emerging common themes of the study are culture shock, different learning cultures, challenges and perseverance, social interactions and their impact, and personal growth. This section discusses the thematic findings of the study, and presents some recommendations for enhancing the international students' experiences in higher education institutions in the U.S.

### **Culture Shock**

Adjustment of international graduate students in this study to their new lives in the U.S. was not easy, as they experienced culture shock in their daily lives. Even the simplest things such as food or transportation, which local people are already accustomed to, were problematic for the participants. For example, both Vee and Gracia had problems getting used to the food they experienced in the U.S. because their habits and appetites were different. They both looked for familiar tastes in different meals that they tried, as food was an important aspect of life, and it took time for them to find their own ways. Vee's traditions in Christmas were different than American traditions, which made her feel lonely and homesick. She realized the concept of family is more closed to outsiders than it was in her home country. Another aspect of everyday life was transportation, which is often ignored since it is assumed that most individuals have cars in the U.S. None of the participants of this study had a car on arrival to the U.S. Even after

staying in the U.S. for years, only two of them had cars. Therefore, public transportation was of great concern to them. Gracia described the transportation in Michigan as inconvenient. It was inconvenient for her to use busses so she had to purchase a car. Similarly, Anita had to take the bus even inside the campus because the campus was large. Compared to her smaller university, where she used to go everywhere on foot, it was a change that she needed to make. Wang had serious problems in terms of housing. Her life in that house, which should have been a warm shelter for her, was a big stressor for Wang because of roommate issues.

When describing the time when he first came to the U.S., Oscar listed a number of daily challenges that he needed to overcome: Finding a proper accommodation, getting a phone line, getting a social security number, driver's license, registering for electric and water services. Oscar mentions these everyday life issues right off the top of his head, so the issues that international students experience are not limited to those in particular. However, Oscar's summary may show how simple things in everyday life, which local people are familiar with, may make international students lives complex as they first try to adapt to a new life.

Ritz (2010) emphasizes that having access to food, transportation, and housing in a place where they are far from their families and friends may be the most challenging aspect of the international student experience. These small details also belong to their adaptation processes, as they are the daily aspects of their lives (Zhai, 2004). When international students encounter the everyday life problems as soon as they arrive the U.S., the crisis phase may dominate the honeymoon phase in the frame of four stages of adjustment indicated by Winkelman (1994). It can be hard for students to enjoy their arrival and focus on their goals in their new environment if they are overwhelmed by simple but annoying everyday life problems. Therefore, what

international students may go through while trying to adapt to their new lives in a foreign country should be understood adequately, in order to help them out while they are settling down.

### **Different Learning Cultures**

All of the participants indicated significant differences between the learning culture that they encountered between the U.S. and that in their home country. Although participants described the learning culture in the U.S. as more positive, informal, practical, and open than what they had experienced in their home countries, they could not adjust right away when they started in their programs. The participants of this study needed time to figure out the dynamics of their new learning culture and how their experiences in their previous institutions shaped their ideas, behaviors, and skills. Therefore, they needed to cope with their preconceived thoughts and old habits while trying to become accustomed to their new academic environment.

The international graduate students who participated in this study came from institutions where the learning culture was more teacher-centered, traditional and strict. Their assignments were more structured, and the assessment styles were more exam-oriented. For instance, Anita needed to be more creative and analytical in her studies, in contrast to the learning culture in Vietnam where she used to learn by heart and did not use higher order thinking skills. Similarly, it was difficult for Veev to let herself be creative and think critically since she was used to following what the professor said during examinations or assignments in Cameroon, which was enough for success. Both Anita and Veev needed to adjust themselves to fulfill what was required in the U.S. learning culture to be productive. Gracia pointed out that the Chinese education system did not allow her to choose the classes that she might want to take, as everything was already mandatory. Gracia, Wang and Joe did not realize there were other ways of assessment such as presentations, group works, and projects until they came to the U.S. They

were used to having many exams and assignments instead of more experiential and collaborative study. Their lack of experience in such assessment styles impacted the way they performed. Joe was never taught how to prepare presentations or present something in India, whereas all his domestic classmates were already accustomed to having presentations. Gracia felt isolated in classes especially when there was group work. Because she was not comfortable with her English and was not familiar with the group work, she did not know how to approach and communicate with her peers. Her peers also did not want to become group mates with her unless the professor assigned the members in a group. Gracia was not familiar with competitive team work, and she felt like she was not appreciated enough by her team members. Therefore, she tried to work harder without letting others notice she was studying that much, in order to make them think she was already capable of contributing to the group work. Oscar was surprised when he realized how he needed to get involved in many projects during his study in the U.S. He was not familiar with either hands-on experiences or strict project deadlines. Oscar needed to apply the theories he had learned on the projects that he participated in, so he highlighted that he needed to adapt to a more practical learning culture rather than preparing for theoretical exams only.

In most cases, participants asserted that they were not used to communicating with their professors back home as much as they needed to do in the U.S. For example, Vee, Wang, and Anita were unaccustomed to communicating with their professors in a more informal manner. They were not aware that they could consult them without any hesitation or share their problems. Because their previous relationships with their professors in their home countries were formal, they said they already supposed the teacher-student relationships would be the same in the U.S. Therefore, it took some time for them to discover how they might have a better relationship with

their professors, and how they could get help from them. Anita realized after a while that neither of her professors would humiliate her because she asked a simple question. Similarly, Wang wasted some time by questioning her relationships with her professors in order to see if she was crossing boundaries or behaving inappropriately. Oscar needed to adjust to the weekly meetings with his professors, held in order to keep track of the progress made during the projects. This was something with which Oscar was unfamiliar, as he did not communicate much with his professors in Turkey. Although most participants described the U.S. learning environments as more open, Gracia thought that the relationships of professors in the U.S. with their students were more superficial. Gracia's professors in the U.S. met students during class or their office hours by appointment, unlike what she experienced in China. Her professors in China were always at their office and students could meet them any time by just dropping by. Another important difficulty of the teacher-student or student-student relationships in the experiences of this study's participants was the jokes that had been exchanged during class. Wang and Gracia experienced feelings of isolation and alienation in the class when American professors made a joke that only American students could understand without any explanation. When they experienced a moment that all class members except for them shared, not feeling a part of that community was inevitable for those international students. Therefore, there were experiences that the participants of this study needed to understand and cope with in order to adapt to their new learning culture.

Familiarity with a certain learning culture shaped participants' perceptions, which were hard to abandon even after coming to the U.S. For instance, Veev had a hard time sharing knowledge in her new learning environment in the U.S., since students did not contribute to each other's learning by sharing knowledge in her previous institution in Cameroon. Another aspect of

the learning culture in the U.S., which the participants needed to get used to, was certain behavioral norms. Veee was concerned with how she dressed up for the classes, and she always tried to have a professional style, whereas her American peers were wearing casual clothes to classes. Also, behaviors such as eating in class, drinking coffee, or sitting casually did not seem appropriate to Veee. Anita and Joe had similar concerns. Anita later realized that people did not judge others depending on how they look, but they pay attention to the quality of their work. Joe also noticed that his peers in class were not competitive or jealous of his accomplishments, which was the opposite of how he felt about his classmates in India. Although the U.S. learning culture promotes a more equitable environment, the stories of the participants of this study indicated that they needed some time to understand the requirements, conventions, and people in their new academic environment.

The international graduate students who participated in this study experienced confusion in their new academic environment, in terms of the unfamiliar practices or assignments, their interactions with professors and classmates, and as a part of the learning culture to which they were trying to adapt. Zhou, Frey, and Bang (2011), in describing student perspectives in a study they conducted, asserted that their international student participants found their professors supportive, patient, and helpful. In another study, it was found that international students did not communicate with their advisors more frequently than their domestic peers (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013). However, if international students perceive their professors in the U.S. learning culture as more approachable, the reason why they do not consult them when they have any confusion or problem is worth questioning.

Another important point is the international students' feelings of isolation in the class. If, as Trice (2005) stated, both American and international students should benefit from the

curriculum, then presenting different points of view about a topic that might be unfamiliar to international students may be helpful. Therefore, meeting international students' unique academic needs as they try to become accustomed to their new learning culture can ease their adjustment process.

### **Challenges and Perseverance**

Success was a big issue for the international graduate students who participated in this study because they wanted to accomplish many goals by coming to the United States. Graduate study may be difficult for anyone, but the burden is greater for the international graduate students, as they come from different backgrounds and cultures than the U.S. culture. They need to learn how to overcome the obstacles on their way to success as they encounter various challenges. However, international graduate students never forget the reason why they came to the U.S. and they seek success during their stay.

Vee, Gracia, Wang, and Anita experienced challenges related to academic writing. For instance, Vee and Wang felt the need of direct writing skills, which they were not used to, in order to be successful in their writing assignments. They were not presenting their points explicitly in their assignments. Therefore, in contrast to the indirect writing style that they were accustomed to, they had to write in a precise and clear manner in the U.S. This was quite a challenge for them because they used to write in a way that did not directly signal the message to the reader. Learning and being able to apply APA style on assignments was another problem experienced by Gracia, Wang, and Vee. Also, Wang and Gracia experienced issues regarding language, which decreased their self-confidence. Similarly, Anita felt stuck when she was working on her thesis because of her difficulties in academic writing as an international student.

Experiencing those challenges made the participants feel stress and question their capabilities since they felt inadequate or not appreciated in their new academic environments.

Time management was a big problem for Vee as she needed to work on multiple projects and assignments as well as her own daily life issues. Gracia experienced challenges with understanding various accents of her professors from different cultural backgrounds. It was a severe obstacle for her because she could not understand the class adequately. Therefore, she needed to record each session and listen to it later. Another problem that Gracia experienced was to assert the use of her real name in the class since her professor was not willing. It was a demoralizing and stressful experience, yet she endured.

Financial difficulties were a part of participants' lives from the very beginning. Some of them had either a scholarship or graduate assistantship to sponsor them for the program. Some of the participants were financially supported by their parents. In both cases they felt the pressure to be successful as they wanted to fulfill either the scholarship/graduate assistantship requirements or parents' expectations. Anita, Joe, and Oscar asserted that working as a graduate assistant helped them financially, academically, and socially as they were a part of the academic network at school. However, Oscar needed to work at multiple jobs besides his work as a graduate assistant in order to support himself financially. Although it helped him to solve financial problems and meet more people, it was also tiring, which was not understood enough by some of his professors. Yet, he perceived most of his professors as role models since they were dedicated in their research, which inspired Oscar to accomplish more. Similarly, Joe was very motivated to succeed, as his study was the biggest passion for him.

The participants of this study persevered despite the challenges and put success at the center of their lives because they thought that their initial purpose in coming to the U.S. from

miles away was to pursue their degrees successfully. Curtin, Stewart, and Ostrove (2013) in a study conducted to compare international and domestic students' academic experiences, found that international students' academic and research related experiences were more crucial than those of domestic students. One of the driving forces that motivated international students was the support of their families. However, the participants also felt pressure in order to make their families proud, and to give something back to them by any means possible, so that their spiritual or financial support would not be wasted. Therefore, family concerns and expectations might have been another stressor, even though the support received from them was motivating (Zhou, Frey, & Bang, 2011). Most participants experienced academic challenges such as academic writing, although they were successful in other areas. Andrade (2006) indicated that international students might not be familiar with analyzing an argument directly because they used to write in an indirect style.

Participants explained how working as graduate assistants helped them to adapt to their new academic environment and helped them make progress. Similarly, Zhou, Frey and Bang (2011) found that having ambition to succeed in a foreign country and working as a graduate assistant enhanced the participants' well-being as well as their adaptation. Hence, providing international students with working experiences may be encouraging for them to succeed, in addition to their intrinsic motivation. Despite the challenges and discouraging experiences, the international graduate students who participated in this study explained that they worked hard and chased success to attain their goals.

### **Social Interactions and Their Impact**

Successful social interactions impacted the adaptation of international graduate students who participated in this study, by helping them feel more situated in their new environments.

However, it was challenging to make friends and maintain friendships in a new environment because of communication problems, culture shock, or personal characteristics. The participants of this study explained they either casually or professionally built friendships with others. Yet, they also indicated they experienced issues such as communication issues, isolation or homesickness.

Participants' social experiences indicated that lacking American English skills and confusion about American culture impacted their social interactions. Vee was shocked by the attitude of an American who asked her if she had been living in the trees back in Cameroon, as well as by the views of others who could not believe her English was good. Therefore, her first impressions of American people did not encourage her to interact with them. Although English was Vee's first language, she was not used to American English, which created some misunderstandings, leaving her feeling embarrassed and vulnerable. It was a discouraging social experience for Vee as she started to fear making mistakes or offending others. Anita also felt the need to improve her American English as she had hard time making herself understood. Language was a big barrier for Joe and Gracia, which undermined their relationships with Americans. More specifically, Joe felt inferior when communicating with an American because of his accent or other language issues. Therefore, Gracia and Joe's relationships with Americans were very limited as they experienced language barriers.

The participants of this study also revealed that they needed social and cultural clues in order to have better relationships especially with Americans in their new social environment. Wang was very confused about when to say "hi" and what "how are you" or "see you later" meant. It was confusing for her until she figured it out that these are common sayings of Americans and she did not need to explain how she really feels or she did not need to give her

contact information to see that person later. Anita's social challenge was setting social boundaries as she could not know to what extent she should let others be involved in her life. Coming from a collectivist culture, it took time for her to understand the individualistic values of the new society in which she was living. Oscar was puzzled as he could not understand what his American friends were saying because he did not know some things in American culture. For instance, Oscar did not know what Halloween was, however, he asked how he could know if nobody explained it to him. Because his American friends assumed that he was familiar with their traditions, they could not see the need to be more explicit. Eventually, participants' relationships with Americans could not grow into comforting friendships because of cultural or language barriers. Some of them never met their American friends outside of the class. For these reasons, all participants of this study indicated that they built closer relationships with people from their own country or other international students since they share more commonalities and understand each other better.

Most participants explained their feelings of homesickness and loneliness during their experiences as international students. Being far from her beloved family members and her home was not easy for Vee. Similarly, Gracia experienced homesickness as she realized it would not be easy to go back and visit her parents. Because of the lack of Internet connection, expense of making international calls, or time differences, it was hard for Vee and Gracia to communicate with their families. They looked for people from their own countries to fulfill their needs of being socially connected. Wang was the only person from her home country in her new neighborhood. Although she was looking for someone with whom she could speak her native language, she couldn't find one. Therefore she communicated more with other international students to overcome her loneliness and homesickness. Vee and Oscar benefitted from the

activities provided by the Office of International Students as they met many other international students and expand their social network. Working also facilitated the social lives of Oscar, Joe, and Anita. Since they met with new people, American or international, and became a part of the environment they worked, they felt socially more connected and eased their feelings of loneliness or homesickness.

Experiencing a social life and being connected to others is important to international students' well-being. However, it is not easy to build social connections as international students may not be familiar with the new society that they try to fit into, and sometimes cultural barriers may prevent international students from making friends with others. Although most of the participants of this study asserted that they did not meet their American peers outside of the class, having American friends and gathering with them in casual settings are important parts of international students' experiences abroad (Wilson, 2011). However, the participants of this study were hesitant to communicate with American students, either because they were shy or could not relate to the topics discussed by Americans. In such cases, communication skills, such as being assertive, become important (Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002). If the participants of this study were more assertive, they could ask for clarification to understand things that Americans assumed they already knew, so that their relationships could be closer with fewer barriers.

Nevertheless, adjusting their attitudes might not have been easy for international students. Trice (2004) emphasizes that gaining fundamental social skills and norms accepted by the new society can be crucial for international students as they try to build and maintain friendships. As Zhou, Frey, and Bang (2011) indicated, working on campus is a great opportunity for international students to meet with American students and faculty.

International graduate students who participated in this study explained their feelings about being far from their families and the impact of their social life on their adaptation. They experienced homesickness when they left their home countries, and disengaged from their relationships and networks, which were important to them. Not being able to interact with family and friends at home can be very stressful for international students when they feel the need to build social relationships (Hendrickson, Rosen & Aune, 2010). According to the study by Hendrickson, Rosen, and Aune (2011), being friends with both other international students and American students helps international students to adapt and enjoy their life in the U.S. more as they experienced less homesickness; they felt socially more connected and more satisfied with their lives. Although research supports the idea that international students adapt to their new environment, and become more social and feel comfortable when they interact with American students, it is not easy to overcome cultural and language barriers for establishing friendship (Trice, 2004, p. 683).

Although the international graduates who participated in this study had adequate proficiency in English, which was certified by examinations such as TOEFL, they still experienced communication problems because they were not accustomed to American English. Therefore, improving American English skills is important for international students to lessen the issues caused by language (Zhou, Frey, & Bang, 2011). The participants of this study stated that other international students were closer to them; they made friends more easily. Brown and Aktas (2011) indicated that both mixed-nationality friendships and host country friendships are beneficial to reduce loneliness and homesickness, which is true for the participants in this study as they also indicated less loneliness when they were socially engaged. Zapf (1991) indicated that international students' feelings of loneliness, ongoing complaints about their new social

environment, and seclusion from others might show they need help because of their poor adjustment. Hence, understanding the social and cultural struggles that international students experience and the impact on their adaptation should be of great concern to faculty and staff.

### **Personal Growth**

After following their dreams and having experienced both social and academic life in the U.S., the participants reported that they had noticed some changes in their academic and social skills as well as their mindsets about different life styles, in both American culture and world cultures. All of the participants perceived their experiences as challenging but recognized that they contributed to their professional and self-development. However, they experienced dilemmas and conflicts as well during their stay in the U.S. as international graduate students.

Most participants became more tolerant and relaxed about certain issues as their prejudices or stereotypes diminished during their experiences as international students. Vee explained that her eyes were opened to many social and cultural issues after coming to the U.S. She learned more about gender issues, eating habits, and also developed social skills. Similarly, Joe expressed his relaxed opinions about social issues such as drinking after meeting with people from different cultures. Oscar, too, indicated that his experiences and friendships with people from other cultures made him more open-minded. All participants asserted that they experienced academic and personal development tremendously as their horizons were expanded through their experiences in the U.S.

Participants behaved in certain ways while trying to fit in to her new environment in order to be academically or socially accepted. Hence, some participants experienced cultural dissonance in return. Vee felt like she had abandoned her own values and culture in order to be appreciated by others in American culture. She found her dilemmas about the change she had

been experiencing disturbing, as she could not feel entirely comfortable with herself as she compared her old mindset to the new values she followed in the U.S. However, no matter how Veee sacrificed to fit into the American culture, she explained that she would never fit in completely. The same concerns were present for Wang as she was doing certain things only because she was living in American culture, even though she thought she could never quite fit in. She also had religious values that she wanted to keep. Gracia questioned her values when her professor asked her to use an English name. She did not give up her real name since it did not seem morally right to her. However, she always compared herself to her Korean classmate, who changed her name. Anita and Oscar felt the need to be cultural representatives of their own cultures. Since they were engaged in their own cultures often, Oscar and Anita did not experience cultural dissonance.

Participants learned a lot through their social and academic experiences. Most of them became culturally more open and aware, some of them gave up their stereotypes, some of them started to be less shy socially, and all of them said they accomplished a lot in terms of academics while describing their experiences. International students are committed to succeed in their new environment but this does not make them readily accept everything about the new culture that they are exposed to in the U.S., since international students may question themselves during their adaptation process mindfully, and adopt the things that helped them make progress and expand their horizons as they were evaluating their experience (Kettle, 2011). When they feel conflicts, international students may experience cultural dissonance in their new social environments, hence, it can be difficult for them to adapt without losing their own cultural identity (Chen & Lewis, 2011). Despite the challenges, international students' learning processes at any level contributed to their personal changes, and international students situated themselves in their

home cultures while living in a different culture (Erichsen, 2011, p. 126). The participants of this study found ways to stay engaged in their own culture by protecting their identities and values as well as sharing their cultures with others through work or social events. All in all, these international students' experiences evolved without entirely abandoning their home cultures. They persevered and believed they made a good decision by studying abroad, as they broadened their horizons, both personally and academically.

### **Recommendations**

The recommendations from this study can be divided into four categories, which include recommendations for support services, faculty members, international students, and further research with implications for practice and suggestions for future research.

#### **Recommendations for Support Services**

International graduate students who participated in this study reported that they experienced unique challenges in their academic life. For instance, academic writing assignments posed problems for the participants because of either the writing style or language. However, they did not have any special support other than the feedback from their professors and the writing center, which was open to all students, domestic, international, undergraduate or graduate. The specific problems that the participants tried to solve had graduate level of requirements, such as the use of APA style. Also, the participants who came from cultures where indirect writing was promoted needed to adapt to a more direct and precise writing style. Moreover, the general language proficiency posed unique problems in their writing assignments as well. Therefore, higher education institutions that admit international students to their graduate programs should establish a specific unit under the existing writing center in order to

address those students' special academic needs. Hence, it could be helpful to provide an extra language and writing service for international students (Zapf, 1991).

Although the participants of this study passed the required language exams, they still encountered difficulties in communicating. Language and cultural barriers prevented participants from engaging in their new environment more. Thus, providing classes to teach American communication skills to international students could make those students feel more confident, as well as more aware of the cultural and social norms of the new society that they live in (Wilson, 2011). If such communication classes were offered to international students, they could develop and practice communication skills that would be helpful for them. Another way to develop communication skills could be providing peer programs in which international students interact with domestic students (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998). Some of the participants of this study indicated that they were involved in the activities provided by the Office of International Students, and explained that they socialized through those activities. Interacting with other international students and learning about other cultures through those friendships made the participants socially more active and engaged, which reduced their feelings of loneliness and homesickness. Yet, the participants did not develop close friendships with Americans, which could have eased their adaptation process. Therefore, more activities could be organized by the Office of International students in order to allow American and international students to meet up in casual settings and learn from each other culturally.

Although there were services provided on-campus that the participants of this study could benefit from, they did not report that they checked into these services, especially when they were new, and experienced emotional, social or academic challenges. In their study, Abe, Talbot and Geelhoed (1998) asserted that although campus resources, such as student volunteer programs,

counseling, advising, and career services, were provided to all students, they were the least used resources by international students. Thus, those on-campus services that international students can benefit from should be more available or should be included in the orientation program of the students when they initially arrive. As Kemp asserted, “the learning culture embedded in a learning community is the place for students of many nationalities to create, share, and build knowledge, through connection and collaboration” (2010, p.66). For this reason, international students should be supported well so that they will have a sense of belonging to their new environment, maintain their well-being, accomplish their preset goals, and contribute to the class through connection and collaboration.

### **Recommendations for Faculty Members**

The participants of this study did not indicate active engagement in the support centers, but they had to actively participate in their classes. Therefore, their professors were the ones who saw them regularly. Since professors have the opportunity to observe the international students in their classes, they can notice if those students need help. Hellsten and Prescott (2004) suggested that reflecting on the teaching process, and altering the delivery of instruction according to the needs of the students’ profiles, could be helpful to meet the international students’ needs. Nieto and Booth (2010) asserted that faculty awareness and interest in the culture and the news about the country of the international students in their class could be helpful in understanding and helping international students. Since the learning processes of international students are not only an academic endeavor, it can be comforting for international students to see their professors try to understand them. Therefore, more responsibility is there for faculty as they have the chance to observe and meet the international students often.

## **Recommendations for International Students**

Not only the faculty, international student offices or support services but also the international students themselves should be aware of the activities that can ease their transition. First, international students should not hesitate to ask for help when needed. They should know that learning is also social, so international students should know when to ask a question or how to ask for help when they need it, without isolating themselves (Salomon, & Perkins, 1998). International students should gain awareness about how to learn in an American setting, as learning is beyond mastering a certain subject alone in order to develop academic skills to study more efficiently. Therefore, international students should realize the importance of engaging in the community in their learning processes (Salomon, & Perkins, 1998). International students should also be aware that they cannot learn just from the textbooks; they need to be socially integrated in the class. Since there will be changes in daily and academic life after coming to the U.S., it is better to be prepared beforehand by anticipating what they might be encountering in terms of the language issues or the new academic culture (Wang, 2009, p.41). Therefore, international students should try to learn about the country, city, and institution as much as they can before arrival. Another useful suggestion for international students is to be involved in the activities arranged by the International Student Office in order to build social networks, as well as improve language skills, and become familiar with the new environment (Wang, 2009).

In one study, Tseng and Newton (2002) suggested some strategies for student well-being through their interviews with international students whose coping skills were good: “Know self and others,” “make friends and build friends,” “expand worldview,” “ask help and handle problems,” “establish cultural and social contacts,” “build relationships with advisors and instructors,” “become proficient in the English language” and “use the tactic of *letting go*” (p.

595). Although many of the suggestions are self-explanatory, it can be helpful to elaborate more on what “know self and others,” and “use the tactic of *letting go*” mean: Knowing the difference between self and others means that international students should understand the similarities and differences between their home culture and American culture so they can set more realistic expectations (Tseng, Newton, 2002). Therefore, it is important to become aware of the cultural aspects before coming and keep learning about them after arrival. The other strategy is to “know when to let a problem or concern go” which reduces the stress and helps international students protect their well-being (Tseng, Newton, 2002, p. 595). This strategy of letting problems go can be vital to maintaining their well-being, as having problems in a foreign country may disturb or make international students anxious, even though the problem itself may not be too serious. Along with the other strategies, such as getting help and being social, international students may be able to minimize the challenges before they come to the U.S. and after arrival.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study could be expanded by including: wider demographics, the impact of marital status and gender roles. International graduate students who participated in this study were either Master’s students or doctoral students. However, it is not certain if the participants referred to their undergraduate studies when they were comparing their experiences as international graduate students in the U.S. to their experiences in their home countries. Therefore, further research may include only the international graduate students who have another graduate degree from the institutions in their home countries in order to address this limitation. Another limitation of this study is that there were no follow-up interviews. Developing follow-up interviews for each participant based on what emerged from the first interviews could give more details regarding their experiences and the solutions they might have discovered. In addition,

including international graduate students from Western cultures to the study may increase the variety of participant experiences, and comparisons between the experiences of students from Eastern and Western cultures can be made.

### **Conclusion**

Without understanding the unique experiences of international graduate students, support services or faculty will not be able to assist international graduate students in their endeavors. In order to provide international students with better opportunities, the university should look at the experiences of international students from the perspective of students (Fleischman, Lawley, & Raciti, 2010, p. 16). This study aimed to offer assistance for faculty members, support services, such as writing centers, the Office of International Students, and international students themselves in order to enhance the international student experiences.

This study aimed to give voice to the international students and reflect their perspectives to show the complexity of the students' experience and offer some solutions. In order to minimize the possible challenges, open communication and awareness appear to be crucial. However, the range of international students' and faculty members' thoughts may be limited by the dominant values that they were exposed to in their home culture. Therefore, both international students and their professors might assume different things, and these misunderstandings might pose problems, of which the professors have no awareness, because generally, they are members of the dominant culture (Kim, 2011). International students' adaptation is a process that takes time, and this process is about the changes in the perspectives of international students that also alter their lives, and how they make sense of themselves and their worlds (Erichsen, 2011). Often times, it is only the international students who are expected to make sense of themselves whereas the members of the dominant culture do not try to come

one step closer to the foreign student. For that reason, it is important to have what Gardner (2006) calls “the respectful mind” which makes us aware and appreciative of the differences among us rather than ignore them (p.106). Educators should instill this idea in their students, and international student offices should instill this perspective in the faculty members. Through the mutual respect and efforts of international students, faculty, or students from the mainstream culture, it can be easier to build a community that learns and shares together. This community of international students, faculty members and other students from the host country is not simply a group of people in a classroom. This community is a “learning circle” and “a bridge between individual members and the total membership of the community,” which enables individuals to understand the norms and values that emerged from their interactions (Collay, Dunlap, Enloe, & Gagnon, 1998, p. 29-30). Therefore, communication and understanding among the people who are a part of that learning circle should be considered essential. When international students are accepted as members of the community where they currently live and study, then it will be a journey to different cultures, different perspectives, and intellectual ideas that will be beneficial for all -- professors, American students, and international students.

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