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# Voices to be heard : an exploratory look at international students' experiences of maintaining and making meaningful connections

Sarah Christine Smith

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Sarah C. Smith  
Voices to be Heard: An  
Exploratory Look at  
International Students'  
Experiences of Maintaining  
and Making Meaningful  
Connections

#### ABSTRACT

This study is an investigation of the experiences of International Students who were enrolled at a college in the Northeastern United States during the 2007-2008 academic year. Participants in this qualitative study were asked to describe their experiences of making and maintaining meaningful connections with friends and family from their home country, fellow International Students, American students, and diaspora populations. Findings of the study provided rich examples of how the participants made and maintained meaningful connections as well as their thoughts and feelings about those connections. The study at hand was intended to provide an overview on which further research can be based to pinpoint the effectiveness of services and programs available at similar colleges.

VOICES TO BE HEARD:  
AN EXPLORATORY LOOK AT INTERNATIONAL  
STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF MAINTAINING  
AND MAKING MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS

The specific objective was to gather narrative data about international students' experiences of 1) maintaining connection with those they left in their home country and 2) making connections with those they met during college in the United States.

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2011

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This study investigated the experiences of International Students who were enrolled at a highly selective liberal arts college in the northeastern United States during the 2007-2008 academic year. The overarching objective was to explore international students' experiences of relocating to the United States for a collegiate education. The specific objective was to gather narrative data about international students' experiences of 1) maintaining connection with those they left in their home country and 2) making connections with those they met during college in the United States.

The idea of researching the experiences of connectedness of International Students emerged from my growing interest in how International Students build and maintain connections with others when immersed in a different culture. How does one maintain her/his connection with family, friends, culture, and country of origin while focusing on learning a new culture, a new educational system, and attempting to thrive at an academically intensive institution of higher learning? Are there ways in which the administration at such an institution can aide International Students in maintaining their connection to their culture and building connection with their new community?

The institution of higher education where this study was conducted hosts International Students from over 65 countries each year. The college offers a wide range of services to their students including, an international student association, career development, counseling, and collaboration with the office that handles U.S. students

studying abroad in other countries. The international community at this institution boasts approximately 200 members during a given academic year. With an enrollment of approximately 2400 at the time this study was completed, the number of International Students comprises a little more than eight percent of the total population.

While the programs that are in place to assist the International Students' transition to life at this institution easier, this study serves as a means of obtaining a more detailed picture of how a self-selected small sample of these students maintain meaningful connections with people they are geographically removed from, and make meaningful connections with new people in a new environment.

There is a wealth of information already written about the experiences of international college students that largely focus on specific geographic areas of origin (Constantine, M.G., Anderson, G.M., LaVerne, A. B., Caldwell, L.D., & Utsey, S.O., 2005; Constantine, M.G., Okazaki, S., & Utsey, S.O., 2004; Duru, E. & Poyrazali, S., 2007; Guan, J. & Dodder, R. A., 2001; Najjian, Z. & Dixon, D. N., 2001; Sakamoto, I., 2006; Wang, C. DC. & Mallinckrodt, B., 2006; Yeh, C. & Inose, M., 2002; Zang, N. & Rentz, A. L., 1996) Most information is written for professionals working in college counseling centers to help them develop cultural sensitivity for specific populations. Information extends to studies of diversity and acculturation among international students pursuing a variety of degree programs, including undergraduate and graduate. The literature, focuses on issues of acculturation, including language proficiency, social connectedness, and homesickness. During the 2006-2007 academic year, the number of International Students studying at colleges and universities in the United States increased

by 3% from the previous year to 582,984.<sup>1</sup> With so many International Students joining the student bodies at universities and colleges and after the tragedy at Virginia Tech in April 2007, administrators and mental health professionals on campuses across the United States are questioning their programming for this population. Those in charge are examining how their policies and services assist or fall short of assisting International Students with the tasks of acculturation and connecting with support systems.

This study used qualitative interviews to explore meaningful connections and social networks of International Students at an elite university in the northeastern United States. The interview guide consisted of approximately thirty questions that were meant to generate an overview of the subjects' social systems and meaningful connections. The questions asked were intended to generate the subjects' own narratives, thus it is important to realize that the interview guide is just that – a guide. If the subject had difficulty elaborating some answers in a way that the investigator did not obtain a clear picture of his or her experience, the investigator asked relevant questions intended to enrich the subject's description.

The subjects for this study were full-time matriculated students at a highly selective liberal arts college above eighteen years of age. All International Students at this university were invited to participate in the study. Interviews took place on campus at an arranged time that was convenient for the participant and the investigator in a room that was reserved specifically for each interview, thereby ensuring privacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Information taken from the Institute of International Education's report for the 2006-2007 academic year. <http://opendoors.iienetwork.org>

This study's primary goal was to provide an opportunity for International Students to speak about their experiences – specifically their experiences of maintaining and making meaningful connection while studying in the United States. The members of this population need to be given a voice. This study was an attempt at one institution to do that. How often are International Students over-looked? Do administrators at this college and other universities truly hear the struggles of their International Students? Do they know the difficulties International Students have communicating with family and friends from home? Do they understand the difficulty some International Students face making friends with students from other countries and cultures? The question is not just do they know, but it is also, are they tailoring programs to meet these needs?

Furthermore, it was my hope that the results of this study will be used to inform the administrators at this particular school so that they will have a better sense of International Students' needs regarding making and maintaining meaningful connections for the duration of their education away from their country of origin. Statistics show that International Students are at a greater risk of suicide than are native-born students at universities in the United States, and the fact that they include members of so vulnerable a population should make their needs an important priority. Given the information garnered from this study, administrators at this institution may be better prepared to engage in conversation with students about how to better meet their needs and enrich their experiences of meaningful connection, both in the United States and in their home county.

This study is important to the field of social work for two reasons. First, it has given the International Students from this particular institution who chose to participate,

the opportunity to share their experiences. An important goal of social work since its inception has been to reach out to underserved and vulnerable populations and help their voices be heard. This study was an attempt to reach out to International Students on this particular campus and let them know that they are a vital part of the campus and people want to know what their experiences have been, both positive and negative.

Secondly, the intent of this study was to give insight to clinical social workers and other professionals working with International Students at institutions of higher learning. While the findings of this study cannot be generalized to every International Student at every institution, it was meant to be a ‘jumping-off point’ in a conversation between administrators and the International Students who attend this particular institution in hopes that the college can better respond to the needs and experiences of its International Students.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on International Students and their experiences in the United States has increased over the past couple decades, mostly as a result of the increase in attention to minority students and the increased student populations for whom English is not their primary language in higher education. How do we connect with those who may feel stigmatized or those who are uncomfortable using traditional support services on campus, including counseling centers? This study was born from trying to assess ways to include the under-represented International Student population at the counseling center where the study took place. A review of the literature shows that many studies have looked at ways to minimize risk for serious mental health collapses and providing increasing support for International Students who may be struggling with culture, language, homesickness, and other difficulties that arise from enrolling in institutions of higher education outside one's country of origin.

This review of literature focused on the following topics as a basis for understanding the current research question: the demographics of International Students during the academic year in which the data for this research was collected; common challenges, such as acculturation and access to resources; the significance of connectedness; and multicultural counseling.

### *Demographics*

According to the Open Doors 2008 survey conducted by the Institute of International Education there were 623,805 international students studying in the United States during the 2007-2008 academic year, an increase of 7% from the previous year. The top 10 countries of origin for that year's international students were, in order, starting with the greatest number of students were India, China, South Korea, Japan, Canada, Taiwan, Mexico, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand. The top five host universities were University of Southern California, New York University, Columbia University, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Perdue University's main campus in Lafayette. This means that of the enrollment of International Students at the top five institutions, approximately 22.5 percent attended institutions on the West Coast, 40 percent in the Northeast, and 37 percent in the Midwest. Data for total distribution of IS enrollment by region was not available.

Business and engineering were the most popular fields of study, representing 19.6 and 17 percent of enrollments respectively, followed by physical and life sciences, such as biomedical science at 9.3 percent and social sciences at 8.7, which includes fields such as Psychology; Public Administration and Social Service Professions; Parks, Recreation, Leisure, and Fitness Studies; History; and Security and Protective Services.

Furthermore, according to the data gathered by the IIE survey New York State, in which the participating institution resides, was ranked as having the second largest population of international students with a total of 69,844. The institution that provided subjects for the current study had 170 international students enrolled during the academic

year this study took place, 2007-2008, ranking it 23<sup>rd</sup> out of the top forty baccalaureate institutions hosting international students.

### *Common Challenges*

Acculturation is a factor that many have pointed to as an indicator of International Students' success studying abroad, particularly in the United States. Typical acculturation issues among immigrant populations are communication difficulties, unfamiliarity with American customs and values, interpersonal problems, and academic and/or career problems (Yeh & Inose, 2002). Some very basic barriers at the beginning of International Students' course of study in the U.S. include inability to ascertain their basic needs, especially transportation, healthcare, and lack of documentation needed to study in the U.S. Meeting basic needs is the first step to acclimating to a new environment and is necessary before acculturation can proceed (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).

Nilsson and Anderson (2004) defined *acculturation* as the degree of acceptance by the immigrant of Americans and U.S. culture (p.306). Certainly, the degree to which International Students accept the host population and culture fosters a feeling of connection with the new environment. The feeling of connectedness is affected by both familiarity with language and customs as well as interpersonal experiences. Perceived prejudice, which is the perceived degree of acceptance by Americans, is key to International Students' feelings of connectedness (Nilsson & Anderson, 2004), which will be discussed more fully further on. Misra and Castillo (2004) cited the findings of previous studies showing that International Students who are more acculturated

experience less academic stress (p.145). A higher degree of acculturation is primarily due to familiarity with language and cultural norms related to classroom expectations and behaviors. However, Misra and Castillo also cautioned that International Students may not admit to academic stress due to the stigma.

Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006) identified poor social integration and/or homesickness to be a major factor in the adjustment, acculturation, and attachment of Chinese and Taiwanese students studying in the U.S. Furthermore, they found that “high attachment anxiety and high avoidance were significant predictors for both sociocultural adjustment difficulty and psychological distress” (p.428), which would certainly complicate acculturation and building a support network.

Duru and Poyrazli (2007) found that social support, social support satisfaction, and social connectedness were related to lower levels of acculturative stress. While feelings of familiarity with classroom norms are beneficial for International Students’ academic success, it is important to look at International Students’ social connectedness with Americans as well as other non-native born populations. A study by Misra, Crist, and Burant (2003) found that International Students’ social support more often came from friends, family and other co-nationals than from American students. Additionally, they found that higher levels of social supports reduced academic stressors.

Duru and Poyrazli (2007) also found that greater adjustment (or acculturation) difficulties can be attributed to the limited resources available to deal with cross-cultural adjustment. They found in their study of younger Turkish students that individuals with higher English proficiency reported better adjustment. However Duru and Poyrazli also

found that the *only* variables that are consistent predictors of International Students' adjustment are social support, social support satisfaction, and social connectedness.

### *Connectedness*

Sarason, Levine, Basharm, and Sarason (1983) found that social support contributes to positive adjustment and personal development and that it provides a buffer against the effects of stress. Their study used the Social Support Questionnaire to assess how the frequency of contact and length of relationship determine one's social support. Results of that study is consistent with findings from Zhang and Rentz (1996) who found that the greater the length of time in the US, the greater the *intercultural adaptation* (p.324). Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) added that once students start building relationships with people from the host culture, their experiences are more likely to be positive. Additionally, the totality of perceived social support includes not just contact with one's own culture, but also contact with new friends and direct family in the United States, contact with the local community, and contact with religious organizations (Misra, Crist, & Burant, 2003). These indicators of social support were the springboard for present study.

Acculturation and success of studying in the U.S. has focused on the degree of connectedness to International Students' host culture. However some attention also has been paid to connectedness with International Students' culture of origin. Contact with one's own culture helps ascertain cultural identity, (Misra et al., 2003). But, the longer the contact with the host culture the less interest in one's *cultural conservatism* which is the desire to decrease value change during contact with the host culture (Guan & Dodder,

2001). This leads to the belief that one becomes more open to value changes brought about by contact with the host culture, the longer one studies in that culture.

Sakamoto's research has identified the process of *cultural negotiation* that occurred with Japanese International Students in the U.S. (2006). There are six stages of cultural negotiation: cultural encounters, acculturation (accommodating differences), resistance to the host culture and re-enculturation into the native culture, reevaluation of the host culture(s), reevaluation of the native culture, and transculturation. This last stage, *transculturation* is defined as a disconnect from either the host or native culture. Sakamoto looked at the impact of gender and family of origin in this process and found that family connections could act as both a buffer and a constraint for acculturation.

#### *Importance of Social Networks/Support*

To determine the importance of connectedness, it is beneficial to look at social networks in general. Bankoff's (1994) study looked at psychotherapy patients who were "embedded in a network of significant and meaningful ties" (p.503) and how that impacted their engagement in therapy. Findings showed that the majority of participants had equal kin and non-kin relationships in their social support network.

Studies about the degree of perceived support (Antonucci & Israel, 1986; Hobfoll, Nadler, & Leiberman, 1986) point to the importance of intimacy and the congruence or veridicality on one's well-being, leading to further supposition that connectedness is important in times of crisis. Whether or not crises occur for International Students, the presence of social support is imperative to their success. *Social support* in Antonucci, Fuhrer, and Dartigues' study (1997) is defined as the qualitative aspects of the support

relationship, including how satisfied individuals are with the support they receive and whether supportive others understand them. For instance, Stokes and Levin (1986) looked at gender differences in predicting loneliness, and found that men have friendships that tend to be more group oriented than women, but women have more interest in close, dyadic social ties (p.1073). Combining research on gender differences and cultural expectations surrounding social support may lead to greater understanding of how institutions of higher learning can support IS, but first we must understand International Students' current experiences of social support just as the current research hopes to do.

### *Multicultural Counseling*

“It is essential to identify the difficulties individuals experience when they come to the US, and the coping strategies they would use, in order to develop culturally relevant services for immigrant youth” (Yeh & Inose, 2002). Without a clear understanding of current experiences or providing culturally competent services, college counseling centers will not reach International Students on campus, thus leaving sometimes large portions of the campus population unsupported.

Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006) compared International Students' experience to Ainsworth's Strange Situation. The results showed that attachment anxiety was significantly negatively associated with acculturation to U.S. culture but attachment avoidance was not. Furthermore, the results showed that Chinese International Students with high levels of attachment avoidance were less likely to reach out to local or campus resources and reluctant to rely on others' help with acculturative stress. This situation

poses a huge barrier to getting students in the door of campus counseling centers. Understanding the cultural context of help-seeking behaviors and attachment styles are the first steps to developing programs that meet International Students' needs in a culturally respectful way.

Yakushko, Davidson, and Sanford-Martens (2008) research point out the significance of mental health services helping with the adjustment of International Students in the host culture. Relationship issues were identified as being most prevalent in terms of what International Students wish to address at mental health services on campus, which furthers the idea that connectedness is essential to adjustment in a new environment. Seeking mental health services on campus is affected by International Students' preconceptions about counseling and may cause them to suffer without professional support. Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) found that the International Students in their study thought counseling services were only for students who were severely depressed or suicidal and therefore did not seek help with issues related to acculturation or interpersonal strife. When working with International Students it is imperative that the college counselor has solid multicultural competency, knowledge, and skills. These skills increase International Students' perception of the counselor's having greater expertness, trustworthiness, and ability to help the student with academic and social concerns (Zhang & Dixon, 2001).

### *Summary*

The literature shows that the presence of International Students at institutions of higher learning in the United States is on the rise. Professionals on those campuses need to be prepared to assist International Students with issues specific to their circumstances, namely, acculturation issues and the presence of social support. The literature has shown that connectedness, intimacy, and perceived support is important to success and wellbeing. Information about International Students' support system, acculturation process, and culture can be utilized in the therapeutic setting. This multicultural competency will enable professionals to become part of International Students' support systems. The first step in the process of creating programming and encouraging resources for support is to obtain a clear picture of International Students' experiences of connection, which is what the current research aims to do so that International Students can be better reached.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The research question for this study is: What is the experience of international students studying in the United States with regard to maintaining and making meaningful connections? This study was designed to elicit the experiences of meaningful connection International Students among International Students at a highly selective liberal arts college. Specifically, this study explored the participants' relationships with their friends and family from their home country, other international students at the same institution, American students at the institution, and the Diaspora community residing in the United States. Based on the literature, these four areas of connectedness appear to be the populations with which International Students have the most interaction.

A qualitative design using semi-structured interviews was used to gather rich narrative data about the experiences of this student population at this institution. Additionally, since this study was aimed at discovery, a qualitative design, using in-person interviews with study subjects, was used because "people are often more willing and able to reflect at length on complex feelings, understanding, and past experiences through the spoken word than the written one" (Anastas, 1999, p.351). Open-ended questions were designed to explore the experiences of connectedness International Students have with the above populations and the challenges they have faced making and maintaining meaningful connection with members of each group. A questionnaire of

approximately 30 questions was self-developed for the interviews (see Appendix A). Probes were used as needed to help participants expand on their responses.

The questions were open-ended in nature in order to gather narrative data that was then transcribed. The transcribed interviews were then analyzed and common themes were drawn out and used to describe the similarities and variances of international students' experiences.

### *Sample*

The target sample for this study was full-time matriculated students, over the age of 18, who are citizens of any country other than the United States and were enrolled at X College for the 2007-2008 academic year. This study was open to all International Students who met the above criteria regardless of race, nationality, gender, physical ability, language skills, or sexual orientation.

A recruitment statement was sent to all International Students explaining the purpose of the study attached to an email that was sent from the director of the International Students Office (Appendix B). I requested participants for the study and asked that students email me directly if they were interested in participating. Students were not asked to reply to the email from the director of their program so that they could freely choose to participate or not. Snowball sampling was utilized, in that participants were asked to refer friends to the study, although no participants came forward through this means. The goal sample size was 12-15 participants. Nine students responded, eight of which completed interviews for use in the study. Thus, eight participants comprised the total sample. One reason for the small sample size is that the timing played a role in

not meeting the target sample size on this campus. The recruitment statement was sent out six weeks before final exams began and the high academic focus may have contributed to some potential participants rejecting the study due to time constraints and their academic work load.

### *Ethics and Safeguards*

This study applied to and was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the college where the study took place. The letter could not be included in the appendices of this write-up due to the fact that it identifies the institution the participants attended, thus breaking confidentiality.

The primary risk of participation in this study for International Students was discomfort subjects might have felt being asked personal questions or emotional responses they might have had about being asked to reflect on their experiences of meaningful connections. As stated above, email communication directly with me, the investigator, was used so that students would not feel obligated to participate in the study, as some may have if they had been asked to respond to the director of their program. The consent form (Appendix C) signed by each participant reiterated the purpose of the study, use of the data, and dissemination of the results. Participants were free to refuse to answer any questions or ask to discontinue the interview at any point without question or consequences from administrators, faculty, staff, or me. Contact information for follow-up services was provided via the Debriefing Letter (Appendix D) at the end of the interview. Please note that in Appendix D the resource names have been changed and phone numbers and campus location deleted to ensure confidentiality.

No monetary compensation was offered to students for their participation; however, other benefits included the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and have their voices be heard. The findings of this thesis may also contribute to the school administrators' understanding of International Students and give them an opportunity to engage in conversation about how to better meet the needs of their International Students.

To ensure confidentiality, a member of my cohort who knows the importance of confidentiality and is bound by the Social Work's Code of Ethics transcribed the interviews and signed a contract agreeing to maintain confidentiality of these participants' interviews (see Appendix E). Names and other identifying information such as geographical references pertaining to the identity of the institution were changed. My thesis advisor also had access to the audio recordings of the interviews and was able to look at copies of the transcripts in their altered form. The Findings chapter reports collective results, through the use of tables, graphs, and individual quotations. When using individual quotations, identifying information has been carefully disguised. To further ensure confidentiality, all materials are kept in locked storage for three years, after which the materials will be destroyed, as is consistent with Federal regulations.

Participation in the study was completely voluntary. Participants were given the option to withdraw at any time during the study or before May 1, 2008; there was no penalty for withdrawal. Participants were also given the option to refuse to answer any of the interview questions. If participants had any questions about the study or their participation, they were encouraged to ask me at the time of the interview or to contact me by email afterwards. Participants were also given the option to request a summary of the results upon the completion of my thesis project.

### *Data Collection*

Narrative data were collected through semi-structured, individual interviews with each participant. The interviews took place on campus at a time that was convenient for the participant; most interviews took place on weekends and in the evening. A private meeting room was reserved for the interviews so that confidentiality could be maintained.

The confidentiality of the interview attempted to ensure the validity and reliability of the data collection. Given that the interview took place in a confidential surrounding, in a meeting room not connected with campus administrators, the participant was likely to have felt more comfortable giving truthful and thorough answers. Validity was maintained through the use of the semi-structured interview guide (Appendix A) so that the investigator could be flexible enough during the interview to ask clarifying and/or probing questions to get at the richest descriptions of International Students' experiences.

One process used to increase reliability was the use of pilot testing. The researcher met with three International Students who volunteered their time to discuss the research design of this study. Each student in the pilot test was asked about the environment they would feel most comfortable being interviewed. The students said that meetings would garner more honesty and reliability if they were conducted on campus in a neutral space, such as the meeting rooms that can be rented for student study sessions or group meetings. They were specific that using an administrative or counseling office may hinder the reliability and richness of data collected. The students who assisted in pilot testing were aware that by participating in the informal discussion regarding the research design they were in no way expected to participate in the study.

The interview guide addressed each participant's meaningful connections with friends and family from his/her home country, other International Students at the college, American students at the college, and any diasporic communities with which participants have come into contact in the United States. Participants were asked questions such as, What is the most difficult thing about communicating with friends and family from your home country?, What relationships have deepened and which have deteriorated since coming to the U.S.?, What have you learned about communicating with people from other cultures?, Have you experienced any relationship difficulties since coming to the U.S.?, What do you like most about your American friends?, What challenges have you experienced meeting others from your country in the U.S.?, and Do you plan to keep in touch with anyone you have met while studying in the U.S.?

### *Data Analysis*

After the interviews were transcribed, initial coding of the data was done. In vivo or indigenous codes were used in that the themes of the categories used for coding were partially determined by the participants based on their narratives. Coding categories were heuristic in that they were relevant to the aims of the research and the goal of the study, which, as noted above, was to explore the experiences of participants' meaningful connections. Themes were parsimonious which means the smallest unit that could stand alone was used. This varied from data set to data set and from theme to theme. The unit of analysis was most often the theme or idea expressed, regardless of the length (Anastas, 1999).

While most coding was determined in vivo, some selective coding was used due to the nature of the questions asked. For example, data were analyzed using selective coding that related to the four areas of meaningful connections which the investigator initially wanted to explore (i.e. connectedness with friends and family from their country of origin, American students and other International Students and Diaspora communities).

The use of selective coding was helpful in that it assisted the investigator with organizing the data into larger categories and gives a broader way of understanding the data. In vivo coding helps draw out more specific themes related to the specifics of the participants' experiences. For instance, while selective coding showed that not many participants engaged in meaningful relationships with Diaspora communities, in vivo coding showed that the isolated nature of the campus and the abundance of activities and academic rigors contributed to the lack of connection with Diaspora communities.

Findings that were expected included participants' disclosure of homesickness for family members and comforts of home, including cooking, and that the majority of participants would recommend the experience of studying abroad in the U.S. to others. One finding that was unexpected was that few participants shared experiences of discrimination and that one, an African student, said that he was unaware of racism through personal experience until he educated himself by taking courses in the African Studies department. Another unexpected finding was that participants in this study did not seek out connections with diaspora populations.

One methodological bias is that open ended questions will garner more detailed description of participants' experiences. Another limitation in regards to the design of

this study is that all interviews were conducted in English, which could affect the ability or willingness of the participant to go into greater detail about their experiences. Another design flaw was that due students self-selecting to participate in this study, there may not be a varied representation of experiences. Perhaps only those who have enjoyed their experience in the U.S. chose to speak out to an unknown researcher about those experiences. Another design flaw may have been using face to face interviews. Would there have been more honest and/or varied responses if anonymity could have been preserved through using an online survey. Lastly, because all participants were currently enrolled in the college, there was not an opportunity to hear from those who returned to their home country before finishing their degree.

Some limitations to this study include the small number of participants and inconsistency of the researcher's delivery of the questions, meaning the probing questions that were added in any given interview relied upon the interviewer's assessment of needing more information.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### *Introduction*

This chapter presents the finding from eight interviews conducted with International Students who matriculated at a liberal arts college in the Northwestern Unites States. All participants were over 18 years old and identified as having a country of origin outside of the U.S.

The interviews were conducted on campus, in private, at a time that was mutually agreed upon by the participants and the researcher. Respondents were asked approximately 30 questions about their experiences of making and maintaining meaningful relationships during their education in the U.S. While an interview guide was utilized, the researcher asked additional probing questions to elicit richer narratives from participants. The findings are organized into the following categories: Getting to Know the Participants (demographics), Friends and Family, Other International Students, American Students, Diaspora and Additional Questions.

### *Getting to Know the Participants*

There were eight participants in this study. Table 1 shows the demographic breakdown of the participants; it includes age, gender, country of origin, grade level, time in the United States, and self-identified race or ethnicity.

Table 1

| Participant | Age | Gender | Country of Origin | Grade Level | Self-identified Race/ethnicity         | Time in the U.S. |
|-------------|-----|--------|-------------------|-------------|--|------------------|
| A           | 20  | Female | Brazil*           | Junior      | Brazilian/<br>White Brazilian          | 36 mo.           |
| B           | 22  | Male   | Ghana             | Senior      | Black African                          | 42 mo.           |
| C           | 22  | Female | Vietnam           | Sophomore   | Asian                                  | 18 mo.           |
| D           | 21  | Female | France            | Junior      | Indian &<br>Caucasian                  | 8 mo             |
| E           | 20  | Male   | China             | Freshman    | Chinese                                | 8 mo.            |
| F           | 21  | Female | Canada            | Freshman    | Caucasian                              | 8 mo.            |
| G           | 21  | Male   | Kenya             | Freshman    | Black                                  | 8 mo.            |
| H           | 19  | Female | Ecuador*          | Sophomore   | Latin American/<br>Ecuadorian-American | 77 mo.           |

#### *Demographic Characteristics*

Of those eight, three identified as male and five identified as female. They were diverse in terms of their countries and continents of origin. Two were from South America, one from Brazil and the other from Ecuador. Two were from Africa, one from Kenya and one from Ghana. Two were from Asia, one from Vietnam and the other from China. One was from North America, specifically Canada and one was a European from France. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 22 years old. Three described their class year as freshman, or first-year college students. Two were sophomores, two were juniors, and one was a senior, getting ready to graduate at the end of the academic year. The time that each participant spent in the United States ranged from eight months to 77 months. The participant who spent 77 months in the United States specified that the first 60 months were her first five years of life and that she had returned in the last

two years to attend college, spending a total of 17 months pursuing higher learning.

Lastly, participants self-identified as being of a variety of ethnicities and/or races: Latin American and Ecuadorian-American, Brazilian American, White Brazilian, Black, Black African, Caucasian, Indian and Caucasian, Asian, and Chinese.

### *Extracurricular Activities*

Participants were asked what types of extracurricular activities they were involved in. Two had been trained as Emergency Medical Technicians and participated in the Emergency Medical Service on campus. Three mentioned sports including soccer, tennis, squash, lacrosse, and akido. Two additional respondents were part of the soccer intramural team, one planned to try out for the competitive school team the following school year. Another student was part of the school Ice Skating Team. The following clubs were part of the participants' extracurricular activities: French Club, Poetry Club, Women's Chorus, the African Student Union, Christian Fellowship, Debate Team, Forum for Political Thought, Friends of the Art Community, the Class Issues Alliance, the school-Haiti Project, the school Farm Project, Amnesty International, and an unnamed acapella group. One participant said what she liked about being part of the debate team is that "we got to go to different schools and I thought that was really cool. [It was] a way to visit different places in the states." Two participants were part of the school newspaper. One held offices in several of the clubs in which he was involved and one served on the campus executive board. One contributor had just started learning how to play the piano at the time he was interviewed and another was teaching himself how to play the guitar. One student did field work at a local jail and volunteered in the community at several local schools, while two others mentioned volunteering in the

community but did not specify where. Finally, four students had on-campus jobs at one time or another during their matriculation, including one who worked two different part-time jobs at the time he was interviewed.

### *Free Time Locations*

The interviewees were asked where they *hang out*, in other words, where they spend their free time. All participants named multiple places where they hang out. Three identified spending free time in the apartments and townhouses that were only for seniors students. Two said they spent some of their free time at the library, two others spent time at the gym. One student named the cafeteria, two others hung out at the coffee/snack bar in the student union, and two named the “courtyard” on campus. One person named a professor’s office because of the intellectual stimulation she gained from conversations about “what it means to lead a meaningful life.” Another student said he spent time in the building that houses his major because “If people want to meet up with me, it's close.” Three participants talked about the quiet time they get from being in their dorm rooms. One said, “I don't know that many people in my dorm, which is kind of nice because I know that when I'm there, it's quiet time. So... it's kind of like hiding out.” Another student mimicked that sentiment when she said, “my favorite time is when my roommate goes away. I can get up early when the sun comes up and put on NPR or the BBC and drink tea. That's a private time. That's kind of my hanging out. Otherwise my schedule prevents hanging out.” Finally, this quote seemed to apply to most participants but was said especially well by one, “I am a floater... One evening I might spend part of the evening with a group of friends and then I will hang out with another group of friends who are all tight. And then I will hang out with my hall friends.”

“Everything's pretty fun (laughs) I wouldn't be doing it unless it was fun!” was one participant’s response when asked what she does for fun. Every participant included “hanging out with friends” in their responses to this question. Four students mentioned going to on campus parties or the on-campus bar, one of whom voiced her dislike of the on-campus bar/dance club scene saying,

I find it quite socially frustrating to go to the [on-campus bar] and be like ‘this is the college center.’ I can't take it seriously and I feel really bad because a lot of people are and a lot of people feel like they are in the college center and they are still having fun but it doesn't hold my attention. - same with parties and house parties.

The other three students indicated that they very much enjoyed the on-campus bar and campus parties. Those participants who were unhappy with the “party scene” preferred going to concerts and lectures, while two other respondents watched “a lot of TV.” Two students specified that they like to get off campus for fun, usually in the form of eating at a restaurant. One interesting response was that one student kept a journal. She reflected, “I don't know if that should be considered something to do for fun, because it's reflective. It's fun, but it's also reflective. It's deeper than fun.” Another interesting disclosure in response to this question was that one participant used to take ballroom dancing lessons because “I had this dream to become a professional dancer by the time I'm 35.”

### *Friends and Family*

When exploring connectedness with friends and family from the participants’ country of origin, the first course of action was to get a snap shot of how students were supported by their friends and family prior to coming to the United States. The first question along these lines was how each participant found out about the institution of higher learning that they chose to attend.

### *Reasons for School Choice*

Four participants heard about the school from people with whom the student had an established relationship and who had already attended or were attending the school at the time of the research participants' college search. Another heard about the school from a guidance counselor at school; another obtained information through her home-colleges exchange program. Two others researched colleges online, listened to word of mouth, read school brochures, and researched school rankings to determine if they were interested in applying.

Once each participant described how she or he discovered the school, they were asked how they decided to enroll. The Vietnamese student in this study said that a school brochure talked about a professor having a conference in Hanoi about the Vietnam war, which made her feel that "these people you know have some sort of... knowledge and connection with Vietnam." That student also had email interactions with administrators prior to getting accepted and "had the feeling that [staff] was supportive and friendly."

Another student chose the school because of influence from his father who had a friend living close to the campus. Both the friend and the student's father encouraged the student because they valued a liberal arts education. Similarly, one respondent said, "My parents were a major influence in my coming here because they didn't want me to straight jacket myself into engineering so I could explore other things outside of engineering."

Another student chose the school because he heard from a current student who he knew from high school that the Economics department was good. Lastly, one student said she was looking for a school in proximity to another college, with a liberal and artistically-

mindful campus in a particular setting and this school fit all requirements. She said, “I wanted something that would be a change from the city. But not too far from a city.”

### *School Choice Supporters*

Next, students were asked who was the most supportive of their decision to come to school in the United States. All but one respondent said their families were most supportive, some naming the way their mom or dad was supportive. The one respondent who didn't mention his family said, “I would say myself. My parents wanted me to go to University in Alberta.”

Other students shared their perception that their parents were overall supportive but that their excitement and happiness may contain other feelings. “It's always hard for families to be very excited about their child going far abroad. But they were quite happy for me I think (laughs),” and “My parents were very supportive but they are also very concerned because I don't be home... for four years and they are worried about that. But I am determined so they give support.”

The student whose parents wanted him to attend school in Alberta, Canada explained that his parents did not know much about school in the United States. He added that his father's push toward school in Alberta was because, “When my father went to college, he went to the University of Nairobi and he had a visiting professor from Alberta and that was in the 70's and so since then he's been like ‘oh, it's a nice place’.”

Other participants discussed concerns their parents had about financing their education, cultural adjustment, and sadness and adjustment difficulties for the family after the student came to the U.S. One student described this family concern:

...tensions about some concerns about how my sister was going to live without me considering that she'd always otherwise been with me. We have a very close relationship. How the family would organize... what things would be when I would come back? Would [things] be the same for her?

Another student responded, "No...everyone really supported me," while another disclosed that he was the most opposed to attending the school. He explained that he had set his mind on an engineering school in California and needed to be persuaded by his mother and father to pursue a liberal arts education.

### *Leaving the Family*

Next, respondents were asked to describe those close to them who they left at home to study in the U.S. All participants mentioned leaving two-parent households, although one mentioned that the male parent was a step-parent. Three students stated that their fathers worked long hours; or in one case, worked outside their home city, therefore not being particularly close to them prior to leaving. Three students talked about leaving their mother behind when they came to the U.S. These individuals were very close to their mothers. Most of the participants spoke of leaving their siblings; two talked about leaving siblings who were significantly younger. One participant did not have any siblings. Three students mentioned extended family including aunts, uncles, grandparents, a grandfather, and nieces to whom they were close. Five participants spoke of leaving their friend groups but three identified that they had drifted apart from their main peer group prior to attending school in the States - two due to attending high school abroad and one due to her peer group leaving home for college prior to her attending college in the U.S. Two of the five participants who mentioned their friends said they

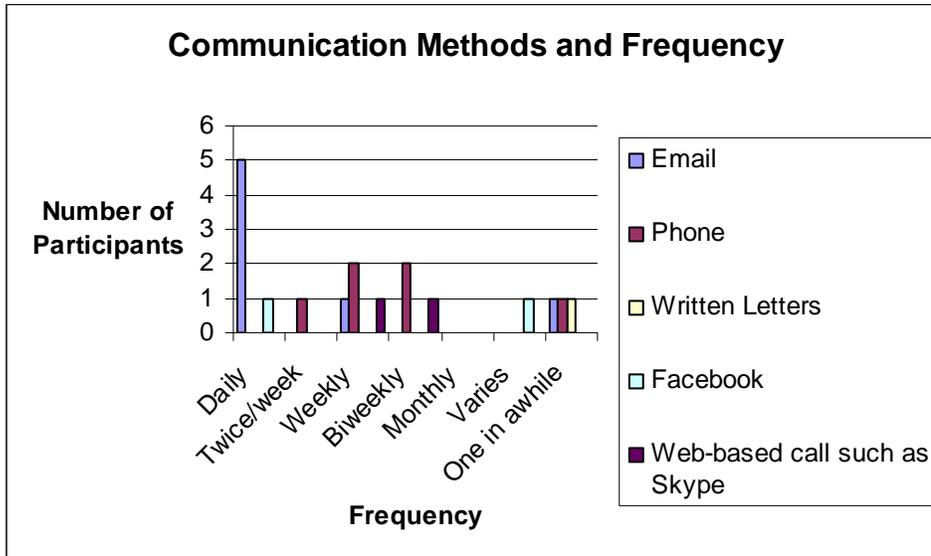
still keep in touch with them. Lastly, there was one respondent who identified her mentor and her boyfriend at the time as being people she would miss seeing.

### *Returning to the Country of Origin*

As a way to understand how they reconnect with those they left at home, the International Students in this study were asked how often they return to their country of origin. Overwhelmingly, respondents said they return approximately once each year, about half chose to return during the summer break in classes while the other half return during the winter break. One student, who was a senior, said he had only returned once during the four years he was in the U.S.

Below is Table 2 that shows how and how often each respondent communicated with friends and family from home. There are more modalities of communication than study participants because most participants identified multiple ways they communicated with people at home. Five participants used email on a daily basis, while another participant used the social networking site Facebook daily, to communicate with friends and family. One person used the telephone twice each week to connect with friends and family. One person used email, two people used the telephone, and another person used the web-based call program Skype to communicate each week. Two participants used the telephone and one person used Skype on a biweekly basis. One participant stated that his/her connection with friends and family occurred via Facebook and the frequency varied. Three other participants stated that they used email, the phone, and written letters “once in awhile” to communicate with friends/family from their home countries.

Table 2



One participant explained how hectic life can be and how that affects her communication frequency and mode:

Email could be even five times a day with my mom when we have something we are talking about. Or at times I can go up to two weeks if I am busy. With friends it's more detached and even if I don't really know them I will call them once in awhile. It's hard. They find it hard to call me even if they have my number, so I always call them. With my family it's more my mom; my mom's the main person I communicate with.

*Family Visits to the United States*

Participants were also asked how often friends or family from their country of origin visit them in the U.S. Four said that no one has visited them since they came to the U.S., two citing the expense as the reason no one has visited. Two said that one or both parents came with them at the beginning of their studies in the U.S. “to make sure everything was fine.” One explained that he has seen his family much more than he expected due to his physician father’s work bringing him to the Northeastern United States on business. “He comes down at least once a year to New York. So either I will

come down to the city or he will come out the (city) to visit.” He further explained that due to a wedding and his sister graduating from college in the U.S. the year before he has seen his mother and sister much more than he thought he would.

Expense was identified as a barrier for family members visiting respondents during their time in the U.S. Participants were asked what other barriers to communicating with friends and family from home they experienced during their academic sojourn. One student was not sure there were barriers to staying connected. He spoke about the time difference and that his family would mention local news that he did not know about due to not having easy access to African news in the U.S., but he denied those things being *barriers*. Another student mentioned the time difference that posed a barrier to connecting via telephone. He said that it was difficult to find good times to talk with family back home due to the time difference because he was very busy, as was his family. That student identified weekends as the only time to be able to speak with family but also identified another barrier was the expense. A few other students mentioned how expensive it was to call overseas, but most others named the main barrier to connecting being that the students were living different “realities” than their friends and family back home. One summed it up by saying:

I get really caught up with things at school, activities and politics and things. And [I'm] trying to select things to tell my family... that's the hardest part, trying to select things to select things to focus on because you can't stay on the phone for three hours... [It's] hard trying to communicating everything you're learning here and everything you're questioning and I can't just pick up a phone whenever I want and say this is what I'm learning, this is what I'm thinking about, this is how I am changing, you know? And you're going through this incredible transformation process.

Another student echoed the student above when she said:

You don't need the same things... you have this underlying love for your family and you have all the daily life which nurture[s] your conversation, which underlies your relationship with your family. I don't have that here because I am doing something different. So you can tell sometimes on the phone, you share what you are doing but you don't share something really with them. They say what they do but you are not in the place with them so you receive it not as a stranger but as someone outside.

Lastly, one student named language as a barrier, saying he emails to family and friends at home in English due to limited keyboards on campus with Chinese characters.

#### *Relationships with Friends and Family from Home*

When asked how their relationships with friends from home have changed during their time in the U.S., the International Students in this study had a variety of responses. Several spoke about changes in their relationships with friends due to the differences in experiences they were having. One said there was “some difficulty communicating with them because I had been exposed to a whole different culture and a whole different way of thinking.” Another went a little deeper to describe how things had changed with her friends:

I'm not very good at censoring my experiences. the first time I went home I was really upset that I would even have to censor my experiences and that they didn't want to hear about these things. I understood why but it's not better it's not worse but it's just different. And, a lot of people would rank themselves according. It was really frustrating.

Another said that “relationships is not a stable thing, it changes all the time. People go to college and they change the way they interact with each other.” Most seemed to agree that the number of their friendships with people from their home country decreased but some indicated they were not distressed by this or that the quality of the friendships that remained improved. One respondent said that due to time constraints and finances she

wrote letters to her friends from home and the result was that she had a different kind of relationship:

We write. And you don't say the same things when you write and when you talk. You say maybe deeper things when you write because you try to condense your experience, to be more precise about what you want to say so you say different things, more maybe about your feelings in the long run. More about how you fancy your environment. It's not as simplistic an experience.

One participant said that her relationships with friends from home had already changed because they left home to attend college before she did; therefore there was not a change when she arrived in the U.S. Two students had contrasting reasons why their relationships with friends from home changed. One said that his friends' expectations about what life was like for him in the U.S. increased the amount of "miscommunication" and contributed to his peer group diminishing. The other said that his friend base decreased due to difficulty communicating as a result of the change in his expectations:

I expected a certain type of conversation...a more liberal way of thinking and more open minded way of thinking of things and a more critical analysis of whatever we are talking about. It's not the same kind of experience at home so I got a bit frustrated at times because I wanted to dig in deeper to issues and that wasn't forth coming because it's not the culture.

Each participant reported some type of positive change in their relationships with family members. Many felt there was more respect, honesty, and realization of independence. Two spoke about positive changes due to no longer taking their family for granted and realizing how much they care about them. One said,

There's a very high sense of individualism [in the U.S.] that sometimes I am not used to. So when I encounter that kind of thing I miss home that much more and appreciate all the things my parents did... I just really feel more connected to a sense of community.

Even though all participants identified some positive change in their relationships with their family, some mentioned ways particular relationships suffered. For instance,

one participant named his relationship with his mom. He said, "Because of the distance when we do get a chance to talk it's not as deep and it's not as comprehensive as it used to be," but he also went on to say, "It's not something that has been permanently changed or damaged because of my time here. It's just changed temporarily because of the situation." Another shared her conflicting feelings about the change in her relationship with her mom due to the differences in their life experiences. She said:

I don't feel as much like a kid anymore...I'm getting to the level now where I'm going to surpass at least the academic experience or type of academic experience they had... It's hard because you don't want to go back. And you still want that same maternal relationship like "mom mom mom" but it's not completely like that... I have noticed that I can have a lot more conversations about different topics and I'm not afraid to ask questions and take her criticism anymore.

Students were also asked what relationships have deepened since coming to the U.S. for school. One named her relationship with her grandmother because she is no longer calling her grandmother on the phone with the rest of her family, but rather was calling her grandmother by herself which allowed a more intimate conversation. This student also identified a change in her relationship with her sister due to the participant being away from home. She described her relationship with her sister below:

When I left, there was no base of comparison. She didn't have to live up to standards anymore, so she grew more comfortable with herself and our relationship... was better because I don't think she feels like she's competing anymore. But at the same time there's the distance and she doesn't really like talking on the phone, so... I don't really know what's going on in her life anymore and she doesn't really know what's going on in my life anymore... When we come together to talk we have a really good time but we have to be in the same space to do that.

One student did not think any of his relationships had deepened. Another only identified the relationships with friends he went to high school with outside his country of origin who were also studying in the U.S. and said that they remained close because they

could all identify with the common experience of missing home. Another said that her relationship with her mother has deepened due to her mother helping her process her experiences of being on an American college campus, “She's been good at putting into context the experience here.” Another respondent named her mom but said it was because she believed her mom wanted to talk to “someone older” because the only child at home was the participant’s little sister. Still another named her mom and explained it was because it “became easier for me to not have that urge to fight with her every time I disagree with her” due to the distance. Lastly, one participant named his relationship with his sister because she was also studying in the U.S. He said that is because “we were the only family we had” and that “because she's here it's easier to call her it's easier to see her.” He went on to say that they were not as close in their home country because they had their own friends and did not have many shared experiences, while now they primarily have each other and one large shared experience of studying abroad.

When asked about relationships that have deteriorated one participant identified relationships with friends. That participant placed the blame on himself due to not wanting to communicate via email. He said, “I personally am not the kind of person who likes to have email conversations with people. I want to have a direct conversation. I feel like I could communicate more achieve more if I spoke to them over the phone.” He went on to say that he felt like he could “rebuild” the relationships with these friends when he returns home after graduating because “I still feel like the relationships although they may not seem to function now... the foundations of these relationships are strong enough that if we were to see each other again the relationship would reignite.” Two others said they did not feel that any relationships had deteriorated, even though one had

broken up with her boyfriend after coming to the U.S. The other of this pair said that her “feelings faded away,” however neither saw these two things as negative happenings. Another spoke about feeling “alienated” from her extended family when she returns home because “there's not a lot of family who leaves.” Two others identified school friendships as the relationships that deteriorated and they attributed the deterioration to different experiences and not having much time to communicate.

Lastly, participants were asked who they could want to live in the U.S. with them and why. Three students identified conflicting reactions to this question. All named people they would like to have closer but two knew that those they chose would not be as happy in the U.S. as they are back home. The third student noted that he would not have had the same experiences he had if his mother was with him because,

When I'm asked to step out of my comfort zone and challenge myself I think I've grown because of that. And I feel like I wouldn't have had that kind of growth if I was comfortable and was surrounded by people who were dear to me and who were the ones I wanted around me.

Another participant said that she would like to have her sister with her because “when I am here and go to jazz night or am frustrated or something really meaningful she's the first person who comes to mind that I would want to share it with.” Three others named their mothers, one because “I think she would be pretty happy about being here,” and another because, “I want to share all the opportunities that I am getting.” The last respondent named his mother and his 12 year old brother, but did not give any specific reason besides “I miss my youngest brother a lot. I think he's funny and I don't know... he's 12 years old. I don't know any other reason.”

### *Fellow International Students*

Participants were asked if there were other students from their home countries matriculating at the same college. All but one said that there were other students from their home country at the school. One did not know any of them. Another student knew the four students from her home country because they all attended the same high school. A third participant reported that he had grown close with the other students from his country in the time he had been at the school.

When asked for more details about getting close to the other students from their country, the Brazilian participant said that of the students she went to high school with, nothing had really changed in their relationships. The Canadian student said she had not sought out the other students from her home country and because she felt the group was “collectively... staying away from each other.” Another said that the other students from his home country were “really difficult to approach.” One participant, who was a senior, spoke about how his experience of interacting with other students from his home country evolved during his four years in the U.S. He said that when he first arrived, he felt “detached” from the other Ghanaian students because “it seemed like they had already formed their own relationships and had their own groups of friends.” He described feeling closer with the other Ghanaians as more students came every year. He added,

These are people I really enjoy spending time with... it definitely was refreshing to communicate with them... especially because they understand the way you think and what you mean without having to require a lot of explanation to why you say this or why this is funny. They get the humor. We have the same kinds of tastes. We can discuss more broader range of issues because we come from the same place.

Similarly, a Vietnamese student described how her connection with another student from her home country evolved. She said,

For lack of better words I was pro-American... I didn't think it made that much difference if someone was from my home country or not, so I didn't feel the need to reach out to them as like a minority community or anything like that. But this year I became a lot closer with the other Vietnamese students... [we] would often like talk about stuff that we missed back home. Like favorite food, or something we cannot find here.

A French exchange student summed up what many described by saying,

I was happy to have another person from my school... sometimes you need to speak your own language... and you also need somebody with whom you can talk about your experience... as a foreigner in another country.

Respondents were asked what they have learned about communicating with other cultures. One student said he was more critical of the dominant American culture because “they have a support system” as opposed to other International Students. Similarly, the North American student said that she had not learned much about communicating with other cultures from her time studying in the U.S. compared with her time studying at an international high school in Singapore. Her experiences of interacting with International Students prior to college focused on trying to become comfortable with her working-class background, not cultural differences. One student voiced her surprise by saying, “It's much more enriching than I thought. I always loved the idea of communicating with other people from other countries and confronting other points of view and understanding them.” Another student said that

Curiosity is very very important... It's important to show an interest in their culture, ask about what's different about living in their culture and the states.... I don't think a lot of students are very interested in international students own culture.

A third student took her experience of how others approached her as an International Student and used it to inform how she approaches others from different cultures. Mainly she learned, “It's ok to ask things about how politics in their country works or how the geography in their country works, stuff like that, stuff I don't know.” While the previous respondent had to learn that it was ok to ask questions about what she did not know, another student said he had to learn to censor himself because his native culture was “very blunt, very in your face” and he had to learn to be respectful of others’ backgrounds and beliefs. This style of relating to other was difficult for his because it was so different, however, he added that

I pushed myself into places that would ordinarily be uncomfortable...that involved speaking to people where you had no idea what, you know, the backgrounds they had. And because I did this on a regular basis it's made things easier with speaking to someone where you have no idea where they are from.

A fourth participant spoke about not initially joining student groups with other International Students because she worried it would “re-marginalize people.” Later, her experience of growing close with her roommate who was another International Student helped her realize that “there are certain things that I learned that I don't think I could ever learn from books because of that personal connection.”

The students in this study were then asked what similarities were found in the other International Students that they had not anticipated before coming to the U.S. One described the shared experiences of simply being an International Student. For example, she and other International Students stay on campus during breaks and they also carry a financial burden due to studying abroad. The Ecuadorian student identified the shared

struggle among International Students in terms of deciding whether to return to their home country after graduation or completing graduate school. She said,

There's always that struggle of staying in the states or going back home after college graduation... especially people who come from supposed third world countries... Going home means being close to our family but maybe we can't support them as much financially.

One African student had not anticipated the shared beliefs, values, or cultural groups being similar to those of a friend from Singapore. He said, "The sense of family and the whole issue of families wanting their kids to be doctors and lawyers and the pressure on them to succeed... are very common aspects of their culture that's in mine as well and I didn't know that." However, he did point out that, over-all, he felt that his friend from Singapore had many more similarities with other African International Students than with European International Students. Two study participants noted the style of socializing that is common among International Students. One described "social flexibility" in that "you form groups of friends and there's no huge emotional trauma when you leave." The other discussed what role drinking [alcohol] played in socializing for International Students as opposed to American students. "More international students... drink mostly in the dorm room; mostly a small group of familiar people will talk and drink... Not like strangers hanging out in bars or drinking parties."

One African student stated that he felt different from other International Students because he was the only student from his country. He explained that he felt the burden of representing his country and that he was wary of others thinking that everything he did was indicative of his people. The other African student felt similarly; he said,

When I speak of the conditions of living at home, it's not something they can relate to. And when they speak of living at home it's not something I can relate to

because it's not the same where I am from... because the lifestyle in Europe [and Asia] is very different from that in Ghana.”

Five students noted that they did not see International Students as a homogeneous population and therefore had difficulty answering the question of differences among the whole group that they had not expected. Aside from the two students above who spoke about being from very different areas of the world than the United States, three others addressed the differences among International Students and their integration into the American student population. That data will be shared in the next section that asked about American students.

#### *Setbacks, Loneliness, Discrimination*

Four students responded in the positive to the question about setbacks they experienced and three said they did not have any. However, one of the South American students who did not identify any setbacks went on to describe adjusting to American customs such as politeness, sharing, touching, and what setting a date for a certain time means. Another South American student who experienced setbacks noted that she had to adjust her time management and more importantly deal with monetary issues. Another student talked about the difficulty he faced not having a vehicle. He explained that he stays on campus during most breaks and not having a vehicle, especially in the winter months, makes doing things like grocery shopping and finding activities off campus to relieve stress difficult.

While other students did not identify setbacks, all participants stated that they experienced some degree of loneliness or discrimination. Four students denied experiencing discrimination, although the two African students had been told by others

prior to their arrival that there is much discrimination against blacks in the U.S. They took it upon themselves to learn more about racism through their classes and lectures. Another student said she was only discriminated against due to her accent. The Chinese participant indicated he had had a negative experience with his first roommate and believed it was due to his nationality and/or race. Another student described a unique experience of “passing” as an American. She said,

Unless I tell someone I'm Brazilian, they assume I'm just American but can't tell where I'm from... Sometimes when I am just meeting someone and don't want to deal with anything I will just tell them they I live in upstate New York

This Brazilian student added that part of what she “doesn’t want to deal with” are the preconceptions Americans have about Brazilians, including notions of hyper-sexuality. She shared the result of these preconceptions is, “I haven't been able to form relationships with men. I feel like I'm being eroticized.”

Three students readily acknowledged the loneliness they felt during their college experience. One said he missed his mother’s cooking and felt lonely during the long break around the holidays when there are so few people on campus and his classmates returned telling stories about the exciting things they did during the break. Another disclosed missing her family and feeling guilty for not being at home because her mother was “suffering with cancer” and the student had missed the last three or four operations. An Asian student described feeling “family sick” and how her experience of that may affect her plans about graduate school or staying in the U.S. to work for awhile after graduating. The French student said she copes with homesickness by seeking out another French student to talk about home.

Lastly, one African student answered the question about setbacks, loneliness, and discrimination uniquely by sharing his experience of violence in his home country. He explained that violence broke out over elections while he was at home for a winter break. He stated that it was hard to come back to school in the U.S. (after winter break) and that others asked him about his experience. The student felt that “people were just being curious - just to get a first hand account of everything that was happening,” and then returned to being concerned with grades and their own social life. This student described feeling frustrated that the violence at home was at the forefront of his mind but faded from others’ minds. This is how he described these interactions:

....someone asking me a question about what was happening and it left me saying the same exact thing without having a personal reflection. "How are things now?" or "I read about this in the news, is your family ok?" the kind[s] of question[s] that after that answer comes to an end you move on in your life. It's not like I am coming to you and sitting down to talk about it. It's meeting you on the road like "oh, hey..." [for] two minutes and walking away.

He added that he had “developed a strong enough relationship to people to sort of take care of me when I needed them.”

After inquiring about setbacks, discrimination, and loneliness each participant experienced, students were asked who they turned to for support. Participants named the following: my friends, my house fellow, my advisor, my supervisor (at an on-campus job), staff and faculty, my sister, my roommate, a professor, my advisor, the head of the study abroad office, my parents or friends, other Chinese students, the dean of students, my mom, my best friend. The Canadian student specified that she turns to people off campus more often than on campus for support, specifically her mom and her best friend.

Next participants were asked specifically if they have experienced any relationship difficulties. One student said that all friendships changes so she did not think that the changes and shifts in some relationships were all that unique. Similarly, another participant noticed that people do not “define friendship the same way,” specifically relating her experience to a culturally-based understanding of friendship. She described American students being friendlier initially but much more guarded and superficial after the initial meeting, whereas French people are more difficult to engage but one can rely on them as confidants right away. Another said that he found it difficult to be in a romantic relationship with an American student because “it would be very difficult to relate to my plight, to why I want to do what I want to do, in the same way that it was difficult for me to relate to hers... There was that kind of tension.” Another student spoke about “an invisible wall” she could not cross with a good friend who was American and she attributed that wall to a “high sense of individualism.” Still another student echoed this sentiment with his experience of trying to befriend his roommate who immigrated to and was socialized throughout his childhood in the U.S. He said, “People don't seem ready to talk about things with people they aren't really close to.” Lastly, one student discussed his own reluctance to engage in deeper friendships when he said that he holds himself back “to sort of to get to know people”

Only three participants named the supports they used to deal with the relationship difficulties above. Those students identified talking to friends who did not know the other participant in a given relationship, or other students they happened to fall into deeper conversation with, or the campus counseling center.

### *Relating to American Students*

As a segue to the next topic, participants were asked, what the most challenging thing about making connections with others in the U.S.? While this question was intended to refer to anyone they had met during their time in the U.S. half of the participants specifically reflected on their interactions with Americans, while the other half did not specify Americans. Two students talked about the high sense of individualism that they see in their American friends. One participant said that it was difficult for her to understand and connect with American peers who were direct with her about their needs, likes/dislikes, desires, etc. Similarly, the Kenyan respondent found that it was difficult to make connections due to “the security thing,” which he described as the way people are cautious about interacting with people they do not know. Three students found that while people are very nice, it was harder to forge a deeper connection and develop close friendships. The European student cited the language difference as a barrier to connecting, specifically difficulty with slang, casual dialogue, irony, and other forms of humor. Two respondents talked about differences in experiences and “perspectives” being the reason they have struggled making connections in the U.S. An African participant shared how his lack of knowledge about the history of slavery and racism in the U.S. contributed to his difficulty making connections. He explained:

I think the manner in which I spoke about issues back then was just very direct... Sometimes I have to confess I wasn't too thoughtful in my opinions because I didn't understand the history of those issues in my country -- issues of racism or the plight of African Americans. A lot of people from Ghana or other African countries just feel like the reason African Americans are in the situation they are in is because they are lazy. Those are the kinds of things that come out of my mouth. I had no idea the history, the structure[s] that have prevented progress for that community... I needed to sit back and absorb the history of this place first.

After asking about challenges regarding making connections, participants were asked whether they preferred friendships with American students or International students and why. Four respondents identified feeling more comfortable making friends with International Students and four students said it did not make a difference,.

When asked why, one student said he felt more comfortable making friends with other International Students because he had had better experiences with International Students during his time in the U.S. The Ecuadorian student said she had about the same number of American and International friends, but that is significant due to the total number of International Students on campus being much less than American students. An African student reflected that initially he felt more comfortable making friends with other International Students because of the “culture shock” and feeling that everything is so different in the U.S. At the time of the interview he said, “I feel like once I recognized... how to start a conversation with this person or that person, it became very easy to be friends with them” and “the passions you have brings you together... those are the things that have made making friends for me easier at this point.”

An Asian participant who said he did not find a difference between making friends with International Students and American student indicated that he struggled to make friends regardless of nationality. He initially responded, “I don't think I can like talk to American students because I feel like they may not have experienced the same thing, so they wouldn't have a lot of shared understanding.” But when asked if it was easier to make friends with International Students he said, “No... it's all the same. I don't know if it's this school or... there's something distinctly very different on this campus, like people don't care a lot about politics or making changes like activism.” A North

American student answered the question by saying, “I find it easier to meet a lot of international students and feel very socially comfortable with them immediately. But, I haven't noticed a difference once we form a friendship.” Lastly, one student simply said meeting International Students has “worked for me.”

Participants were then asked what they like most about their American friends. Respondents named the following likeable qualities in their American friends: “They are more liberal in their thought even if their actions aren't part of that;” “I love hearing their perspectives and take on what their government is doing;” “They don't interrupt you when they talk. And they do listen to you;” “They have very different [food] tastes;” “open mindedness;” “their frankness;” “willingness to be critical;” “to think outside the box;” “to not accept things for face value... the superficial things;” “They are very socially conscious;” “They always will try different things;” and “They have been so amazingly welcoming into their homes.”

Next, participants were asked about the most difficult aspect of making friends with American students. One reiterated his earlier response about his experience of others [Americans] being suspicious of people they do not know and therefore hesitant to engage with them. Another student said that the “loyalty” of where people are from is a challenge because there is not automatically a common link between herself and an American student because she is an International Student. The French student also reiterated her earlier answer that because people [Americans] are so friendly right away, “you don't see the deep personality of a person” and that makes it difficult to judge with whom you will develop a friendship. Similarly, one respondent said, “It's not easy to just recognize [things you have in common] unless you engage [American students] and, you

know, you hang out more and more to find out what they are interested in.” Lastly, one South American student reflected on the difficulty she had connecting with American students when she first came to the U.S. She said, “At first it was really hard when people just weren't realizing how it's a privilege to be living in the same country as their family.”

Respondents were asked if they could, would they take a friend who they met at college to their home country. Five students said that they definitely would take a friend or several friends home. The Brazilian student stated that she already had taken two good friends to her country of origin. And two male students described the type of person [American] they would take with them, but they were unable to identify anyone specific who they had already met.

When asked to elaborate by sharing who they would take and why, the respondents said:

My friend (name)... because I think she'd appreciate the attitude of Canada. She's a really open minded, really creative, really honest person and I think she'd appreciate it

I would want to bring all my friends just to make them experience Paris and to give back to them back what they've given me

I would definitely want to take all of my close friends back to my country, honestly, just because Vietnam is a beautiful country and I just want them to be there and I want to show them around and um... show them how hospitable Vietnamese people are.

The friends that I have made I would definitely take home... they are very interested in where I'm from and, you know, what has made me who I am right now... I would feel very comfortable taking them with me because I know they would be able to adjust and respect the culture. And because of that I would be willing to take the people who would go with an open mind. And who wouldn't entertain prejudices people normally have towards Ghana and other countries.

The student who had already taken friends home recounted how important it was to her that her friends were interested in visiting her home country and how important it was that they attempted to learn the language, even if it was just the words for water or thank you.

Lastly, the two students who did not identify any particular person or persons, shared the qualities they would look for in a friend they would feel comfortable taking home. Those qualities include “wanting to be exposed to another culture,” “someone who I thought would fit in [with my family],” and “[someone] able to understand that life in Africa is different.”

### *Diaspora*

The respondents in this study were asked if they have met people from their home country outside of campus life. Four participants said they have not met anyone from a Diaspora population, one student specified it was because he did not leave campus often. The Canadian student who has met others from her home country said that “no lasting relationships” were formed. Another identified Vietnamese American restaurant owners she has met in the major city closest to campus due to her missing food from home. However she pointed out she did not talk with them. Two students had seen other students from their high schools who were also studying in the U.S. A South American student was connected with her parents’ friend and she grew close with that person, maintaining regular contact. The Kenyan student responded that he met the son of his mother’s friend in a major city during a break and helped him find an apartment, their communication was sporadic due to the respondent’s and his friend’s busy schedules. He added that he tries to see him each time he goes to that city. Additionally, this student

also had a childhood friend who lived in Tennessee, with whom he spoke regularly and visited once. Lastly, the Ecuadorian participant said, “Yeah, traveling [and] in airports, but I don't feel like I have anything in common with them.”

Only three participants answered the next question relating to challenges they experienced meeting others from their home country. The Brazilian student said that she did not have a lot of time to search for diaspora populations and that those she happened to meet were tourists, therefore were returning to her home country. An Asian student who had not connected with anyone from a diaspora community, speculated that the only difficulty she might have would be if they held “unexpected or uncharacteristic” opinions of her culture. The example she gave was the popularity of the Iraq war in her home country. The last respondent who answered this question stated that the main challenge was being the only student from his country at this school. His assessment was that he would have made connections if there were other students or a professor on campus from his home country. He added that there was a visiting professor from his home country on campus for a short time who promised to return to talk with him but never followed through.

Participants were asked about similarities and differences between themselves and people from diaspora populations. A South American student said that because her home country is so large and there are regional differences, the others she has met in the U.S. are very different from herself and each other. An Asian student described a similarity that she and the others from her home country shared as, “We want to be home as long and as often as possible” A difference that this student noticed between herself and her friends at other schools is their connection to the “academic scene,” some being

more engaged than she and others less. This student also talked about others being more connected to their Vietnamese identity in that they have joined on-campus groups and clubs for Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American students. This Vietnamese student elaborated that while her campus does not offer such clubs, she was not certain she would join them even if they were offered. Lastly, An African student who knew people from his home country in the major city nearby and in Tennessee shared that differences between himself and them are that one “is adapting to the city at a fast pace. I am not sure if that's a cultural difference or the environment shaping him” and the other was getting married at age 22. This participant felt “to some extent I find that surprising and I feel as though he wouldn't do that if he was back home.” Lastly, a Chinese student saw the difference between himself and others from his country as, “Some of them are more ready to give up their... identity, to become Americanized, or whitewashed. But I am not.”

When asked how salient these differences were in their ability to make connections, two students quickly responded by saying those differences were not salient. The Chinese student above stated that the difference he identified (giving up their identity) is a “major difference.” Another observed that “some underlying prejudices and assumptions get pushed aside because of the fact that we're two people living in a foreign country [and it] is more important at that moment,” indicating that she believed the regional differences are more noticeable when in her country of origin but not when living elsewhere.

### *Additional Questions*

Participants were asked what supports have been most important during their matriculation in the U.S. Respondents named: the International Student office (n=2), the director of the International Student (n=3) office along with his wife, my advisor (n=3), a house fellow, faculty and their families (n=4), my closest friends, a particular friend, my sister (n=2), my closest friends from high school, my friends here, my parents (n=2), my host faculty member (n=2), and the student support center for information.

Next, students were asked if they planned to keep in touch with anyone they met while attending the school. All participants responded in the affirmative that they plan to keep in touch with people. People named were, friends, roommate, administrators, faculty, my best friend and my best friend's parents, and everybody! When asked why they named those people, respondents said the following:

I am just generally interested in what happens to my class and the class above. I've never been as interested in anyone else's life to this extent.

I've never met so many outspoken, intelligent people in one place before who don't ask me what my grade is, who don't care what I'm doing academically, which is a big thing. They are here for themselves. They aren't here to compete with other people.

Some administration members because... I might donate funds to the college.

The professors who I get to know about and students who I really share a passion and an interest with and who I really get to know about

More people than I usually did... people I have worked with and friends who I know will make a difference, who have a strong passion for what they are doing... people to inspire me and to keep challenging me.

In order to obtain a deeper understanding of the impact being an International Student had on the participants, they were asked how attending school in the U.S. has changed their lives. Five students spoke about how the type of education (a liberal arts

education) has raised their awareness and broadened their horizons. Several mentioned that being an International Student taught them how to think more critically and explain how and why their views have evolved. Two spoke about the school affording them a varied cultural experience through the diversity of the student body and cultural immersion trips abroad. Three students spoke about how being outside their home country has impacted their knowledge base and ability to interact with others. The Ghanaian student, looking toward his future said that he learned how to “deal with people of all walks of life in a respectful and thoughtful manner, [which] will be useful to me in the future when I am making decisions that impact people [in my home country].” Another student felt that attending school in the U.S. changed the way he thought about America; he realized that there are social ills and more complexity and diversity than the media portrays. Lastly, the Vietnamese student, in addition to talking about the impact of the high quality of education, said that attending school in the U.S. has enabled her to forge a greater connection with her cultural identity and heritage.

When asked if the participant would recommend the experience of studying abroad in the United States, every student answered in the positive. One student noted how life in the U.S. is different from her home country and the value of a liberal arts education. Another student expressed a feeling of caution about the drawback of the campus being “isolated from the rest of the United States” and that the school does not have a great dating scene, nor would it be a good match for someone who has already chosen their field of study. A different participant said, “I think part of what has been really cool is that we get to see the place and experience it for yourself rather than hearing about it from others.

The final question that participants were asked was, If there was anything the researcher did not ask that the participant felt was important to add about their experiences of making and maintaining meaningful connections. Two students said that the questions covered everything. Others said:

I don't want to say it's a lonely experience, being an international [student] all the time, but it's an independent experience.

When you have your close friends and you talk to them you realize that whether you are American or French you have the same concerns... so I think we are probably all the same.

I wish I could figure out how to strike a balance when I go home with people who I have left and come back to. I wish I could figure out how to... communicate with them and share parts of my experience without alienating or intimidating them.

I don't tend to open up and tell people what I am feeling or what I'm thinking or why I'm having a hard time but once I get to know you, [I] will rely on you and interactions then develop much better. So... maybe the reason why I pick out certain people is my personality in general. I don't know if that can be generalized to every international student or not.

Before I came to the U.S., I considered myself a kind of introvert because I would not take initiative to talk to strangers but after coming here I would say that's not very true because I have seen a lot of people who are more reserved.

The above student goes on to talk about difficulty connecting with others who did not open up to him because of their introverted style of communication. Lastly, one student suggested that one question in the interview should ask how comfortable International Students would be with living in the U.S. for a long time.

### *Summary*

The findings presented about show that the participants in this study shared an array of opinions and experiences. They contributed rich descriptions of their experiences making and maintaining meaningful connections. All the participants in this

study formed some degree of attachment to a variety of people they met since beginning their academic sojourn in the U.S. Some participants relied more on their supports from home, while others made deep and meaningful connections to their new community. Adjustment centered around socialization and academic adjustment, some of which participants attributed to language and analytic discussions, respectively. Participants were hesitant to share experiences of discrimination but quick to identify feelings of loneliness and isolation. The next chapter will discuss the findings in greater depth, including limitations and clinical implications.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirmed and disconfirmed expectations of the researcher. It is important to remind the reader that the primary expectation of the researcher was to gather descriptions of the participants' experiences of making and maintaining meaningful connections during their academic study in the U.S. Under the primary expectation, which was met, were subtle expectations of content that filled the participants' descriptions. The overall consensus that participants who enjoyed their experiences of attending college in the United States was expected, as was the positive changes that occurred in some participants' relationships with family members from home. What was unexpected was the lack of desire to connect with other International Students from their home countries and diaspora communities.

Even though the participants in this study lacked connection with others from their home country, they reported a good social support network, which explains why they seemed to report relatively low acculturative stress. This is consistent with the previous research (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Misra & Castillo, 2004; Nilsson & Anderson, 2004; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Sarason, et al., 1983; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Yeh & Inose, 2002) that identifies the importance of social support and connectedness in buffering difficulties that may arise due to being an International Student, such as adjustment to language and culture and interpersonal challenges.

This chapter will discuss the findings in greater detail with respect to the topics identified in Chapter II: Common Challenges, Connectedness, Importance of Social Networks/Support, and Multicultural Counseling. After that, there will be discussion about Implication for Social Work Practice, Implications for Theory, and Recommendations for Further Research.

### *Common Challenges*

The ability to meet basic needs specific to studying outside one's home country, such as gathering the proper documentation, healthcare needs, and transportation is one area that may pose difficulty for International Students (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). The absence of these issues, save transportation, in the data may be an indicator that these needs were met. For those who mentioned their lack of transportation, there may be a greater issue at hand and that is remaining on campus during breaks, which is also connected to the lack of monetary resources available to International Students. None of the previous researched identified limited financial support as a common challenge for International Students, although the participants in this study certainly included it in their hardships. The cost of calling internationally was also mentioned, leading one to believe that for these International Students, financial resources were a primary concern during their matriculation. Perhaps this is indicative of this specific school's socioeconomic status as a whole and that International Students at other institutions of higher learning may not feel such a discrepancy between their own financial situation and that of their American peers.

Another common challenge, which was identified by Misra and Castillo (2004) and Yeh and Inose (2002), is that of familiarity with American customs and values.

Participants in this study identified a limited number of differences between their own customs and those of the United States. For those who did identify differences, they seemed to adjust and adapt as needed to forge greater connections with their American peers. This was the example given by the Ghanaian student who learned he needed to think about how his words could affect others from different backgrounds before speaking. One exception was the student who talked about her connection with American customs and culture being very strong initially but shifting and allowing her to reconnect with her native Vietnamese culture. It seems that for this participant her familiarity with U.S. customs and culture helped her adjust to her new environment but also led to the blending of her native culture with her new environment. While she said she moved back towards her native culture, she also reported feeling connected on campus and happy with her life at the college leading one to believe she successfully blended the two cultures, creating optimum support (Nilsson & Anderson, 2004).

One student talked about adjusting to classroom norms specifically; however others mentioned their close connections with faculty on campus. While forming connections is an important part of acculturation, what was significant to this part of the discussion was the assistance it may provide International Students in adjusting to classroom norms, leading to less acculturative stress. These connections may also provide additional opportunity to practice the English language in a less demanding setting than the classroom, further reducing anxiety. One last benefit to connecting with faculty and staff, is that it may provide an additional, possibly even an enhanced, resource to assist International Students with cross-cultural adjustment (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Misra et al., 2003). Although, the Kenyan student's experience of the Kenyan

professor not keeping his promise to return did not work out, it may have provided much needed assistance for this student who identified the stress of being the only one from his country on campus, which is a different type of cross-cultural adjustment.

While all participants acknowledged some degree of homesickness or loneliness, none expressed this as an overwhelming challenge. These responses lead one to the conclusion that it was mitigated by social connectedness. For most students, it was social connectedness on campus with their fellow International Students, however, one participant named her main supports as people off campus. Both of these are consistent with the finding of Misra et al. (2003).

Perceived prejudice is another common challenge with which International Students deal (Nilsson & Anderson, 2004). The interesting responses from the participants in this study deal with their experiences of racism. The two African participants, who one may think would experience the most prejudice and racism due to the history of racism in the U.S., were the ones who specifically stated they did not find what they were told would be challenging about studying in the U.S. They had to go out of their way to seek out what racism is and how it had impacted them through course work and campus dialogue. It may be difficult to figure out why this was the case, but it is significant due to both African students mentioning this.

The Brazilian student talked about prejudice surrounding her nationality's stereotype of hyper-sexualized women. While she reported overall good connectedness, she admitted it affected her ability to form relationships with men. This piece of data is significant because it applies to more nationalities than just hers, although she was the only one to mention it. Prejudice or popular opinion about someone's sensuality, dating

style, or sexual practices can contribute to anyone being marginalized but may be a specific struggle that is particular to female international students.

### *Connectedness*

As noted above the degree of connectedness an International Student experiences is mentioned in most of the literature, but specifically by Misra et al. (2003), Sarason et al. (1983), and Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) as a mitigating factor for poor adjustment to being away from one's home country. Connectedness with various communities, such as other International Students or diaspora communities is an important part of adjusting to a new culture, hence its inclusion in this study. The absence of participants' ties to diaspora communities is curious and may be due to the academic rigors of the college or the participants' own connection with their cultural values. Several participants explained how their connectedness to their culture changed throughout their time in the U.S. or how it contributed to their choices in forming deeper relationships with peers, which is in line with the findings of Guan & Dodder (2001) and Sakamoto (2006). Some participants connected with friends from their home country who were also studying in the U.S. and those seemed to be successful connections, while two who were connected with family acquaintances had very different outcomes. The differences in experiences connecting with family acquaintances from home is similar to the difficulty participants had characterizing their fellow International Students. It seemed easier for the participants to characterize their American friends than their International friends. Is this due to some unspoken feeling of camaraderie with fellow International Students due to the shared experiences? While interview questions were intended to elicit this type of response, participants were unable to verbalize many of the similarities they may have

felt about fellow International Students. Their reservation may be in part to the analytical nature of the liberal arts education. As several participants spoke about, the type of critical thinking they were taught broadened their understanding of issues but perhaps, it also kept respondents from disclosing raw, unedited beliefs and assumptions.

#### *Importance of Social Networks/Support*

The effect of having a close and supportive social network is imperative to the success of International Students (Antonucci, et al., 1997; Antonucci & Israel, 1986; Hobfoll et al., 1986). The participants in this study identified many meaningful connections they have made since arriving in the U.S. Although there was a lack of connection with diaspora populations, there was variation of who students made connections with. What is most striking in the findings of this study is the flexibility that most participants reported regarding negotiating cultural differences. Even when participants identified differences in socializing, such as the environment (small parties for International Students versus the bar scene for American Students) or friendliness (American students being outwardly friendly, but more difficult to judge the potential for deeper connection) they still named many supports among American peers as well as American faculty and staff at the school. This suggests that the International Students in this study were more adept at cultural negotiations than the whole population of International Students studying in the U.S., or that the presences of close support among family and friends back in their home countries gave them the security needed to make the cultural negotiations necessary to form cross-cultural bonds.

The findings in this study show that these International Students were well connected with family during their academic sojourn in the U.S. While participants

report changes in friendships, they were able to maintain, and in some cases deepen connection with family members who remained at home. This is significant given the challenges they reported maintaining those connections. One wonders if easing these challenges, such as cost and inability to return to their home country, would result in maintaining even more connections at home, thereby broadening their support networks and enabling International Students to thrive to an even greater extent.

### *Multicultural Counseling*

The participants in this study, save one, did not mention the campus counseling center and the one who did said that he attended once but did not return. While the focus of this study was not specific to asking about International Students' experiences of utilizing the counseling center, the results clearly indicate that this is not a resource that this particular group of students sought out. Yakushko, et al, (2008), Yeh & Inose (2002), and Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006) discussed the importance of counseling services as a way to alleviate some of the anxiety International Students have coming to a new country and culture. The fact that the study participants reported feelings of loneliness and experiences of discrimination and yet did not avail themselves of the counseling services provided shows that perhaps 1) participants were not aware of those services being available for those issues (Zhang & Dixon, 2001); 2) participants turned to other supports such a family and other faculty and staff for assistance with these issues; or 3) participants held cultural beliefs that hindered them from seeking services. These issues will be addressed in the Clinical Implications for Social Work section below.

The findings of this study outline the experience of International Students making and maintaining meaningful connections. Discussion of the findings with respect to the

literature in the areas of common challenges, connectedness, social network/support, and multicultural counseling showed that these students appear to have succeeded in maintaining established connections and forming new connections during their time in the U.S. What can be drawn from that conclusion and how it can enhance college counseling centers will be discussed in the next sections.

### *Implications for Social Work Practice*

While this study is helpful for understanding the experiences of these participants, it can also be helpful for the field of Social Work. As mentioned in the discussion of multicultural counseling above, the potential reasons that study participants did not utilize the counseling center on campus for issues that potentially could have contributed to serious mental health crises are concerning. The three reasons outlined above are important for professionals working with International Students to keep in mind. Social Workers have often been part of the clinical staff at counseling centers providing therapy, running groups, and assisting students with crises. There is also a growing number of Clinical Case Manager positions that have been added to counseling center staff with the purpose of referring and monitoring higher risk students' whose needs extend beyond the ability of the campus counseling center. For anyone working with an International Student it is important to have multicultural knowledge, but it is also important to understand the challenges that International Students face simply because they are International Students.

This study offers a glimpse into those challenges and how they have affected the experiences of these International Students. The snapshot garnered via this study can provide Social Workers and other counseling staff information to 1) examine the

counseling staff's ability to meet International Students' needs, and 2) begin a dialogue with International Students about how to improve programming.

#### *Implications for Theory*

The findings of this study fit with the established literature surrounding relationship theories. Reports of study participants support data that has been collected using International Student populations showing that connections both with the host culture and with close supports help International Students adjust to life in the U.S. The exception to this is the need for connection with one's own culture, as the participants in this study did not seek out diaspora communities to help them adjust to life in the U.S. It is possible, however, that this type of connection was unnecessary due to the small campus environment and plethora of other International Students, who participants were able to form deep connections with. On a larger campus, where many of the studies in the literature took place, there may not be a great a feeling of community among International Students. What this points to is the need to expand the literature and theory surrounding adjustment and connections to include various types of institutions of higher education.

#### *Recommendations for Future Research*

Due to the design of this study as exploratory , there are quiet a few areas of recommendation for further research. One area that is particularly appealing to the investigator is the impact of gender on International Students' experiences of making meaningful connections. As one participant pointed out through her disclosure of difficulties forming relationships with men, prejudice or popular opinion about someone's sensuality, dating style, or sexual practices can contribute to anyone being

marginalized but may be a specific struggle that is particular to female international students.

Another area for additional study would be to probe more deeply into the reasons that these study participants did not utilize the campus counseling center to assist them with the challenges they identified, specifically surrounding loneliness/isolation and discrimination. A study with this focus could also be conducted with other International Students, but first the investigator(s) would need to ask them about any difficulties they experienced while in the U.S.

Lastly, a larger study, perhaps a quantitative or a mixed method study, that includes the majority of International Students on campus could ask about cultural norms and values surrounding help-seeking behavior, specifically through the use of a campus counseling center. As stated above, a study of this nature on a smaller campus may yield different results than those that have taken place on larger campuses. While a study on a smaller campus may not be applicable to all colleges and universities, perhaps a best practice is for each college or university to create their own study to better assess the needs of their own International Students.

### *Conclusion*

This study was intended as an initial exploration of the experiences of International Students at a particular college in the United States regarding their experiences of maintaining and making meaningful connections. The data that was gathered showed that the participants experienced some difficulties, but overall felt they connected with peers they met and maintained, even strengthened in some cases relationships with family members from home. What this study provided was a basis for

future research and information for administrators on this campus and others like it to begin to evaluate their programs' and services' effectiveness for International Students. While much is still unknown, it is the hope of this researcher that all International Students' voices will be heard.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

#### Demographic Questions

What is your age?

Gender?

What year are you (in school)?

What is your nationality?

How do you identify racially/ethnically?

How long have you resided in the United States?

#### Interview Questions

##### Family/Friends

1. How did you learn about X College? How did you decide to come to X College?
  - a) Who was the most excited/supportive of your decision to come to X College?
  - b) Was anyone opposed to the decision to come to X College /school in the U.S.?
2. Describe those closest to you who you left at home to study in the U.S.
3. How often do you return to your home country?
4. How do you communicate with friends and family?
  - a) How often do you talk/email?
  - b) How often do they visit you?
  - c) What are the biggest barriers to communicating with friends and family from home?
5. What changes have you noticed in your relationships with friends? With family members?
6. Which relationships have deepened since coming to the U.S.? Which relationships have deteriorated?
7. If you could have one friend or family member live in the States with you right now, who would it be and why?

##### Other International Students

1. Are there other students from your home country at X College? What has been your experience of getting close with them (has it been difficult or easy)? What has made it difficult or easy to get to know them?
2. What have you learned about communicating with students from other cultures?
3. Have you found similarities between other International Students and yourself that you had not anticipated? How about differences?
4. What type of extracurricular activities are you involved in?
  - a) Sports?

- b) Clubs?
  - c) Activities?
  - d) Where do you hang out most often?
  - e) What do you do for fun?
5. Describe any problems/setbacks you have experienced while in the U.S.?
    - a) Any loneliness/unhappiness?
    - b) Discrimination?
    - c) Who have you turned to?
    - d) What has been helpful in dealing with these issues?
  6. Have you experienced any relationship difficulties during your time in the U.S.? Explain.
    - a) How have you dealt with it?
    - b) What supports have you used?
  7. What is the most challenging aspect of making connections with others in the United States?

#### American Students

1. Do you feel more comfortable making friends with other International Students or American students? Why?
2. What do you like most about your American friends?
3. What is the most difficult aspect of making friends with American students?
4. If you could take a friend you have met in college to your home country, would you? Why or why not? Who would you take and why?

#### Diaspora

1. Have you met anyone from (country of origin) since you started school in the U.S.? If so, how did you meet? How often do you communicate with them? How do you communicate with them?
2. What challenges have you experienced meeting others from your country in the U.S.?
3. a) What similarities and differences are there between your culture and that of others you have met from X country?
  - b) How salient are those differences now that you are not in your home country?

#### Other questions

1. What supports have been most important during your time at X College?
  - a) supports on campus
  - b) supports outside of X College
  - c) Teachers/advisors?
  - d) Who would you go to first (on campus) if you had a problem?
  - e) Do you have a special relationship with any faculty or administrators? Who? Why?
2. What are your plans after finishing at X College?

3. Do you plan to keep in contact with anyone you have met in the U.S.? Who? Why those people?
4. How has going to college in the U.S. changed your life?
5. Would you recommend this experience to others?
6. Is there anything I have not asked about that you think is important for me to know about your connections with others?

## Appendix B

I am a Master's student at Smith College School for Social Work and am conducting a study on the experiences of international students who matriculate at X College. The purpose of this study is to obtain information about your experiences of meaningful connection with others during your time at [at X college]. Your information will be used for my thesis and related presentations and publications. You are also asked to supply your gender, age, class year, nationality and ethnicity during an individual interview with the investigator. The interview should take you between 60 and 90 minutes to complete. All of your responses in the interview will be kept confidential and identifying information will be omitted. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions asked in the interview and you may withdraw your participation at any time. Participation in the study should pose little risk to you. The most that may happen is that you might become a little self-conscious for a while because you have been thinking about yourself. Only those 18 or older may participate in the study. If you are 18 or older and would like to participate in the study, here is a consent form.

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant,

I am a Master's student at Smith College School for Social Work and am conducting a study on the experiences of international students who matriculate at X College. The purpose of this study is to obtain information about your experiences of meaningful connection with others during your time at X College. Your information will be used for my thesis and related presentations and publications.

For this study, I am interviewing full-time undergraduate students at X College who are citizens of a country other than the United States and resided in that country prior to beginning their college career.

Your participation consists of allowing me to interview you. I will collect demographic information about the people I interview, for instance, age, year in school, country of origin, and how long you've resided in the United States. Then I will ask you about your experiences of maintaining meaningful relationships with friends and family at home and making meaningful connections with others while attending X College. Additionally, I would like your perspective on the support you have received at X, from the administration, the students, the local community, and your families. I urge you to use this interview as a way to inform others about your challenges and your triumphs when it comes to making and maintaining meaningful relationships as an International Student.

The interview should last 60-90 minutes. I will audiotape the interview and later transcribe the session.

The primary risk of participation in this study is discomfort you may feel being asked personal questions, or emotional experiences you may have to questions about your experience. You may refuse to answer any questions or ask to discontinue the interview at any point. Contact information for follow-up services is provided on the accompanying page, should you need it.

While I am not able to monetarily compensate you for your participation, you may realize other benefits, such as reflecting on your experience and some of the strengths you have utilized during your time at X. The conclusion of this thesis may also contribute to the school administrators' understanding of international students and give them an opportunity to engage in conversation about how to better meet the needs of international students, especially surrounding programs that could help foster relationships.

To ensure confidentiality, I will transcribe the tapes myself, changing names and other identifying information such as geographical references. My thesis advisor may also need access to the tapes and will be able to look at copies of the transcripts in their altered form. When I write the Findings section of my thesis, I will report collective results and some individual quotations. When using individual quotations, I will carefully disguise identifying information. To further ensure confidentiality, I will keep

all materials in locked storage for three years, after which the materials will be destroyed, as consistent with Federal regulations.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time during or after the study, and you may refuse to answer any of the interview questions. There is no penalty for withdrawal. If you have any questions about this study or your participation in it, please feel free to contact me by email: [ssmith@smith.edu](mailto:ssmith@smith.edu). If you wish to withdraw, please contact me by May 1, 2008 and I will withdraw your responses from the study analysis.

The data and other study materials will be used for my Master's thesis and other professional publications and presentations only. You may also request a summary of the results be sent to you at the completion of this study.

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION, THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS, AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

Please keep this consent form for your records. Thank you for your participation in this study!

---

Participant

Date

---

Sarah C. Smith, Investigator  
[ssmith@smith.edu](mailto:ssmith@smith.edu)

Date

Appendix D  
Debriefing Letter

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your participation in this investigative study of the experiences of meaningful connection among International Students studying in the United States. Your participation has helped me gain a clearer picture of what it is like to study in another country and how it affects relationships. Your participation also helps me fulfill the thesis requirement for my Master's Degree, for which I am eternally grateful.

It is my hope that this experience has been a positive one. If the material covered in this interview has brought up feelings and thoughts that you are not prepared to deal with on your own, please use the referrals provided at the bottom of this letter.

Best Wishes,

Sarah C. Smith

Additional Resources

Office of International Services

International Students Association

Student Cultural Center

Counseling Service

The Women's Center

Campus Life Response Team

Appendix E

Confidentiality Agreement

I, Lavange Berry, have assisted Sarah Smith with the transcription of data for her Master's Thesis. I hereby certify that I am duty bound as a graduate of an accredited school for social work to abide by the ethics set forth by the National Association of Social Workers.

I understand the above agreement and agree to keep the information contained in these interviews confidential.

Lavange Berry  
Printed Name

[Signature] 10-9-08  
Signature Date

APR 18 2008

**DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY**

**April 3, 2008**

**Sarah Smith  
Box 706**

**Dear Sarah,**

**The research proposal entitled "Making and Maintaining Connections as an International Student" which was submitted to the Institutional Review Board on March 31st has been approved.**

**Best of luck with your research.**

**Co-Chair, Institutional  
Review Board**

**DZ/gg**