

International Students: Challenges of Adjustment to University Life in the U.S.

Murat Tas^{1,*}

¹International Programs, University of the Incarnate Word, San Antonio, USA

*Correspondence: Director, International Programs, University of the Incarnate Word, 4301 Broadway CPO 307, San Antonio, TX 78209, USA. Tel: 1-210- 829-2785 E-mail: mtas@uiwtx.edu

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Abstract

Learning a new culture and learning in a new culture which may have different beliefs and values can be difficult. Even though international students are subject to the same stresses of academic and personal life as their U.S. counterparts, these stresses are compounded by being in an unfamiliar culture and surrounded by challenges of communication and language. Language is the most frequently reported barrier to adjusting to U.S. university life, followed by financial difficulties and problems adapting to the culture. In the U.S., the university strategy should include both international and multicultural themes and reflect the great diversity of ethnic, racial, and national groups. Educators must encompass both the U.S. and international students in promoting understanding about diversity--commonalities as well as differences, strengths as well as weaknesses, and values as well as practices. The cultural diversity of the U.S. society can be used to appreciate and understand diversity in the world (Scott, 1994).

Keywords: international students; international higher education; internationalization; U.S. higher education; recruitment

1. Introduction

Learning a new culture and learning in a new culture which may have different beliefs and values can be difficult. Even though international students are subject to the same stresses of academic and personal life as their U.S. counterparts, these stresses are compounded by being in an unfamiliar culture and surrounded by challenges of communication and language. Language is the most frequently reported barrier to adjusting to U.S. university life, followed by financial difficulties and problems adapting to the culture. Female students, older students, students enrolled in scientific and technology courses, and students with limited exposure to foreign cultures are more likely to experience difficulties adjusting to university life in the U.S. (Dee & Henkin, 1999).

As the world is increasingly becoming to a multi-cultural, understanding the differences between cultures is becoming increasingly important. In this growing multi-cultural environment, members of this environment need to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their own culture in order to avoid their own blind spots. The work of Geert Hofstede (1997, 2001) helps us clearly see these differences. Hofstede's work suggested it is necessary to gain insights into other cultures so that organizations can be more effective when interacting with people in other countries. If understood and applied properly, this information should reduce people's level of frustration, anxiety, and concern. It is critical to understand other cultures in order to create a multi-cultural or globalize environment.

Hofstede (1997, 2001) conducted extensive research on cultures and found a total of five categories to be instrumental in defining, understanding, and bridging cultural barriers to achieve organizational success. The first category, Power Distance Index (PDI) focuses on the degree of equality, or inequality, between people in the country's society where a high index indicates that inequalities of power and wealth have developed as opposed to a low index where differences between power and wealth have been de-emphasized. The second, Individualism (IDV), is differentiating between individuality and individual rights versus a more collectivist nature, one where extended families and collectives take responsibility for their group. Masculinity (MAS) is the third category and is the degree of reinforcing a masculine work role, control, and power, high being where males dominate the society and power structure and low where males and females are treated equally.

Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) as the fourth category is a level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity within the society. High avoidance indicates a low tolerance where rules, laws, and other controls are used to reduce the uncertainty. Low avoidance allows a variety of opinions, less rules, more risk taking, and accepting change more readily. The last category, Long-Term Orientation (LTO) is the degree or level that the society focuses on traditional and forward thinking values. A high orientation is a commitment to the long term and tradition. A low orientation is just the opposite; allowing more change or less impediments by long term commitments and tradition to change. This last dimension emerged from a study with Chinese employees and managers. A representative sample from Hofstede's Dimension of Cultural Scales. (2010) follows in Table 1.

Table 1: Sampling of Hofstede's Dimensions

Dimensions	PDI	IDV	UAI	MAS	LTO
Arab Countries	80	38	68	53	
USA	40	91	46	62	29
Germany	35	67	65	66	31
Mexico	81	30	82	69	
Philippines	94	32	44	64	19
Taiwan	58	17	69	45	87
China					118
Turkey	66	37	85	45	
South Korea	60	18	85	39	75
Japan	54	46	92	95	80
Brazil	69	38	76	49	65

As an example, Germany's PDI of 35 is low, indicating that differences between power and wealth have been de-emphasized, as opposed to Arab Countries index of 80, which indicates that inequalities of power and wealth have developed. Likewise, an index of 91 for IDV in the United States differentiates it in reference to individuality and individual rights versus a more collectivist nature, like that in Taiwan with an index of 17. Hofstede's continuing research has been instrumental in understanding how culture is related to developing, learning, and engaging at all levels within organizations. Craven and Kimmel (2002) focused enculturation on multicultural interdisciplinary doctoral studies addressing globalization and new cultures in the learning discussion and observed similar cultural differences as those indicated by Hofstede (1997, 2001). These differences included:

Group learning versus individual learning, uncertainty avoidance (the degree to which cultures tolerate ambiguity), masculinity (the degree to which the dominant cultural values focus on assertiveness, performance, and material success), and time orientation (the degree to which cultures are either long- or short-term oriented). (p.60)

Like the frequent language barrier reported in Dee and Henkin (1999), Craven and Kimmel (2002), experienced this barrier first hand in using a constructivist approach and Feuerstein's (2001) mediated learning experience (MLE), a learning experience "based on the concept of cognitive modifiability" versus Piaget's (1975/1985) concept of cognitive development" (p. 62).

Besides the language barrier, some of the challenges that international students face: sense of loss when they move into a new culture; stress of learning new skills, language, and other cultural impacts; stereotypes about international students' culture; low self-esteem; self-identity problems; gender differences; lack of social support; alienation from domestic students; culture shock; and a new educational system.

Unmet needs are the other challenges in the adjustment process. These needs of the international students are often non-academic in nature and result because their cultural

backgrounds are different from those of the domestic students. Harold J. Adams made two relevant points pertaining to the matters of international students' needs: that unsatisfied needs tend to negatively affect the personality of some students, which results in feelings of inadequacies; and that failure to meet certain biological or psychological needs of some students often leads to reduced academic performance. Basically, not meeting certain needs tends to reduce a student's ability to concentrate on academically related tasks. (Obong, 1997)

Satisfying both academic (educational) and basic non-academic (support services) needs related to educational goals, living conditions, finances, social relations, and acculturation is essential for students enrolled in institutions of higher education. If these needs are neglected or unsatisfied, they may pose serious problems for the students and the institutions in which the students are enrolled.

2. Studies about International Students

International students' problems and concerns have been examined in many studies. In one of these studies, Parr, Bradley, and Bing (1992) studied international students' adjustment patterns. Concerns and feelings of international university students attending a variety of colleges and universities throughout the United States were examined in the study. Findings from 163 international students revealed that they were most concerned about extended family, cultural differences, finances, and school. They found that international students are mostly happy and well adjusted, with more positive than negative feelings. Feelings are higher (more positive) in the first year of study.

Hart (1974) investigated international students' problems in selected public community colleges in Texas focusing on perceptions of international students and international student advisors. Two hundred and twenty international students and 30 international student advisors in 30 community colleges were administered Michigan International Student Perception Inventory. Results indicated that international student advisors and international students perceived the greatest problems in the areas of English language, financial aid, admissions and selection, and academic advising and records. Moreover, female students showed significantly different perceptions in several areas when compared with male students.

Besides problems, needs of international students and their satisfaction were also commonly examined in international students' adaptation process. In one of these studies, Obong (1984) examined the impact of non-academic needs of all college students. He compared 100 domestic and 100 international students. This study of non-academic services administered to international and non-international college and university students had three purposes: exploration of differences that might exist between the non-academic social service needs of international and non-international students; identification of a mean level of non-academic needs; and determination of the correlation between the non-academic needs of students and the student services provided. The study investigated student services, living conditions, student finances, social relations, and acculturation for a sample population of 100

international and 100 domestic students. The American College Testing Student Opinion Survey was used to collect data. Significant differences of opinions were found in the following areas: satisfaction with involvement in campus activities; involvement in religious activities; availability of instructors; opportunities for student employment; accuracy of pre-enrollment information; and flexibility to design a unique course of study. Both groups were satisfied with honors programs and dissatisfied with availability of courses desired.

Selvadurai (1991) examined the international students academic needs and satisfaction with the services provided on campus. One hundred and thirty seven international students were administered a 33-item questionnaire. Responses highlight academic needs for all 15 categories examined and inadequacies in all but 2 of 17 personal services. It was found that students were not satisfied even to minimum levels. Some areas that needed change were: improvements in English, counseling in curriculum programming, academic advising, rapport with faculty, availability of tutoring services, and orientation to the academic setting.

Gomez (1987) reviewed the needs of international students in California's community colleges. Demographic characteristics of international students and their academic, social, and recreational needs were investigated. A questionnaire administered to determine the population of international students in California Community Colleges, the characteristics of these students, the effectiveness with which foreign students were being served; and the extent of social recreational programs available for international students. Major findings of this study showed that there were serious lack of administrative support for providing autonomous departments of international student affairs with only moderate support was given to the provision of appropriate levels of staffing; and less than half of the colleges currently seek or provide community support such as family housing, student clubs, or social functions for international students.

Tabdili (1984) examined the effectiveness of international student office services in meeting needs of international students in colleges and universities. Five hundred and six international students and twenty international student office officials near San Francisco Bay were sampled in the study. The main questions of the research addressed differences between student and advisor perceptions regarding the frequency use, importance, and effectiveness of the services provided by the international student advisors. Results indicated that international students were significantly more negative in most areas and perceived the services as significantly less effective.

As Lee, Abd-Ella, and Burks (1981) pointed out, universities need to examine international students' needs and construct programs accordingly. It is crucial to be aware of effective factors in order to improve international students' success and satisfaction with their academic experiences and for retention purposes.

As a common finding, academically related needs and achievements are very important for international students. Britton, Chamberlain, Davis, Easley, Grunden, and Williams (2003) noted several factors for international students to be more successful in academic settings. These are international student faculty interactions, instructional methods, and the effectiveness of instructional tools. For this study, 19 undergraduate international business

students at a highly competitive and prestigious business school in Midwest were contacted through e-mail and classroom solicitation. The caring or approachable nature of faculty, use or lack of inclusive examples and illustration, preference for visual instructional tools, challenging and valuable group projects, and the students' assertiveness in the classroom were all factors in the results.

Molinar (1996) investigated the factors in student retention at Barry University, a private urban comprehensive university. Data were gathered from 3,000 students entering the university between Fall 1991 and Spring 1995. The students were surveyed on expectations during orientation classes, and again on satisfaction with college experience after six weeks of classes. The research showed that students' academic success was the dominating retention factor. Social and psychological outcomes, measured by satisfaction with social experiences and the on-campus social environment, were next in importance. Findings of this research clearly stated that institutional strategies to improve students' academic performance and speed progress toward a degree may help improve their motivation.

Zhao, Kuh, and Carini (2001) concluded in their research that international students were more engaged in educationally purposeful activities than domestic students. For this study, researchers examined levels of engagement in effective educational practices of 3,000 undergraduate international students and more than 67,000 domestic students at 317 universities. For this research, the College Student report was designed to measure the degree to which students participate in educational practices that prior research shows are linked to valued outcomes of college. This survey consists of 69 items which measured involvement in different types of in-class and out-of-class activities; amount of reading and writing; participation in selected educational programs, such as study abroad, internships and senior capstone courses; perception of the campus environment including the quality of students' relationships with peers, faculty members, and administrators; and student satisfaction with academic advising and their overall collegiate experience. The independent t-tests indicated that international first-year students scored higher than domestic students on level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and technology use. Results showed that first-year international students spent less time relaxing and socializing, and were less satisfied compared with American students. The findings from this study indicate that international students are more engaged in some areas than American students, particularly in the first year of college, and less engaged in others. First-year international students surpassed their American counterparts in level of academic challenge, and student-faculty interaction.

The research done by Liu and Liu (1999) found that characteristics of students and academic variables affect student attrition. This research study was conducted at a medium-size midwestern commuter campus with a sample of 14,476 students. To ensure diversity, the sample included subjects of various levels of scholastic achievement, different ethnicities, religions, both sexes, and transfer students, as well native freshmen. Throughout the study, it became increasingly apparent that student-faculty relationships were often crucial to student retention. Student-faculty relationships consist not just of formal interaction in the classroom, but also informal contact, such as discussions during office hours. Thus, student retention

requires faculty to relate to the student body. Consequently, high student retention requires more racial diversity among the faculty. The same study proved that minority students, native students, and older adults had lower retention rates due to dissatisfaction with the environment they were in.

Providing social support to international students is essential. Results of Klineberg and Hull's (1979) study reported that social contact with those locals was a significant factor in the coping process. Also results of this research showed that feelings of alienation from university life have been significantly more severe for international students than for students from the United States. In this manner, counseling services and their possible effects can be pointed out for smoother adaptations. Gilbert (1989) pointed out that providing special counseling and related services is vital to international student success. Academic progress may be overshadowed by students needing help with living arrangements, medical/health issues, or working with social agencies and immigration offices. Additionally, Gilbert felt that discussing the special needs of the less elite international student is vital.

Although counseling services are very important resources for international students, counseling services are not used frequently. As Boyer and Sedlacek (1988) reported in their study, only 13% of the international students use counseling center services, while 87% never attempted to use this service. Moreover gender difference is also a critical factor. A study done by Manes, Leong and Sedlacek (1984) indicated that females have a greater need to talk to a counselor than did males.

International counseling service was researched by Barrow, Cox, Sepich, and Spivak (1989) to find out how students would use counseling services. This study examined the degree to which surveyed student needs were indicative of counseling groups and workshops that students actually used over four-year period. Needs assessment was only modestly indicative of group and workshop services student used. Results support the contention that multiple sources of information should be used to assess student's needs and that needs should be assessed continually. Students were mostly satisfied but felt more specialized clubs were needed as well as assistance from a stand-alone international education office.

3. Conclusion

In the U.S., the university strategy should include both international and multicultural themes and reflect the great diversity of ethnic, racial, and national groups. Educators must encompass both the U.S. and international students in promoting understanding about diversity--commonalities as well as differences, strengths as well as weaknesses, and values as well as practices. The cultural diversity of the U.S. society can be used to appreciate and understand diversity in the world (Scott, 1994).

Diversity, like change, continues to occur, but like change it can be planned to capitalize on its benefits, not liabilities. As the world becomes more internationalized, previous boundaries disappear, become more transparent, overlap, or change. Diversity not only affects people but organizations as well—families, groups, communities, businesses, education, and

governments. Understanding the issues of culture, learning, and education, and how they are inter-related is increasingly important in promoting diversity, retaining international and domestic students, planning interventions, and implementing changes. Along with developing change adaptability in organizations, culture itself can be used to facilitate change (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Senge, 2000; Senge, 1999).

International student issues have been researched for quite a number of years as indicated by the studies conducted as early as 1974. Some of these issues are as relevant today as they were then. The survey / interview approach in the following chapter will be used to analyze and define the needs, both academic and non-academic, of international and domestic students today.

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