Barriers to Adjustment: Needs of International Students within a Semi-Urban Campus Community

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Following an ecological framework, the primary purpose of this study was to examine the adjustment needs of international students within their academic and social communities. Focus group interviews revealed that students are more in need during their initial transition after arrival to the U.S. and that they experience a number of barriers in their attempts to adjust. Some of these barriers were related to academic life, health insurance, living on or off campus, social interactions, transportation, and discrimination. The implications of these findings are discussed. Recommendations are made for how higher education institutions can help facilitate these students' integration into their communities.

International students have become the focus of media and a research interest for many social scientists following the changes in American society after the September 11 attacks. Shortly after the attacks, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) became part of the Department of Homeland Security and changed the regulations for international students. Some of these regulations include tougher visa rules to get into the country and a close follow-up of the student through a computerized system (Chapman, 2003). Higher education institutions feared that they would financially suffer from these new regulations and that students would choose to study in other English speaking countries such as Canada, England, and Australia. Despite these concerns, the U.S. continues to host the highest number of international students in the world. A total of 586,323 international students were enrolled in different U.S. colleges during the 2002-2003 academic year, an increase from the academic years since before September 11, 2001. International student enrollment continues to increase at a steady pace and currently 4.6% of all college students in the U.S. are international students (Institute of International Education, 2004).

Prior research has demonstrated that these students face many challenges in adjusting to their new environment and that this may have an impact on students' academic success and psychological well-being, and educational institutions' effectiveness in retaining these students (Barratt & Huba, 1994; Charles & Stewart, 1991; Pedersen, 1991). In the wake of 9/11, it may well be that the challenges these students confront have intensified because of the increased scrutiny to which they are subjected by the state and because of the suspicion with which foreigners are perceived in the broader community. Since societies and communities are dynamic, it continues to be important to examine the adjustment issues that international students encounter in different social and institutional contexts. This study examines the needs of international students in a semi-urban university situated in a relatively racially and culturally homogeneous community. It looks at how the students interact with and participate in their academic and social communities and how well these communities provide the necessary support to promote a healthy adjustment for these students. It also suggests ways for higher education institutions to better serve international students in their efforts to integrate into their new community.

The study utilizes an ecological frame-

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work (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1995; Kelly, 1990; Kelly et al., 2000) in interpreting and analyzing the data. It argues that institutions of higher education need to constantly evaluate the entire context into which they recruit and educate international students. It is insufficient to focus on the concerns they have as merely an expression of individual problems. Rather, attention must be given to the different parts of the social system that foster or inhibit these students' adjustment.

In the sections that follow, we review the research literature on the adjustment experiences of international students. We then discuss the framework for analysis and the parameters of the present study. This is followed by a discussion of method, results, and the implications of the findings for possible changes in the ecological context which might aid students' adjustment.

Literature Review

Upon arrival to a new country, international students face different challenges in adjusting to living and learning in their new environment. Further, their adjustment problems vary by country of origin, race and ethnicity, English language proficiency, and whether or not they come from collectivist or individualist cultures (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell & Utsey, 2005; Surdam & Collins, 1984; Tafarodi & Smith, 2001; Wilton & Constantine 2003). Among the adjustment challenges they face are: 1) finding living accommodations, the means of obtaining food and other essential items for daily life, and getting appropriate documentation for their stay; 2) learning the academic culture including how to interact with faculty and other students, and different styles of teaching; and 3) making new friends and developing a new social support system. While the first set of these challenges occur during their initial transition, the others may last longer. Moreover, given the heterogeneity of the group, English language proficiency and experiences with discrimination may be

additional hurdles to overcome for some students. These experiences of adjustment may have an impact on students' psychological well-being. Below, we review the research literature on these students' experiences in four general areas: 1) initial transition, 2) academic life, 3) social life, and 4) psychological experiences.

Initial Transition

When they arrive, international students' tasks include finding a place to live, getting a social security number and a driver's license, registering for classes, and learning to use a transportation system. Compared to their domestic counterparts, international students tend to experience greater adjustment difficulties and more distress during their initial transition into the university and report greater academic and career needs (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002; Leong & Sedlacek, 1989; Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002). During this transition, language barriers in particular can negatively impact students' well-being and their ability to adjust (Barratt & Huba, 1994; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Stoynoff, 1997; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Their English level competency or discomfort about speaking English may impede their interaction with the new community to fulfill their initial needs. On the other hand, students with higher levels of self-confidence and self-efficacy will likely experience reduced levels of stress and increased levels of adjustment (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002). Married students may face another set of stressors if they come with their families. For example, they may need to find a school for their children or help their spouse find an English as a second language course. To deal with the initial life stress that might lead to academic stress, it has been suggested that orientation programs include attention to a variety of stressors students could face within their environment and ways of coping with these stressors (Misra, Crist, & Burant, 2003). In

addition, it has been suggested that contact with co-nationals be promoted as this contact may be soothing and encouraging when the students initially arrive (Prieto, 1995).

Academic Life

Within academic life, international students face challenges such as English language barriers, developing relationships with advisors and professors, and in most cases getting used to teaching and curriculum differences such as the expectation for class discussion or questioning the teacher. English language proficiency is an important factor in predicting students' academic achievement. For example, language proficiency is positively correlated with freshmen academic performance (Stoynoff, 1997). Curriculum and teaching procedures are another adjustment concern for international students (Day & Hajj, 1986). These concerns encompass study techniques, test taking, classroom instruction, and oral communication such as class discussion (White, Brown, & Suddick, 1983). Research suggests that implementing programs and strategies for dealing with these concerns during the first semester of coursework will enable students to adjust to their new academic life.

Further, research shows that interaction with faculty members (i.e., visiting informally or talking with faculty) facilitates greater academic achievement among minority and international students (Anaya & Cole, 2001). In addition, when students initially encounter academic challenges such as those noted above, the advisors hold the key for students' success. Thus, assigning one particular faculty member in the department as an advisor to the international students helps to accommodate their educational needs (Rai, 2002). Moreover, advisors' sensitivity to cultural issues and willingness to learn about the culture of their advisee can have a profound impact on students. They can encourage students to take additional English as a Second Language (ESL) classes if needed, help them create an initial manageable course load that does not require too much reading or note taking, and help them learn about and deal with the competitive environment of many American colleges (Charles & Stewart, 1991). Institutional practices which attempt to increase the faculty's knowledge of different cultures and encourage consideration of students' culture in lectures aid the students' adjustment to academic life (Rai, 2002). There is also evidence that receiving other forms of support such as scholarships from the academic program lowers stress for many international students (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992).

Researchers have also studied the variables determining the likelihood that international students would persist in their studies in order to achieve their academic goals. It has been found that understanding racism and community service are predictors of persistence (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1988). Understanding racism refers to the ability to recognize various manifestations of racism, such as the low expectations that faculty may have of minority students, while community service refers to students being involved in their communities in some capacity (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976). As a result, mentoring and counseling relationships as well as programs to help students understand racism can be established in order to foster the retention of students and promote their academic success.

Social Life

International students face the challenge of making new friends, coping with loss of social support, and developing a new social support system. Loss and lack of social support in particular have been found to lead to lower academic achievement and negative psychological experiences such as tension, confusion, and depression (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1988; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Hovey, 2000; Pedersen, 1991). Upon arrival to the new country, individual reactions to the host country and culture may vary. While some

become very much involved in the host country's culture, others may feel negative and become distant. A student's home culture, perceived discrimination, being extroverted, communication skills in English, and positive approach to forming relationships with Americans are noted as variables relating to this attitude (Ying, 2002). While students from a more individualistic culture may identify with the U.S. mainstream culture, the ones from a more collectivist culture may feel distant (Swagler & Ellis, 2003; Triandis, 1991). In addition, perceived prejudice increases the likelihood of their identification with other international students rather than the host community (Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003). For students from third world societies, experiences with discrimination may heighten cultural segregation (Surdam & Collins, 1984). Once students start building relationships with people from the host culture, however, their experiences are more likely to be positive. Relationships with other students from the host culture and faculty members tend to lower stress (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Further, engagement in extracurricular activities enhances international students' adjustment and results in a lower level of acculturative stress (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002; Yeh & Isone, 2003). Therefore, international students are more likely to have positive experiences and achieve their educational goals, if they have a satisfying contact with the host culture and live in a pleasant social atmosphere (Prieto, 1995).

Psychological Experiences

Psychological experiences include phenomena such as homesickness, disorientation, depressive reactions, and feelings of isolation, alienation, and powerlessness (Day & Hajj, 1986). International students, like their domestic counterparts, experience academic stress. However, international students usually do not have similar resources to combat this stress (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998). These stresses combined with a lack of resources could lead to stress-related illnesses such as depression or anxiety (Ebbin & Blankenship, 1988; Hovey, 2000).

There is some evidence that students' country of origin determines the amount and type of psychological reactions they show. European students, for example, report experiencing less acculturative stress than the ones from Asia, Central/South America, and Africa (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Non-European international students may experience discrimination which may lead to lower self-esteem, depression and other mental health problems (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2003). It may also encourage them to form relationships with other international groups rather than the groups from the host culture (Schmitt, Speaks, & Branscombe, 2003)

The literature recommends several strategies to help international students cope with the challenges summarized above in order to enable their adjustment. These include accommodations related to various student services, especially those provided by the international student office and counseling center. Other suggestions concerned ways to reduce stigma attached to counseling and alternative types of counseling such as going to the student or including a faculty member in the sessions (Ebbin & Blankenship, 1988; Komiya & Eells, 2001; Siegel, 1991). Social support groups and activities on campus to promote relationships with people from the host culture were also suggested to help the students deal with cultural stress (Olaniran, 1993; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Ecological Framework and Current Study

Even though there is a relatively large literature examining international students' experiences, most of this research used quantitative approaches and studied individual variables related to students' psychosocial and academic adjustment. However, human behavior varies by environmental context

and it is important that a person is studied within this context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1995; Kelly et al., 2000). As a result, the current study was conducted with an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1995; Kelly et al., 2000). This framework states that an individual develops interactively with their immediate and wider environment and that there is a continuous interchange between the individual and his/her environment. Individual behavior and psycho-social health are influenced by their social and physical contexts. Thus an ecological perspective requires that in order to understand the needs of an individual or a group, attention must be directed to the characteristics of a specific setting and the interaction of individuals with that setting. Research that uses an ecological perspective can help psychologists in designing preventive interventions and in assessing the effects of culture and support system on the psychology of individuals (Kelly, 1990). This study was intended to determine the extent to which international students felt their needs were being met in their university. The researchers were interested in finding out whether the university community provided adequate resources to meet those needs. Further, this study used a qualitative method since it can provide a more in-depth understanding of the specific challenges these students confront in the particular environment. Such understanding and the thick descriptions that the method generates can make a valuable contribution to the research literature (Wilton & Moreau, 2003).

From an ecological perspective, a researcher's involvement with the community can be advantageous. This provides the researcher access to community members who can be significant sources of information for the research (Goodkind & Foster-Fishman, 2002; Stewart, 2000). Experiences of members, including the authors, within this academic community (i.e., faculty, staff, or students) was the impetus for the study, and they provided useful information based on their experiences and knowledge to help understand the scope of the needs of international students. The emphasis was on international students, their setting (on or off campus), and the interactions between them. The first author was interested in international students for two reasons: she went through an adjustment process as an international student in the U.S., and, as a counseling psychologist, she provided counseling to international students to aid their adjustment to their new environment. As a result, she wanted to further reach and help international students by studying them and disseminating her research findings. The second author was an immigrant student at a Canadian university and thus experienced adjustment concerns similar to the ones experienced by international students (e.g., differences in teaching styles, making friends with host country students).

Method

Setting

The institution where this study was conducted enrolls about 3400 students and offers several baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral degrees. The campus is considered to be unique in that it enrolls only junior, senior, and graduate students. There is very little residence life and the majority of the students tend to be commuter students. These commuter students tend to spend little time on campus, which then leads to international students having fewer opportunities to interact with other students. The campus is located about nine miles from a small city, but there is very limited public transportation to this city. The town where the campus is located has no public transportation.

Participants

A total of 15 students (3 female, 12 male) were interviewed in focus groups. Two of the groups consisted of undergraduate students, while the other two included graduate students. The students represented a number of

different nationalities: German, Korean, Indian, Chinese, Turkish, and Mexican. Students reported studying in the following majors: information systems, business administration, accounting, computer science, health education, and public administration. The time students spent living in the U.S. ranged from 3 months to 5 years. The majority of the students lived off campus. Although the number of students in this study is small, it is consistent with other research using qualitative methods (Constantine et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Rousseau et al., 2001; Schlosser et al., 2003).

Procedures

The international student office of this semi-urban college campus was asked to send an e-mail to all international students (about 80) and ask them to participate in a focus group interview about their experiences. The focus groups were set up by the international student office and included students who responded to this e-mail and agreed to participate in the study. A total of four groups, each containing an average of 4 students, were formed. The interviews were semi-structured and covered topics in the areas of initial transition, academic and social life, and psychological experiences. The interviews were audio taped and then transcribed.

Data Analysis

The tapes of the interviews were studied by the second researcher in order to gauge the intensity and the consistency with which certain categories of information (for example, housing, classroom interaction, transportation) came up. The tapes were transcribed and the transcriptions were examined for the categories as well. The first researcher then reviewed these to determine whether she concurred with the categories. Both researchers also looked for inconsistencies in the information and used the process to determine whether there were common themes across

the groups. Then, categories were examined again to assemble the themes (e.g., whether there was difficulty with transportation or not, problems with social interaction or not) that emerged in the group discussions (see Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996).

Results

The focus group data provided a detailed picture of students' adjustment experiences and needs between their arrival into the country to their graduation. Although they reported many positive experiences, students also raised several concerns about the adjustment process that needed to be addressed.

When they arrived in their new country students had the immediate task of satisfying basic needs such as accommodations, food and health care. In order to secure these needs they had to have access to transportation, understand the organization of the American health care system, and obtain the necessary documents to legitimize their presence, be able to work in the U.S, and find jobs. They had to learn to navigate the institution and the broader society. As their stay progressed, issues with social interaction, both within and outside the university, arose. Further, their academic experiences inside and outside the classroom with professors and advisors also came to play a significant role in their adjustment process.

Getting oriented. Some students reported having a tour of campus, others said they did not. They stated they needed to know basic things like how to get a parking permit, how to use the library, computer facilities, and the cafeteria's diner club program. "It took me time to get used to all the things, computer labs and then the library and everything . . . So it might have been real help if someone had made a tour of the college." (Grp 1) They also needed help in getting their Social Security cards and better help with their immigration papers.

"We had . . . so much trouble with the car because we needed a Social Security

for the insurance. . . We couldn't buy a car because we needed our insurance or something, for the insurance we needed a Social Security number, for the Social Security number we needed a letter from [director of international students office] . . . (Grp 2)

Transportation and communication problems impeded the process of obtaining appropriate documents.

"They could ease up the process of getting a Social Security card, because it took me really a while to go to [city] and apply. I don't have a car, so I had to wait for a friend to go and get there . . . (Grp 1)

Communication. Students raised several concerns about communication. For example, some said they needed better information about the university □ especially its semi-urban setting □ before they arrive. They suggested that communication with other international students, preferably from their own country, about the campus would be helpful:

"There should be . . . formal allocation of students to those students who are coming. For example, say, Raj has already been here for one year, and I'm going to come from the same country. . . Then they might just allocate Raj to me . . . Basically, if I'm coming from say India, then I would be more informal with the person from India rather than from any other country because he might. . . understand my situation, my culture properly . . ." (Grp 3)

Others indicated that meeting announcements were not timely. They also wanted better quality information and help regarding their immigration papers.

Transportation. Many students did not realize that there was little or no access to public transportation due to what they per-

ceived as poor quality information prior to arrival. This presented a problem for getting settled and for daily living. Most of these students found that the combined cost of cars, insurance, and tuition prohibited car ownership.

"There are lots of things they [the university] can do like providing transport . . .for commuting purposes from college to their locality . . . They are paying expensive tuition here. . . they might not be able to afford a car . . . So international student office should give us more services we can use." (Grp 3)

Access to transportation on arrival was vital for getting the supplies they needed for establishing a home and for applying for their Social Security cards. After getting settled, they required transportation for purchasing groceries, clothing, and other supplies.

Accommodations. Those who had lived in campus residence expressed satisfaction with its proximity to campus. However, the cost of on-campus housing exceeded the cost of off-campus quarters.

"The old dorms . . . rooms are very dirty and they're very expensive for what they offer. . . Well, the new ones are even more expensive, but to live off campus is much cheaper." (Grp 2)

Further, because the campus residence was closed for the summer, they reported problems in finding housing just for the summer. Students with families found it was unfair that campus housing was closed to families.

"[It] looks like no plan for family housing on this campus. . . So I have lots of kind of things to talk about this housing problem. Is big deal. . .I think it's big deal, and I'm not kind of not good about talking this issue. I'm very angry. I was very upset and the place is good, but looks like the management and housing policy is very bad, it's bad . . . It's terrible." (Grp 3)

For these students, setting up house in the U.S. is a major task because of the supplies needed--everything from bed linens to furniture.

"When you're coming from your country, of course, you are not going to bring blankets and you're not going to bring pillow, and you're not going to bring dishes, or nothing. When I came to go to [the dorms] well, it has furniture, but it hasn't any blankets, any nothing, and . . . I swear, when I came, when I went to my bedroom, it looks like a jail because it was empty, it was nothing there." (Grp3)

They found such supplies costly and had no knowledge of how to get them cheaply. They were also surprised and upset that on arrival they were left to fend for themselves with no place to go. They found hotels too expensive and desired a better option for temporary housing.

Social interaction. Some students seemed to fare better than others in their social interactions. Several expressed some dissatisfaction about their lack of connection to both international and American students. The problem for some (e.g. Asians and Hispanics) in not being able to interact with American students was particularly acute.

"The [international student] office has to make it possible interaction with international students, but also with the other students, with the students from here, from [the city] from [the university], from United States. We have a couple of activities and I think we should have more activities and get more. You know, all of us, we are really basically with our studies but we want people know. I think that's one of the purpose of the office is to let people know that there are other students from other countries, and I think that . . . it is not covering that point, and a lot of things. It's nice to know other internationals, but also I think the other

students, they need to know and that there's a way to understand us is getting involved with us." (Grp 3)

For others, especially the German students, interaction with American students was not a problem. Although they had been in the U.S. for about nine months, they and one Indian student with an American boyfriend were the only students to report having many American friends. Visible minority (Ng, 1988) students who said they had American friends stated that those friends were of the same ethnic group (e.g., American- born Indians, American-born Chinese, Latin American) or other naturalized American citizens. This was the case regardless of length of time in the U.S. A few indicated that accents might influence social interaction. The German students stated that their accents were complimented, whereas some of the Asian students said their accents were treated as a problem. In addition, some students attributed the disconnectedness they experienced to the commuter character of the campus. Most students come to class and then leave.

"I agree with Cem who says . . . that there are people who just come for 6:00 to 8:30 slot. I mean, they just come for that time and they don't come afterwards, so it's, it's just impossible to I mean develop that relationship or just talk to them apart from the class time. It, it's just not possible. Just like, I mean, we are open to the friendship, but since they are busy or they are not able to communicate or something there is a communication break or something." (Grp 3)

However, students liked an international lunch program as an avenue for promoting social interaction and wanted them to happen more frequently (perhaps twice a month) than they did.

Students also expressed a desire to interact with the broader community. Some stu-

dents proposed that the University might serve as a bridge for students wanting to connect with similar ethnic community groups.

> "If there is some kind of relationship between this university or this community and some ethnic groups, Mexican community or some Indian community in this area, maybe the university can kind of bridge the student from in that area ethnic group to the regional community." (Grp 3)

They also felt that the university could alert them to relevant cultural events in the community. In addition, students who had outings to various places through student activities were pleased with such programs.

Academic Life. In general, most students stated they liked aspects of the American system and had little difficulty understanding professors. However, a few reported difficulties with some professors. For example, they felt that some professors needed to support ESL students who could not take notes as quickly in English. Other students said that professors will slow down if they knew that students needed them to do so.

In a couple of cases students reported they experienced different (negative) treatment compared to other students. They felt that it might have been related to their ethnicity, but were not sure. However, as the semester progressed, the problem seemed to have sorted itself out. Students found that professors were friendly overall, but there were some scattered complaints about some classes (e.g., group work which they thought indicated a professor's lack of motivation; content which was dated - especially the computer classes; professors who lectured from notes).

> "They have like a cool way to teach. They explain it very well. . .they are always nice." (Grp 1)
> "In some classes, where you have group stuff going on . . .I think the teacher isn't motivated, so we work in groups all the time." (Grp 1)

> "This is the second time I am taking a class with professor. . .All he does is like he brings a big folder and he takes a page out and starts writing on the board.. . . What's the point of coming to class?" (Grp 2)

Their varied comments suggest that these students (like others) have different preferences in terms of teaching style. While they appreciated small classes, they found class participation requirements difficult since they were not used to this format. Moreover, they hesitated to participate because they feared their accents would not be understood.

Many students said that they could not understand American students in the classroom because of their use of slang and the fast speed at which they speak. Several expressed disgust at the way American students showed disrespect to teachers in the classroom.

> "Actually the way they talk to their teacher, I don't like it."
> "They don't sit like firmly, they sit - they are not sitting, they are laying on the floor like . . ."
> "Yeah, they, they have chewing gum in their mouth and like when the professor turns to the board, they do like crazy things up to him, behind of him."
> "It's disgusting, I think, disgusting."
> "They don't behave to their teachers very well." (Grp 4)

Although they had not experienced much discrimination on campus from students, they found that American students were quick to offer opinions on subjects about which they have little knowledge. This was particularly so in relation to discussion about the Middle East but also about China. For example, a Chinese student said she was upset to hear people make comments about her country without knowing about it. Other students said "Americans, they don't know much about the world, but they are free to talk about it. . . They have opinions and usually I don't try to

interact when they are talking because they are talking really stupid things." (Grp 4)

Despite this perceived shortcoming or perhaps because of it, some students expressed a desire for more events and discussion on current issues on campus in order to create a more intellectual environment. Finally, some graduate students had difficulty adjusting to night time classes and wanted more daytime classes.

Advisors. There were mixed reports about advising. Some students were pleased with their advisor's help, some felt they did not need it, and still others had not met with advisors. In a related matter, one student had difficulty signing up for classes because he had to have approval from his home institution, but the American university's schedule was not posted early enough.

Learning center. Generally students were positive about the Learning Center. They found it helpful but thought it could be improved by having people in broad disciplinary areas. Those who know about such services at other colleges felt the university fell short.

Financial. The difficulty managing the cost of tuition and living expenses was raised by many students. This was intensified by the lack of access to loans or scholarships in the U.S. Given this situation and the restrictions on foreign students working off campus, they would like to be given preference in on-campus jobs.

Health Care. This was a two-fold problem for international students. First, they did not understand the system; they found that they might not be covered, covered inadequately, and had no dental coverage. Second, they found care to be costly. They also felt they should not have to pay extra for summer coverage when they were not going to be in the U.S. for the summer. As a result of inadequate coverage, they were confronted with bills that they had to pay on their own. A few students indicated that they tried to self-medicate because of the fear that

if they went to see a doctor, they might be stuck with a bill. An extended discussion of health care took place in Group 4 with each student sharing a story of the problem with health care insurance.

> "I have a big problem with my insurance. You know . . .the first day I come here, they ask me to take a check-up.. . ..The Medical Center charge me 188 bucks for the x-ray check.. . . And right now, there is nobody help me with my insurance. . . I mean, insurance company said, oh, that 188, is too high, too high for us. We have our policy. We only accept ours, they call it [unclear] and customary . . . This is a big differences between they really charge and their customary."

Counseling. Many students said they had not heard of counseling services. Those who knew about the service indicated that they heard it at the orientation, but they felt they did not need to utilize the services because they were not mentally ill.

Discrimination. Overt discrimination seemed to be more of a problem outside of campus. Students of color had difficulty with such incidents. Subtle incidents included experiences with sales clerks who assumed the student could not understand the clerk and provided rude customer service. Overt acts, such as being called names in the aftermath of 9/11 and treating those who looked Middle Eastern as potential terrorists were reported by some students.

> "I remember this once off campus after September 11th attacks. I guess it was a couple of days after that and, uh, I parked my car and this guy on a motorbike comes up, he breaks. . . the car hubcap, he says, "Damn terrorists, go back to your country" and he just goes back off." (Grp 2)

> "I have a lot of international friends here, and like one, _____, he always wears . . . a turban and though he never were able to go, come _____ like

a cop over there, they didn't let him in if he wears it, and he was stopped by the police like I would guess five to ten times. . . And one of my best friends, and, they together, every time the police drives by, they will get stopped, checked, and ID, and everything, so maybe it was because of the September 11th, etc., but . . ."

In one particularly frightening incident a group of students was stopped by police after they had left a local movie theater. In a complicated series of events, one young man jokingly pretended that a van parked outside the theater was his vehicle and that he was going to use it to transport them to meet some other friends at a bar. The owner of the vehicle apparently confronted them about it; they explained the situation, and she let them go. However, when the students left in their car her husband followed them. They stopped their car and also explained to him. He let them go but then they were stopped by the police and questioned for two hours about the vehicle. The students thought the incident occurred because of their dark complexion. (Grp 4)

In three of the focus groups, students spoke of subtle discrimination on-campus. One reported that some of his project team members were either unkind or not responsive to his ideas. Two other students reported that they found it difficult to "support [a] Palestinian voice" in or outside class because of the very negative responses from some students.

In sum, the stresses that students experience are related to the overwhelming number of bureaucratic requirements, the lack of infrastructure that makes it difficult to settle in and focus on their studies, and the isolation that they experience because of that lack of infrastructure. The infrastructure (transportation, housing, and so on) was particularly critical because of the university's semi-urban location and because it is a commuter institution. Neither of these facilitated opportunities

for interaction with the American public. Compounding these problems was the question of language proficiency or comfort in speaking the language. The results suggest that the nationality and perhaps race/ethnicity of the students also influence interaction and adjustment (Constantine et al., 2005; Tafarodi & Smith, 2001). It is noteworthy that the White German students had less difficulty than the Asian or Hispanic students, a finding that is consistent with other research (Surdam & Collins, 1984; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). On the other hand, the interviews support the literature that higher levels of English proficiency might lead to better adjustment.

Discussion and Recommendations

The study revealed that international students experienced multiple barriers to their participation in their academic and social communities. In their initial transition to school major concerns related to housing, transportation, and getting the required documents for their stay. When they began classes and their studies, their needs centered on understanding American students and professors and participating in classes. As time passed and they attempted to get used to life in the U.S., they encountered difficulties with the health care system. Students of color (i.e. Asian, Hispanic and Middle-Eastern) also experienced different forms of discrimination primarily outside of campus. Some of the problems that students encountered both on and off campus were related to the treatment of some groups of foreigners after 9/11. Communication issues were identified as a concern even before they left their countries to the time they left the programs. English language competency appeared to be an ongoing concern. Finally, they felt that social interaction, especially with American students, was lacking.

The results of this study reinforce the value of taking an ecological perspective in understanding the well-being of individuals in

their community. The findings show that the ability of the student to adjust depends not just on the individual but also on many aspects of their physical and social context. For example, while in an urban area transportation may not be an issue for the students, it is for those in a more suburban or rural settings. As a result, the international student offices must consider the physical setting and community context in meeting students' needs.

Kelly and colleagues (2000) identified interdependence, cycling of resources, adaptation, and succession as key, inter-related elements of ecological systems. The well-being of international students at this campus is influenced by its physical location in conjunction with the lack of an important resource (transportation) that might help ameliorate the effects of the campus's relative isolation. This isolation contributes to the difficulty international students have in establishing social support systems both within the campus community and even with co-ethnics in the broader community. The fact that students are able to identify the sources of some of their problems and propose solutions is indicative of their skills in trying to cope with their situation. While they recognize they have some responsibility for adapting, they also recognize that the institution has responsibilities for facilitating their adjustment through providing the appropriate resources and support for their academic, social and psychological well-being.

The study also revealed macro level forces which have an impact on the students' adjustment and may even endanger their health. Understanding the U.S. health care system is a formidable undertaking for even the most skilled among us; it is much more so for newcomers who are neither well-versed in English nor U.S. culture. Further, great differences in the levels of income for students from less developed countries and the U.S. pose a challenge for the students' financial well-being in the U.S. In an effort to control costs, they self-medicate or forego treat-

ment which can be life-threatening. Finally, the events of 9/11 have intensified the discrimination that students of color, especially those perceived to be Arab or Muslim, such as South Asian and Middle Eastern students experience. They encounter suspicion in the broader community and feel silenced on the campus community (for example in feeling that they cannot present the Palestinian point of view).

A key goal of assessing the needs of individuals or a group is to be able to propose interventions that facilitate meeting those needs in the specific context. Consistent with an ecological framework, the recommendations made for aiding international students' adjustment take into account the resources that might be needed to do so. Recognizing that many institutions are financially strapped, in many cases the authors suggest alternatives that are either free or cost little. These recommendations are intended to reduce the barriers to participation and to encourage international students to be more actively involved in their academic and social communities. The recommendations are outlined based on the areas of student concern, rather than the offices of specific student services. However, from an institutional perspective, the recommendations below will likely help increase the enrollment and retention rate of full-time international students. In addition, although the findings are unique to one campus, the problems and recommendations are worth considering across many different campuses. While some problems □such as transportation□may be unique to semi-urban campuses, other concerns such as unwillingness to seek out counseling services due to inaccurate perceptions about their functions can be common to all international students regardless of where they attend school.

Communication

In many respects, the issue of communication traverses many of the adjustment problems that students experienced. From

even before they arrive to their progress through the university, students need to be provided better quality information about the university. This includes information about the campus location, transportation, and housing; the health care system and the services the university offers; cultural differences in teaching and learning; the community beyond the university; and events within the university. Thus, the university should update its web pages and the brochures it sends students to make the information clearer. As the students suggested, the university could pair incoming international students with others from their home country who are already at the university so that they can mentor the new students through the adjustment process. This would not only serve as a more personal mechanism for providing information about campus and community life to students, it would initiate a social support network for students before they arrive.

Initial Transition

The concerns about housing and transportation that students expressed about their initial transition into the university are among the costliest for an institution to address. However, there are potential solutions that are cost-free or cost little. In the long-term interest of the university's goal to attract and retain international students, the authors suggest that the university consider integrating changes in its long-term planning that would take into account the housing problem that students may experience.

Transportation

Pick-up services from the airport. This service could be provided either as free through volunteers recruited from the campus community or charged to the students.

Shuttle service. Initially, students need transportation from the campus to fulfill several needs: applying for their Social Security card, getting a driver's license, and buying a car and household furnishings and food. A shuttle service could be provided to different locations at scheduled times during the week in order to control costs. Since there is always a need to purchase food, dorm residents could be provided a regular shuttle service (e.g. three times a week) from the dorms to the supermarket in town. Non-international students could also benefit from this service.

Housing Services

Temporary housing services. Students encounter problems finding a place to stay upon their arrival and consider hotels to be very expensive. On-campus housing services could provide temporary housing for students until they find a place to live. Another solution is for the international students office to develop a Host Family Program composed of families in the community or the staff/faculty. Families could be asked to host one international student for a few days during the year.

Graduate housing. Several graduate students indicated that the dorms on campus are not designed to house married students with families. They feel forced to live off campus which might negatively affect their academic performance because of their greater time constraints. In the long-term, the institution could reinstitute on-campus graduate family housing to help ease these concerns and help improve students' academic performance. In the short-term, the university could inform students about housing that is within walking distance of campus.

Cost of on-campus housing. Single students also indicated that they feel forced to live off campus due to the high cost of housing on campus. This cost should be modified to be competitive with off-campus housing costs to enable lower-income students to stay on campus.

Household merchandise donation program. The students in the study felt that high out-of-state tuition made it difficult to find funds to spend on things that they would have to leave behind. The university could design

a program to collect donations from on and off campus community and then distribute the items to students under the condition that they should be brought back at the end of the student's stay, if the items are still in usable condition. These items can be passed on to incoming students. A student organization is a possible group that could be utilized to initiate and oversee this program. Another strategy is to provide information to students about how to find items cheaply. For example, students could be made aware of yard sales and ads in the paper for used goods.

Social Support and Interaction

Student mentoring/peer network. A student mentoring or peer network program is a possible means to address students' need for social support. This program could be offered in two different but complementary ways. Before arrival, students could be matched with another international student, preferably from their own country or a similar culture. Thus, the enrolled student could share information about housing, transportation, registration, campus life and so on with the incoming student. After arrival, a peer program that matches an American student with an international student for a few hours every other week would help facilitate familiarity with American culture. This would promote greater psychosocial and academic achievement among international students and also increase the retention rate of these students for the institution.

Social interactions with American students. The Student Activities or the International Student office could also plan events to bring together American and international students. This would help the two groups interact socially, build friendships, and provide social support for international students. In addition, such events will provide American students opportunities to expand their knowledge of diversity and hopefully develop more acceptance and tolerance towards individuals from different racial/ethnic backgrounds.

Work as a means of social support. Since work is a source of social interaction and support, job opportunities for international students are warranted. However, new international students are only allowed to work on campus. In order to work off campus, they must wait about a year and need to apply for a work permit. Considering the social interaction need and financial difficulties they present, students can be given priority for certain on-campus jobs.

Health Services

Health insurance. Students were confused and frustrated about the health insurance system in the U.S. They also expressed disappointment that health center staff were unable to help them understand the student health insurance policy. This appeared to be due to staff members' insufficient knowledge. Since the health center is likely the first place that students seek help in interpreting the policy, health center staff should be trained to become more knowledgeable about the health insurance international students need to use. Health center personnel should explain the insurance system to the students and help them prepare for possible additional costs that the students might pay based on the services they seek.

Advertisement for counseling services. It was noticed that several students believed that the counseling center was a place to seek help if a person, for example, is severely depressed or suicidal. As a result, a different strategy of advertising counseling center services may help international students break the stigma attached to the center and feel more comfortable seeking services. For example, during the orientation, besides giving out brochures and pamphlets, examples of how the center was utilized by international students could be provided. Or, an international student could be invited to talk about how the center can be utilized by international students considering some of the adjustment issues and the acculturation process they face.

Workshop on discrimination. During the focus groups, students also described incidences of discrimination. Counseling centers could prepare a brochure or a one-session workshop on how to recognize and deal with discrimination.

Support group. The counseling center could also offer a semester-long, ongoing support group for the international students, allowing them to enter and exit the group any time and to discuss issues related to their academic and psychosocial adjustment processes, including experiences with discrimination.

Academic Life

Training programs for faculty. The findings of this study indicate that a training program for faculty to learn about the needs and special circumstances of international students will likely help the students have a smoother transition experience into academic life in the U.S. This training program should cover the following two points raised by the students.

a) Participation points in determining grades. Students' difficulty in participating in discussions stems from their perceived inadequacy in English, fear of making mistakes while speaking English, and of potential ridicule from their classmates and professor. However, they expressed frustration and disappointment for the inability to overcome their fear and the loss of participation points toward their final grades. Professors might help students increase their participation by either calling on students during class or giving them priority if they raise their hands. To make the students more comfortable about speaking in class, faculty should wait for students to finish and not interrupt them regardless of pronunciation or grammar mistakes.

b) Inquiries about assignments and class projects. Various students (especially Middle Eastern and Asian) noted that teacher/student interaction in their country was more lim-ited than in the U.S. Thus, in the U.S. such students may not feel assertive enough to approach the professors and ask questions. In some cases, it might be more beneficial for the professor to make the initial contact and invite the students to visit the professor in his/her office during office hours and to feel free to ask questions.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

Although the number of participants in the study is consistent with other qualitative studies, the study is nevertheless limited in other ways. First, the sample is skewed toward Asian students—partly because this is the region from which the bulk of the international students at this campus come. Therefore, comparisons between different groups from different regions are limited. Although the Asian students come from a diverse array of countries, Asians share collectivist traditions. Thus, we can expect them to have a certain similarity of experience in terms of social support within an individualist society like the U.S. (Tafarodi & Smith, 2001). They also share visible minority status within the U.S. and therefore we might expect that their experience with racial discrimination would be similar to native-born Americans with the same status (Surdam & Collins, 1984). Moreover, as non-Whites in a majority White society, they are more likely to experience discrimination (Swagler & Ellis, 2003) than White students such as the Germans. Nevertheless, a study that includes larger proportions of the students of these race-ethnic groups would be useful to see if the patterns that this research found hold. Second, this study is confined to one semi-urban campus. It would be useful to conduct further studies to determine whether students at similar campuses have similar issues. Since this is one case, with a limited number of students, it is difficult to generalize to other settings. However, the value of an ecological approach lies in attention to the specific environment

in which students live.

After the completion of our study, the INS instituted several stricter regulations, developed a computerized system, and asked students from certain countries (i.e., Saudi Arabia, Lebanon) to come to an interview, fingerprint, and register. In addition, spouses of many international students were not allowed to study part-time and were asked to change their visa status to be able to attend school. These regulations, in return, might have resulted in more stress for the students. As a result, further research should examine how students' adjustment to their environment was affected following these regulations.

Conclusion

The results of this study provide a detailed picture of international students' experiences as they interact with their academic and social communities. Our major findings indicate that students experience a number of concerns related to accommodations, communication, transportation, social interaction with host nationals, health insurance, counseling, discrimination, and academic life. Their interest in succeeding academically and socially and the institution's interest in retaining these students require both parties to act to bring about the changes necessary to accomplish these goals. However, the institution has a very significant role in finding and implementing the resources needed to help international students have a successful adjustment experience. While there are macro-system phenomena that the university has little control over (e.g. health care system, homeland security procedures), the institution can provide help for students to cope with those. Administrators, student service offices, and the faculty within the higher education system can help international students successfully adjust by implementing the recommendations presented in this paper.

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