

## **Voices of Difference: A Case Study on the Experiences of International Students at a University in the Southeastern United States**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*International students often encounter several challenges during their academic and social journeys at higher education institutions in the United States. The purpose of this case study was to examine the experiences of three international students at a university in the southeastern U.S. The participants were a woman from Colombia, a man from Saudi Arabia, and a woman from China. The researcher used in-depth interviews to collect data for this case study. Findings revealed that participants experienced culture shock, misguided expectations, and a lack of resources. The experiences of the participants suggest that higher education institutions must provide more meaningful and intentional support for international students.*

**Keywords:** case study, challenges, experiences, higher education, international students

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**I**nternational students serve as tremendous sources of diversity at higher education institutions in the U.S. Their academic and social journeys, however, are not necessarily without challenges. Many scholars have examined the challenges with adjustment and integration that international students face. A common phenomenon described in the literature on the transition to living and learning in the U.S. is the difficulty experienced as international students pursue education abroad. The purpose of this case study was to examine the experiences of three international students at a university

in the southeastern U.S. to better understand the challenges they face. This case study was guided by three research questions:

- What are international students' experiences of adjustment and integration after arriving in the U.S.?
- In what way are the experiences of international students different from their expectations before arriving in the U.S.?
- In what way do the international students' unique cultures shape their experiences of adjustment and integration?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Studies of international student experiences at higher education institutions in the U.S. vary in focus and scope. The review of literature serves to provide contemporary context for the research while simultaneously referencing research that already exists in the field. During the process of reviewing the literature in which to situate the case study, I noticed that much of the literature could be placed into three categories: (1) cultural differences, (2) communication barriers, and (3) camaraderie. Each category is being used to divide the review of literature to organize the complexities of international student experiences. I acknowledge, however, that these categories should be viewed as interconnected and incomplete.

### **Cultural Differences**

International students at higher education institutions in the U.S. regularly experience cultural differences. This is especially true within the classroom. Cultural differences can cause international students to be reluctant to participate in classroom discussions, which is crucial in teaching and learning in higher education (Croese, 2011; Heron, 2018; Valdez, 2015). Faculty can support international students by being culturally responsive and creating inclusive learning environments (Glass et al., 2015a; Heng, 2017; Heron, 2018). Similarly, international students should be willing to adapt to the different approaches used by faculty (Campbell, 2015). Bertram and colleagues (2013) point out that the interactive teaching style in the U.S. leads to challenges with adjustment and integration. Cultural differences can also greatly influence how international students relate to both their domestic and international peers in the classroom (Akanwa, 2015; Leong, 2015; Sato & Hodge, 2015; Silber-Furman & Zagumny, 2018). International students employ various techniques to cope with cultural differences, including photos of family and music from home (Gebhard, 2012). Beyond the classroom, there is often a low level of engagement occurring between international students and their local host communities (Kusek, 2015).

## **Communication Barriers**

International students at higher education institutions in the U.S. frequently experience communication barriers. Although most universities in the U.S. require some proof of English proficiency prior to admitting international students whose first language is not English, a satisfactory score on an exam like the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) does not necessarily mean that international students are prepared to function at a university level (Akanwa, 2015). A communication barrier often means that international students will struggle in the classroom. International students have expressed difficulty comprehending the lecture, taking notes, and completing the assignments (Banjong, 2015; Ma et al., 2020). More specifically, international students may have issues with academic language (Gebhard, 2012) and academic writing (Bawa & Watson, 2017; Eldaba & Isbell, 2018; Wolf & Phung, 2019). International students can still be successful in the university despite having issues with the English language, though (Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2015). It is important to note that communication barriers also reach well beyond classroom walls (Chennamsetti, 2020; Leong, 2015).

## **Camaraderie**

International students at higher education institutions in the U.S. commonly experience issues with camaraderie. It is common for international students to form relationships with international peers who share their values and experiences (Leong, 2015). Of course, that can often mean foregoing relationships with their domestic peers (Yu & Peters, 2019). It is arguable that international students must exhibit a relatively high degree of agency to socially adjust and integrate (Akanwa, 2015). Perhaps not surprisingly, international students who had lesser-developed social networks were more likely to experience issues with adjustment and integration because the development of their personal characteristics was not being supported in a social environment (Heng, 2017; Jackson et al., 2013). Despite the benefits of forming relationships with peers, some international students indicate that they are too busy to socialize (Campbell, 2015). While Tinto (1993) reports that academic involvement is more important than social involvement for almost all universities, he also claims that academic engagement alone is not enough to help some students persist.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

I deployed interpretivism as the research paradigm for this case study. Interpretivism is characterized by the perspective that the truth is many and that reality is subjective (Sipe & Constable, 1996). The purpose of interpretivism, thus, is to interpret and understand the world. To better

understand the challenges experienced by international students at a university in the southeastern U.S., I used a qualitative case study as the methodology for this project. With a case study, the researcher engages in “the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system” (Creswell, 2013, p. 73). Both interpretivism and case study functioned well as part of the research design in that I wanted to understand the challenges faced by international students in a specific context—a single university in the southeastern U.S. at a fixed period in time.

### **Setting**

The setting of this case study was a doctoral-granting university with high research activity situated in a micropolitan area within the southeastern U.S. The total student body of the university was approximately 10,000 students across both undergraduate and graduate levels. At the time of the case study, the total international student enrollment was close to 1,000. International students, then, represented nearly 10% of the total student body. The university is a predominantly white institution (PWI), as nearly 85% of students are white. The community is equally homogenous in terms of race. Similarly, both the university and the community are heavily Protestant. This particular setting was chosen because I assumed, based on anecdotes from insiders, that international students would encounter challenges in a university and a community defined by a relative lack of diversity for almost all social identities.

### **Participants**

The participants for this case study were three international students enrolled in undergraduate programs at the same university (see Table 1). I gained access to the participants by contacting them via email using directory information provided by the Office of International Education at the university. I used purposeful sampling, a technique in which a researcher selects “information-rich cases strategically and purposefully” (Patton, 1990, p. 243). I used the purposeful sampling strategy called maximum variation sampling, which Patton describes as occurring when a researcher “purposefully picks a wide range of cases to get variation on dimensions of interest” (Patton, 1990, p. 243). With this type of purposeful sampling, the researcher attempts to identify common patterns that cut across variations. Participant names are pseudonyms.

**Table 1: Characteristics of Participants**

| <b>Name</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Country</b> | <b>Year</b> | <b>Major</b>      |
|-------------|------------|---------------|----------------|-------------|-------------------|
| Sophia      | 22         | Woman         | Colombia       | Fourth      | Political Science |
| Samuel      | 25         | Man           | Saudi Arabia   | Fourth      | Civil Engineering |
| Sarah       | 21         | Woman         | China          | Third       | Finance           |

**Data Collection**

After meeting the ethical requirements established by the Institutional Review Board, I collected data using in-depth interviews. Kvale and Brinkman (1996) define an interview as a “construction site of knowledge,” where two or more individuals discuss a “theme of mutual interest” (p. 2). In other words, an interview consists of discourse about a particular topic or issue that occurs between an interviewer and an interviewee. I used an interview guide, a list of questions or issues that a researcher wants to explore during an interview (Patton, 1990). The length of the interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 55 minutes. I recorded and transcribed each interview to ensure maximum authenticity of the experiences shared by the participants. I also used member checking to ensure that interpretations of the data represented the experiences of the participants.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative data are only valuable to researchers and other interested actors if the data become findings. This process, known as analysis, takes data and transforms them into “succinct statements that describe, explain, or predict something about what the researcher has studied” (LeCompte, 2000, p. 146). After carefully transcribing and coding the interviews, I used a general inductive approach to analyze the data. A general inductive approach, as described by Thomas (2003), is “intended to aid an understanding of meaning in complex data through the development of summary themes and categories from the raw data” (p. 3). Following several close examinations, I was able to code and organize the transcribed data into themes. I identified three themes from the data: (1) culture shock, (2) misguided expectations, and (3) lack of resources.

**FINDINGS**

**Culture Shock**

The first theme identified during data analysis was culture shock. Related to the first and third research questions, culture shock describes how the participants experienced adjustment and integration during their early years at the university. While each participant had varying degrees of culture shock, it was obvious from the interviews that culture shock was a common

phenomenon across experiences. The factor that most contributed to culture shock for the participants was language, which is consistent with the literature. All three participants spoke coherently during the interviews, though. Sophia, who came directly to the university without any additional English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) instruction, stated, “The first year here went good for me, but I had some problems with English. Reading. Reading was a big problem for me. And writing.” In the case of Sophia, it is clear that English at the university level was a major challenge. For her, the texts prescribed to her as part of her program of study were at such a high level that she often read them more than once to fully comprehend the material. It is important to note that Sophia specifically indicated that she has little to no issues with speaking English.

Sophia was not the only participant who experienced culture shock connected to language. Sarah, who also came directly to the university without any additional ESOL instruction, seemed to have more issues with English than Sophia. In fact, Sarah described how she was so uncomfortable with English that her social interactions outside of the classroom were greatly impacted. She stated embarrassingly,

During my freshman year, I was lonely. Talking to people scared me. I thought they would judge me, especially my English skills. I don't know if they did. It felt that it happened, though ... People can be mean. And I am different. It is always easier to be mean to different ... So, I guess I was afraid to be judged for my English.

Cultural differences may be at play in the case of Sarah. She was afraid that her self-perceived lack of proficiency with the English language would serve as a barrier to meaningful social interactions with her domestic peers. It is also possible that she simply lacked the level of comfort needed to interact with them.

Samuel, who completed an ESOL program prior to enrolling at the university, expressed frustration with not being able to understand the local dialect. For him, there was a major communication barrier between him and an undisclosed number of faculty at the university. In fact, he even indicated that the local dialect impacted his academic performance. He stated, “I'm confident in my ability to understand and speak English. I worked very hard to reach this level. It's hard for me to understand people from here sometimes. Mostly the teachers.” Referencing one professor in particular, Samuel indicated that other students in his class were having difficulty understanding him. This particular story sparked an interest in me, which prompted me to ask Samuel if he attempted to discuss the issue with his professor. It was clear that he was not comfortable doing so.

All three participants also indicated that food contributed to a sense of culture shock during their early years at the university. Food, regardless of the location, is one of the major foundations upon which culture is centered. As such, I was not surprised to hear that the participants in the case study all mentioned food during the interviews. Moreover, there were several instances where a statement from one participant about food obtained consensus from the other participants. Samuel stated, "McDonalds are everywhere. I don't like that food. Not good at all. For me, it is not just not healthy. The whole process is kinda impersonal. No one cooking and serving the food even cares." From his statement about food, it can be inferred that restaurants structured to provide quick (and typically unhealthy) products are less common in his home country. Likewise, it could be that Samuel had a personal preference against fast food. Regardless, food played a part in his experience of culture shock.

Sarah's experience with food in the U.S. went even deeper in terms of culture, especially as food relates to culture shock. Chinese restaurants are relatively common in the U.S. For many U.S. Americans, this is an opportunity to experience a country and culture that they may otherwise not experience in their lifetimes. For a person from China, however, these restaurants can be viewed as somewhat of a misnomer. Sarah indicated, "At first, I was excited to see so much Chinese restaurants ... I learned fastly that Chinese here is not really the Chinese I thought it would be. I really hoped that this food would help me cope with homesickness, but that didn't happen." It was clear that the misrepresentation of Chinese cuisine had a noteworthy impact on Sarah. She expected the restaurants to provide an authentic experience that would remind her of China, but she was disappointed when the food was not what she expected. It was interesting to me that she mentioned her grandmother several times when discussing food; upon reflection, this is probably indicative of the role that elders play in Chinese society.

In some ways, Sophia's experience with food was almost a fusion Samuel's and Sarah's. She pointed out that there are a lot of Mexican restaurants in the city and in other parts of the state that she had visited. For her, it was very surprising that there is such a large Mexican population in the specific region of the state. She noted that she would have suspected this in states that border Mexico, but she found it bizarre for this to be the case in a micropolitan area such as the setting of the case study. She stated, " I was surprised to see so many Mexican restaurants here. The food is good, but I'm not sure how accurately it represents the culture ... There definitely aren't any Colombian restaurants here." I felt that Sophia's relatively neutral position on Mexican restaurants was noteworthy. Prior to the data collection, I had assumed that she would have either really liked the Mexican restaurants or really disliked the Mexican restaurants. During the interview with Sophia, I

asked more about the role of food in Colombian culture.

In addition to language and food, two of the participants also identified religion as a component of culture shock. For those in the state and the nation at large, it is generally accepted knowledge that the state is located in a region known as the Bible Belt. International students, who may be unfamiliar with demographics in the U.S., can be caught off guard by the central facet that religion has in the cultural dynamics there. This was the case for Sarah. She indicated, “There are so many churches here. Too many to name ... I didn’t know to expect that before I arrived. I thought the people might be more religious than in China, but I didn’t know how religious.” From her statement, it is clear that the sheer quantity of Protestant churches in the area added to Sarah’s overall experience of culture shock. Likewise, she was surprised that U.S. Americans were so willing to invite international students to attend their churches. As with language, Sarah highlighted noteworthy cultural differences.

Similar to Sarah, Samuel has experienced culture shock in the form of religion. Samuel is originally from Saudi Arabia, which has a majority Muslim population; in fact, Samuel identifies as Muslim and takes many aspects of the religion seriously. Prior to arriving in the country Samuel was cognizant of the fact that most U.S. Americans identify as Christian. He stated, “A big cultural difference between Saudi and America is the religion. I think everyone knows that ... This was difficult at first. Islam is very important to me, but it is rare here ... I had to make adjustments.” Religion is a major component of culture, so it was interesting to hear just how big a role the lack of Islam in the U.S. played in Samuel’s experience of culture shock. Despite the large Muslim population at the university, Samuel still felt disconnected from his religion. As often as possible, Samuel commutes to the mosque in a nearby city. He indicated that Friday is the most important day for Muslims to be at the mosque, but it can be difficult for students to commute to that nearby city when classes are in session.

### **Misguided Expectations**

The second theme identified during data analysis was misguided expectations. Related to the second research question, misguided expectations refers to the discrepancies between how the participants expected their early years at the university to be and how the actual experience of their early years at the university was. While each participant had varying degrees of misguided expectations, it was clear from the interviews that misguided expectations was a common phenomenon across experiences. Samuel, who learned about the university from his cousin, had the most profound experience of misguided expectations. He stated,

My first year at the university was not what I was expecting. People here seem to not care. The teachers. The students. The staff. There is no motivation. I'm just not used to that ... People can be nice, but a lot of people have been rude. There have been some racist things said to me and friends. I thought people here would always be friendly ... And I hate the weather ... My cousin was a senior when I was a freshman. He said many great things about the university. It sounded like a great school to study at. Sometimes, I regret the decision to come here ... I just thought it would be different.

Sarah, like Samuel, experienced misguided expectations due to information from a third party. She learned about the university through an agency that provides services to Chinese students who want to study in the U.S. As part of this process, her agent was responsible for locating a university that fit Sarah's goals and interests. In other words, this individual was tasked with informing Sarah about what to expect at the university she selected; unfortunately, Sarah felt that her agent did not provide an accurate representation of what she should expect at the university. Sarah said, "It was totally different than what I thought it would be. I worked with an agent to find the right university, but she didn't do good at helping me. She made the university sound like something that it's not." For me, the situation with the agent was very shocking. While Sarah did not state the cost of working with the agency in China, she did suggest that the cost was a substantial amount relative to the experience she was having.

While the previous two experiences of misguided expectations resulted from third parties, Sophia's experience of misguided expectations was a direct result of the university. Sophia did not know anyone who had attended the university, and she was not working with an agency in her home country. Instead, she was using the information provided on the university website to form her expectations; in particular, she was viewing the website for the Office of International Education. While there were positive aspects to the website, Sophia still mentioned that it was relatively misleading. She stated: "After arriving here, I was surprised that most things were different than I expected. I thought there would be a greater sense of community ... The website of the international office shows pictures of students having fun together." When I was developing the interview guide, it was unexpected for a discussion about the website to occur. The homepage for the unit provides the mission statement that focuses on internationalization of the university as well as the variety of support it provides for international students.

## **Lack of Resources**

The third theme identified during data analysis was a lack of resources. Related to the first and third research questions, a lack of resources refers to the deficiency in tools that the participants could use to aid with adjustment and integration. While each participant had varying degrees of a lack of resources, it was obvious from the interviews that a lack of resources was a common phenomenon across experiences. For Sarah, the orientation provided by the Office of International Education constituted a lack of resources due to its structure and nature. She stated,

Orientation was not good ... I was tired from traveling, and everything that week was rushed ... During the big meeting, there was much information given by the international students office. I tried to take notes ... I probably only got half of what was told to us ... A better structure would have made a difference.

While the orientation seemed to provide a lot information for the newly admitted international students, I still felt that it contributed to a lack of resources because it was not conducive with non-native English speakers who had traveled vast amounts of time only days before. Sarah also expressed discontent with a resource fair that occurred during the week, which was “disorganized and unhelpful.”

Sophia’s experience with a lack of resources at the university centered around student organizations. She pointed out that some groups within the international population had student organizations, but the majority did not have anything established. In fact, Sophia argued that student organizations are probably the most valuable resources that incoming international students can have at their disposal. She stated, “Each nationality having a club could be very helpful for new international students. Or at least a club that combines all the other nationalities together to help those without a club.” While some nationalities do have these established student organizations, Sophia was absolutely right in her observation that most nationalities do not have anything like this. Some of these student organizations are very active in their community. Sophia did mention the International Buddies Program as being a good resource. Following the data collection process, I learned that the Office of International Education was attempting to create an international student organization that will focus primarily on assisting incoming international students with adjustment and integration.

The perspective revealed by Samuel was much more expected than either provided by Sarah or Sophia. In fact, he was able to clearly and concisely articulate several points about the lack of resources that he

experienced as an international student at the university. Likewise, he mentioned the experiences of his friends and offered suggestions for improving the availability of resources for international students. He stated, “I wish things were more centralized here ... There may be resources for us, but it was difficult to find them. It seems that most things are online, but many offices have chaotic websites.” Ranging from academic assistance to community engagement, Samuel pointed out a range of resources that he wished he had been able to access. From his statement, it seems that centrality is important for those looking for resources. It is important to note Samuel’s opinion of the websites, which was previously mentioned by Sophia.

## **DISCUSSION**

I initiated this case study on the experiences of international students at a university in the southeastern U.S. by posing three research questions. Two themes answered the first research question (What are international students’ experiences of adjustment and integration after arriving in the United States?): culture shock and lack of resources. Again, two themes answered the second research question (In what way are the experiences of international students different from their expectations before arriving in the United States?): culture shock and misguided expectations. Finally, two themes answered the third research question (In what way do the international students’ unique cultures shape their experiences of adjustment and integration?): culture shock and lack of resources. I believe that the participants in this case study offer voices of difference that must echo through the halls and walls of higher education institutions in the U.S. in order to foster individual development and organizational change.

### **Implications**

The findings have several implications for all stakeholders in higher education to consider. First, the case study contributes to knowledge on international students. Each participant was from a different region of the world, which potentially offers insight into the role culture plays in adjustment and integration (Chennamsetti, 2020; Gebhard, 2012; Jackson et al., 2013). Additionally, the setting was a doctoral university in the southeastern U.S. There have not been very many studies of international students in this region of the U.S., but the context certainly contributed to the challenges experienced by the participants (Silber-Furman & Zagumny, 2018). Second, the case study contributes to policy on international students. The findings of the case study indicate that leaders need to evaluate and reform policy to improve the experiences of international students (Marbang et al., 2021). For example, it is suggested that the policy on English language

competency be examined for problematic requirements or weak implementations.

Third, the case study contributes to practice. Faculty and staff working directly with and for international students need to be aware of these findings so that they can create change on the ground. Programs and initiatives that support international students are clearly needed to address challenges with adjustment and integration (Akanwa, 2015; Banjong, 2015). Fourth, the case study contributes to the international student community at large. In fact, it demonstrates that international students have voices and needs that must be assessed and addressed in order to ensure equity in higher education (Yu & Peters, 2019). Overall, it can be inferred that many higher education institutions have not taken under consideration the findings of previous research that calls for transformative change. This case study, however, adds to the knowledge base in such a way that calls attention to disparities in our commitment to international students (Glass et al., 2015b).

### **Limitations**

It is worth noting, however, that there are limitations to the case study. It presents the experiences of three international students in a specific context at a specific time. The findings from the case study, then, cannot necessarily be generalized across the entire international student population at the university or in the country at large. While a qualitative approach does allow for richness in data, the small number of participants contributes to a lack of generalizability that might be addressed using a quantitative approach. Of course, qualitative researchers usually do not strive for generalizability (Glesne, 2016). Even within qualitative inquiry, the case study is limited in that it only utilizes data collected by in-depth interviews with the participants.

### **Recommendations**

Future research, both qualitative and quantitative, is needed to better understand and improve the experiences of international students. This case study focused on the experiences of undergraduate students, so it would be beneficial to examine the experiences of graduate students. It might also be helpful to consider how the type of institution (e.g., community college) and mode of instruction (e.g., online) play into the experiences of international students. I suggest investigating contemporary issues related to living and learning in the U.S., including the COVID-19 pandemic. This case study occurred prior to this horrendous time in our history, which certainly magnified old and manufactured new challenges for international students (Lee, 2020; Siczek, 2020). Similarly, future research could also examine how international students make sense of recent social justice movements like Black Lives Matter. Regardless, I hope that readers will be able to transfer the

findings to their own contexts as they listen to voices of difference within higher education institutions.

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