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A Whole New World: Understanding the International Student Experience in the United States through Acculturation, Identity, and Support

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States through Acculturation, Identity, and Support

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Abstract

This study explores the feelings and opportunities that international students experience while they are studying abroad. Specifically, it investigates acculturation and adaptation to the host country, the students' cultural identity and sense of belonging, as well as implications for support provided by the host institution.

In order to evaluate these components, an online survey, compiled of 24 open-ended and multiple-choice questions, was distributed to international students at the University of San Diego, asking them to describe their experiences and any indications of challenge and support from the institution in relation to their sense of belonging. The outcomes of this research include a deeper understanding of some of the challenges USD international students encounter, how their identity is affected because of it and what opportunities for the support the institution can provide.

Keywords: international student, identity, support, United States, culture, belonging

A Whole New World: Understanding the International Student Experience in the United States through Acculturation, Identity, and Support

Security in knowing and owning who I am has never really posed to be difficult for me. I am a twenty-three-year-old Mexican and Egyptian, first year graduate student from Kansas City, Missouri. Quite a few people know about my creative spirit. I do not really consider myself to be that great of an artist, but other people appreciate the work I create; photography is my passion but digital art and podcasting are areas I am beginning to explore. I am thankful for my creative brain because it allows me to see the world and develop insights that appear out of the box to others. It becomes both a curse and a blessing. A curse in the sense that sometimes it becomes difficult for me to grasp the obvious dilemmas and situations at hand because I am so preoccupied with finding out the inner details, that I neglect looking at the base. However, my creativity allows me to illustrate ideas and concerns that others may not have considered.

Puzzles are something that I enjoy. When I was little, I would regularly ask my dad to buy me Sudoku books from the dollar store; I learned at an early age what the satisfaction of completing a puzzle felt like and I loved the thrill of the challenge. I still have this mentality now, roughly fifteen years later. I see dilemmas as puzzle pieces and I need to evaluate every single piece and how it all fits together to create the final product. One of my top five strengths is connectedness and I feel as though I am always finding the missing pieces that people tend to forget about in order to make the puzzle complete. This way of thinking, for me, shows up in my everyday life, including professional settings. The missing pieces within my own professional development are the elements of my "tool box" that I have yet to acquire- such as populations that I have yet to work with or solutions to problems related to higher education. I seek out these

missing pieces in order to create a more complete representation of the professional work that I strive to accomplish.

Professional Development

Professionally, case management is an area of work that I never really saw myself pursuing. While I was studying social work at the University of Arkansas, case management was a career path that came up often as an alternative name to being a social worker. My professors made it out to be this very demanding, precise, and overwhelming career; and to be honest, they were not wrong. As I was looking for graduate assistantships, a case manager position was available and I was incredibly hesitant to apply for it. All throughout undergrad, I wanted to prove to myself and to others that social work and higher education could mix together, and I was afraid that if I applied for this position and was offered it, then the social work side of me would become resentful for taking a job that seemed like it was social work-focused.

I was so resistant to pursuing social work-related opportunities because I wanted to make social work function within higher education instead of trying to make higher education function within social work. My passion areas have always been in diversity and inclusion and multicultural affairs, mixed in with some marketing and outreach. These areas are all I have ever known in my journey through student affairs. Case management was venturing into the unknown for me. However, over the last six months, I feel as though I have been able to explore every area of student affairs just by being in this one position.

As a case manager, my role is to assist students in distress and provide them with the proper resources both on and off campus to ensure their needs are being met in every area of wellness. I have been able to meet with students who have dependents, international students, transfer students, and students with a multitude of needs. It was through these interactions with

students that I realized there are so many different types of needs for every student and institutions often accommodate a "one size fits all" mentality. One of the first student of concern cases I shadowed was an international student who struggled to speak English and had no type of support system in the United States. What really struck me with this student was the anxiety in their voice when they spoke. They disclosed that they could not go back to their home country, but also risked being withdrawn from their program because of personal issues they were enduring. Without their enrollment in the program, they would have to be sent back home due to the eligibility of their student visa. I wanted so badly to reach through the screen and hug this student because it was obvious that they were alone and were running out of options. If this student were to be withdrawn from the institution and sent home, then we failed to do our job and a critical piece to the puzzle would be lost.

This student matters. Their experience as an international student– whether positive or negative- matters. Their voice and identity matters. Interacting with this one student opened up a world that was unfamiliar to me, and quite frankly, frustrated me. My frustration stemmed from the fact that our institution failed this student. The resources that were supposed to be provided to them and give them a sense of security and comfort were not available to them. This student put their trust in the institution to aid them through the international student resource center, and that trust was lost. And there was nothing I could do about it. As a future higher education professional, I wanted to make sure that no international student should feel like this and I wanted to get a better understanding of the needs of this population and what efforts I can create to best support them.

Personal Connections and Implications for Research

International students are a population I did not know I wanted to work with until I decided that I was going to become an international student myself. My partner is a British citizen residing in England and following my Master's, I am planning on getting a PhD in England in order to eliminate the distance between us. For my partner and I, looking into visas is already a frightening process because neither one of us has gone through this process before, which led me to think about the countless number of international students navigating visas, traveling to a new country, and encompassing a new environment all on their own. I wanted to gain a better understanding of what institutions are able to provide for international students in the United States in terms of security and aid. Through this knowledge, I also wanted to learn from international students about their first-hand experiences and critique the structure of universities in creating a welcoming environment to these students and enhancing their collegiate experiences. I wanted to take this learning experience through a transformational leadership lens with individualized concern. Transformational leadership has an emphasis on working with teams and individuals to identify needs and changes and works with the team members to execute this change; the individualized concern of this lens has an element where the leadership shows care and concern for the members involved (Northouse, 2016). This leadership theory is the best possible approach to this research because of my interactions with the international students and seeking change based on their needs.

Through this research, I was able to evaluate what measures universities take in order to adhere to international students as a critical component to their student population as well as assess the true needs of international students.

Literature Review

The primary focus of my literature review included an emphasis on three critical components to my research: acculturation and adaptation, cultural identity and sense of belonging, and finally, implications for student support. Each of these elements help break down and assess the needs of international students and how to best support them through different theories and models. I specifically looked at articles and case studies that highlighted international students' first-hand experiences. For the purpose of this research, international students are defined as holders of either an F-1 type of student visa- needed to study in the United States- (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service, 2020)- or a Tier 4 (General).

Acculturation and Adaptation

The United States is a popular destination for students to study abroad. However, when students are introduced to a new country and, oftentimes, a new culture, this change can become overwhelming. As students navigate this change, the host institution becomes the primary source of support and international students depend on the institution to help them succeed. All university students undergo a transitional period. However, for international students, they typically go through two transitions: "one is related to human development and their own maturation, and another is intercultural, as they interact within a different educational environment and a different culture and society," (Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009). Many institutions have courses designed to aid incoming students in the transitional process and are often a general requirement credit. Every student is given the opportunity to receive support for the universal transitional period into university life, however international students are not automatically given the same course opportunity for their intercultural transition.

International students' second transition develops through two phases: acculturation and adaptation. Johnson & Sandhu (2007) define acculturation as "changes in values, and behaviors that result from sustained contact with a second culture." This often appears as the natural culture shock that many international students experience as they leave the comfort and security of their home country and are immersed in a new country and culture. The second phase is adaptation, which refers to the "process of adjustment to the existing conditions in the environment," (Castro, 2003). Adaptation is an ongoing process which incorporates both a psychological and sociocultural element when looking at intercultural adaptation.

Schweisfurth and Gu (2009) conducted a multi-method study on international students at four universities in England. The first stage of their research included a 70-item questionnaire regarding personal, social, and academic issues that was sent to all first-year international undergraduate students. They received 228 responses in total. 32% of the participants indicated (in the initial survey) that they were concerned about their relationships with UK students prior to their arrival, while 1% of students had concerns of mixing with other international students before arrival. Following the first term, the survey was repeated and 29% of international students had concerns of mixing with UK students and 14% had concerns of mixing with other international students, (Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009). In American universities, Hechanova-Alampay et al. (2002) found that international students had a far greater adjustment and adaptation experience the more they interacted with American students.

This initial adaptation period for international students becomes the catalyst for a number of factors as the international student continued their education. Based on their adaptation experience, this can ultimately become an indication of the students' intent to stay in the host country or return back to their home country. Seda Sumer (2009) conducted a study in which 204

international students across eight different eastern region U.S. universities participated in a survey questionnaire regarding their intent to stay post-graduation. The participants were asked to complete five different surveys (1) a 12-item demographics questionnaire, with a question regarding intent to stay in the U.S. using a 4-point Likert scale, (2) a 20-item survey used to measure depression through mood, feelings of guilt and worthlessness, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, loss of appetite, and sleep disturbance, (3) a 29 item socio-cultural adaptation scale that asked, using a 5-point Likert scale, about the level of difficulty making friends with locals, attending social events, and adapting to local accommodations, (4) a 66 item ways of coping questionnaire that evaluated confrontive coping, distancing, self-controlling, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, planful problem solving, and positive reappraisal using a 4-point Likert scale, (5) an acculturation index that consisted of 21 items that evaluated values, cognitive and behavioral domains of acculturation through a 7-point Likert scale. (Sumer, 2009). The results of this study found that the international students who reported higher levels of identification with the American culture and lower levels of difficulty in sociocultural adaptation also reported higher likelihood of staying in the U.S. post-graduation.

Because retention and student success are often the key goals of universities, it is important to note that the extent to which international students feel as though they can easily adapt and integrate into the culture of the host country, the more likely it is that they will remain at the institution for the entirety of their education. Acculturation and adaptation into the new culture are only the beginning efforts of ensuring that international students' needs are being addressed. Although they are coming into a country of a culture and adopting elements of the host country's culture, it is critical that the identity of the international student is not erased.

Cultural Identity and Sense of Belonging

The Communication Theory of Identity illustrates four elements to identity: personal, relational, enacted, and communal (Hecht, 1993). Each of these elements are components of one's sense of identity and contributes to how one sees themselves in relation to others. International students have many adjustments as they navigate their identity, especially in a country foreign to their own. With regard to international students, personal and communal elements are the most affected because of the student understanding how their own cultural identity is represented in their new community, but also how the community affects their existing personal identity. When there are discrepancies between the elements, an identity gap can form. Jung, Heckt, and Wadsworth explain in their study of international students and psychological well-being that "in international students' communication with Americans, cultural differences, and language barriers are often major sources of the difficulties that international students experience and thus, a potential source of identity gaps," (Jung, Heckt, & Wadsworth, 2007). Within this study, international students living in the United States were asked to answer a 75-item questionnaire that measured acculturation, perceived discrimination, personal-enacted identity gap, personal-relational identity gap, depression level, social support, and social undermining. It is important to note that this study highlights "perceived discrimination." "It is possible that international students already expect Americans to have inaccurate appraisals of them due to Americans' biases and their own communication limitations," (Jung, Heckt & Wadsworth, 2007).

Lee and Rice conducted similar research where they interviewed 24 students from 15 different countries and evaluated perceptions of discrimination through a neo-racism framework. Barker identifies neo-racism as discrimination based on culture and national order (Barker,

1981). Within this study, Lee and Rice were able to identify that there was a divide between the experiences of white international students and those of color, with the international students of color having reported higher instances of perceived discrimination. Other findings in this research included that a number of international students had feelings of inferiority based on U.S. media portrayals and negative remarks of their home country or culture; for many of the international students, this type of discrimination occurred early on in their arrival to the U.S. (Lee & Rice, 2007). These negative experiences whether upon arrival or throughout the duration of the international students' time in the host country can create this notion of imposter syndrome and ultimately a negative sense of belonging. This raises concerns shifting from a student's ability to adapt to the host country to inadequacies and backlash from the host country itself.

Two different methods look at the enhancement of international students' sense of identity following feelings of discrimination and isolation. The first model, proposed by Yeo, McKee & Trent is the EYES model. EYES theory "posits 'eyes' as a metaphor for processes of racialization and racial identity development among international students," within three factors: appraisal, place, and identity. EYES theory helps to contribute to understanding how international students view and are viewed within their social environment through their eyes (Yeo, McKee & Trent, 2018). The second method looks at group identity through this notion of shared rejection, known as the Rejection-Identification Model. Schmitt, Spears & Branscombe identify that there are at least two possible identities that international students turn to in response to discrimination: one being an increased identity with their home country and own culture, while the other being a shared identity of being an "international student" and the shared experience of being a "foreigner," (Schmitt, Spears & Branscombe, 2003). Both of these

frameworks offer an opportunity for exploration of the racial and cultural disparities between international students and their host country while also making efforts to address these student-facing issues and create alternative support measures for these students.

Implications for Student Support

There is a clear indication of the many challenges that international students face not only adjusting to a new academic setting in a foreign country, but the surrounding culture and environment as well. The question remains: with all of these negative influences on international students' experience and ability to adapt well to the host country, what efforts are institutions using, or what can they use to best support the international students?

Jan Bamford conducted a case study with four focus groups of international students studying in the United Kingdom. From this study and interviews with the focus groups, the following were suggested that would improve the student experience through cultural, social, and academic aspects: peer mentoring, local language/study skills group, more social activity, staff development, and teaching, learning and assessment," (Bamford, 2008). Many of the solutions offered by the students include opportunities to grow in community as well as have the community educate and prepare itself to engage and interact with international students. Bamford goes on to explain the significance that peer mentorship programs can have on bridging academic gaps and providing greater interpersonal relationships; "peer mentoring provides students with a method of communicating with those who have already progressed in their studies," (Bamford, 2008). Ramachandran also brings up peer mentoring as a positive way of providing support and building community between international students and domestic students; "to reduce the anxiety related to student life, senior students may accompany international students shopping, sight-seeing and eating out; all these sessions will provide opportunities for

interaction between new students and their seniors," (Ramachandran, 2011). Although

Ramachandran does not indicate whether these senior students are international students who

have been at the institution for a number of years or senior domestic students, I believe that

either situation could be beneficial. Senior international students can discuss their experiences to

incoming international students and provide them with a sense of comfort of having someone

already been in their position. On the other hand, senior domestic students can provide a

welcoming environment and introduce the incoming international students with a way to learn

more about the culture of their host country and have a peer from the host country they can turn

to for support. This type of peer mentorship can also allow for international students to improve

on any language barriers they may be facing and get extra experience in practicing English

outside of a traditional classroom setting.

Many institutions have specialized student organizations developed based on country

origin or cultural identity. However, "those who do not have a large representation could be

excluded from these communities…developing [these] student communities may reduce

integration between university communities-both between international and home students, as

well as between international students of different nationalities and ethnic background,"

(Bartram & Terano, 2011). International students who may be the only individual from a specific

country or ethnic group may feel segregated from other student organizations. International

student offices can help play a role in reducing this segregation and can also actively contribute

to student integration by developing multiple initiatives through their office. Bartram and Terano

outline these efforts based on a student narrative. They go on to describe these programs as "an

international student forum, which brings students together for a weekly meeting with various

speakers and contributors; a scheme that finds placements for international students in local

schools; and a social forum where international students join domestic students and local residents for discussions," (Bartram & Terano, 2011). All of these different programs can allow for the international student office to collaborate with various on and off campus partners to provide multiple support systems. International students often rely on the resources from the international student office from the beginning of their journey to the host country. It is critical that the international student feels that they are supported by their community during the duration of their academic career as well.

Not only can encouraging students of the host institution to interact with international students be sufficient enough to be considered a solution. "International students are heavily dependent on the host university in various ways; thus, the university is the most important source of support," (Cho & Yu, 2015). Cho and Yu conducted a survey that asked 131 international students attending school in the southwest region of the United States about university identification and the amount of support they receive from their institution along with school-life satisfaction and psychological stress. The results found that "university identification positively affected international students' perception of university support and eventually their school-life satisfaction," (Cho & Yu, 2015). This finding illustrates that international students who feel accepted and identify with similar values of their university feel that the institution they are attending also provides adequate support to their needs. One way that institutions can help build a stronger community for incoming international students is by implementing opportunities for faculty and staff to be aware of the cultural needs and differences of their potential students. Ian McDonald lays out several ways in which UK higher education institutions are able to support international students. "Orientation programmes can appear to be one-way processes, as it is only the students who take part in them. Little is done to prepare members of staff…for the

fact that they will probably encounter international students…" (McDonald, 2014). Oftentimes, there are cultural differences in regards to students and authority, and that is unknown to instructors with their students. Because of this disconnect to the cultural differences in academia, international students may feel hesitant to reach out to instructors or tutors for one-to-one support. By educating university faculty and staff on the cultural differences of their students, they will be better prepared to offer their students support and gain a better understanding of the backgrounds their students are coming from, thus making the international students feel more welcomed and accepted by their institution. Faculty and staff that undergo these types of trainings also widen the institution's opportunity to view their international students as ways of expanding cross-cultural learning. "International students are disheartened when they are characterized as weaker groups exhibiting poor language capabilities and other limitations, instead of being recognized as a gateway to global information," (Ramachandran, 2011). The relationships that international students have with not only their peers, but their professors as well, determine whether the student has a positive or negative experience at their institution.

Discussion of Sampling and Research Design

Participants Rights and Protective Measures

From a constructionist perspective, the realities of the International Student and how institutions make use of these experiences to create resources for students is how I wanted to approach my research. The truth and meaning behind the support offered by the institution and the interpretation by the International Students stem from the relationship between the two. Because my research involves human subjects and discussion of personal experiences, I submitted an application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. Each of the participants are informed consenting adults. In inviting the students to participate, I disclosed the

purpose of this research, how the data will be used, gave them the option to remain anonymous or replace their name with a pseudonym as well as provided them the opportunity to withdraw at any time without explanation. In maintaining the privacy of the participants, once the data was evaluated from the surveys, I housed the data collection in a password-protected Excel sheet. I discarded any information that may have contained identifiers of the participant by permanently deleting the survey result files once the data was transcribed. All participants received invitation, confirmation, and consent forms (see Appendices A-E for forms). My university email was also provided to participants should they have any questions or needed to contact me regarding their involvement in the study.

Sampling Strategy

In order to select participants for this study, I recruited from the University of San Diego. Because I am currently enrolled at this institution, it allowed me to easily connect with participants and gained a better insight into the performative measures of the University of San Diego with International Students. An email was sent to the Office of International Students and Scholars asking to include the recruitment flyer in their bi-weekly email newsletter that gets sent out to all International Students. Because there was minimal face-to-face interaction on campus and students not meeting indoors, the email recruitment was the best course of action. Although the initial intent was to recruit undergraduate students, I opened up my sampling pool to include both graduate and undergraduate students to see if there were similarities in their responses and experiences. In order to incentivize students to participate in this study, I included an opportunity for students to win a $50 Amazon gift card through an opportunity draw. Students were able to include their name and email for the purpose of being included in the drawing and one student was selected at the end of the study.

Research Design

My research design was implemented through qualitative instruments, but is seen as a mixed-methods design because of the inclusion of a quantitative portion as well. The research is a combination of both grounded theory as well as ethnography. The data gathered through surveys and interviews was used to discover any problems that existed within the institution and how International Students made sense of them as well as understanding the culture of not only the United States, but the culture of the University of San Diego.

Quantitative Instruments

The quantitative survey was conducted alongside the qualitative survey. Within this survey, I evaluated the number of countries that make up the International Student population at the University of San Diego. Because I was not able to represent every country our students come from based on the survey results, I wanted to acknowledge the various countries that are included in the student population. This data was accessed by reviewing assessment reports from the University of San Diego. I reached out to administrators at the University of San Diego to provide a detailed breakdown of the student population. For the 2021-2022 academic school year, there are approximately 832 International Students represented by 73 countries. After obtaining this data, I converted it into a world map, highlighting the percentages from each continent, and indicating the major countries represented (see Figure 1).

Qualitative Instruments

Adjacent to the quantitative data received, I was also able to collect qualitative data through an online questionnaire comprised of both multiple choice and open-ended responses (see Appendix B for questions). The survey was administered through Qualtrics and participants were able to access the survey through both the recruitment flyer as well as the introduction

email that was sent out to interested students. The purpose of the questionnaire is to provide students with the opportunity to share their first-hand experiences of being an International Student and bring to light the strengths and weaknesses of their institution with regard to providing a resourceful environment. This questionnaire not only illustrated the institution's efforts, but also indicated the specific needs of International Students and where the institution may need to reassess efforts and resources. This questionnaire was an opportunity to utilize an outlet to voice their concerns and triumphs of being an International Student. The questionnaire was available on Qualtrics in English, but students had the option of having the survey translated as needed. The questionnaire was published online on February 14, 2022. In order to allow time for participants to indicate interest in the questionnaire as well as maximize time for the participant to take the questionnaire, the recruitment process lasted approximately one month.

In addition to the survey results, I had anticipated having survey participants be a part of video interviews. The purpose of these video interviews was to have the International Students tell their stories first-hand and describe their experiences of living in the United States and adjusting to both the culture of the United States as well as the campus culture of the University of San Diego. Once the video interviews had been conducted, the plan was to compile them into one video with excerpts from each interview. This video was meant to be an inspiration to other International Students to utilize their voice and share their stories too, as well as a way to demonstrate to the University of San Diego what the need is for making our International Students feel a sense of belonging and providing adequate resources for them.

Data Results and Findings

The data is divided up by themes: acculturation, identity, and support. The questions asked in the survey reflect each of these themes. Upon reviewing the data collected from the

online survey, the number of responses was minimal. Only four individuals participated in the

online survey and all four of them chose to opt out of the video interviews.

The first set of questions in the online survey were centered around the individual interest

in attending the University of San Diego as well as living arrangements and moving costs.

Participants were asked to select one or more reasons why they chose to apply to the University

of San Diego. Table 1.1 highlights that all four participants indicated that location as well as the

academic rigor drew them to apply while 50% of participants indicated they were also interested

in the campus student life and activities. Reasons such as involvement opportunities on campus

as well as the student diversity had no responses.

Table 1.1 *Interest in the University of San Diego*
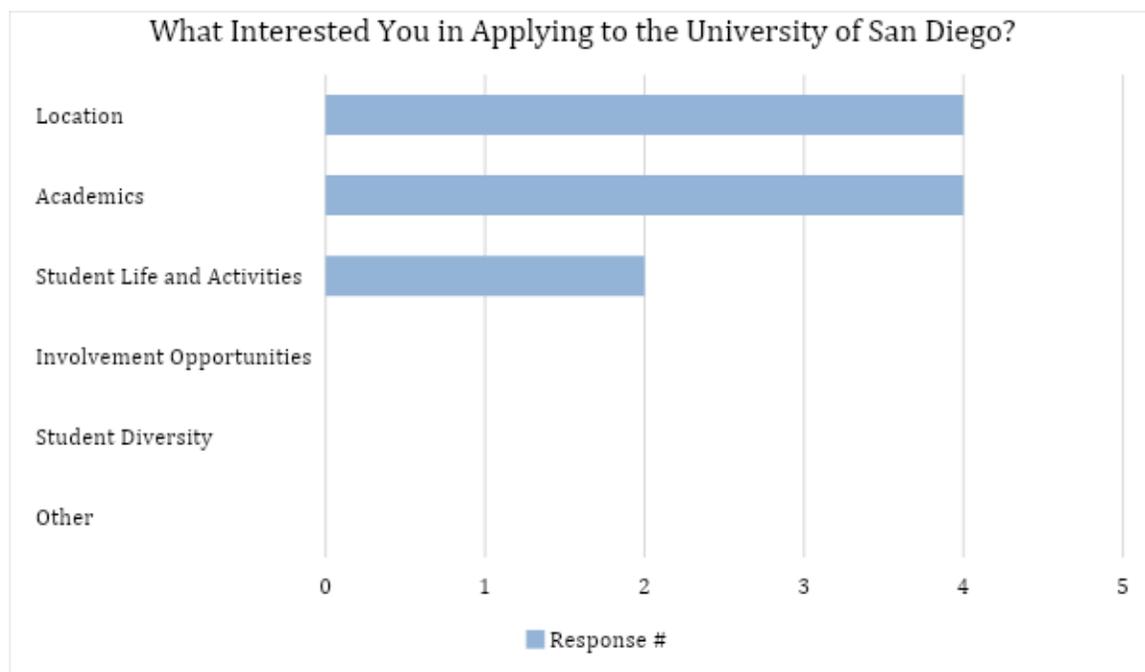
When asked if they have previously visited San Diego before attending university, 50%

of participants indicated that they had visited. Although these individuals stated they had visited

San Diego prior to moving here, this may be taken into consideration in evaluating their ability

to adapt to the culture of San Diego more or less easily. When asked about the cost of moving to

San Diego, 50% of participants reported that it cost them between $3,500-$5,000 to move from their home country. 25% reported between $1,000-$3,500 and 25% reported that it cost more than $5,000 to move to San Diego. The cost of moving from one country to another is already a stressful process, and now financial components need to be taken into consideration. These costs are simply the moving costs from one country to another and does not take into consideration the amount of money the students may need to provide for themselves; because International Students have limitations to seeking employment in the United States, they may rely on the institution or their families for financial support. Several questions were asked regarding community support. 100% of the participants indicated that they live either with a roommate or roommates. Participants also reported that various community events as well as International Student orientation helped welcome them to the University of San Diego.

The next set of questions were centered around identity and if participants felt they had representation of their culture on campus. 50% of participants reported that there were opportunities for them to interact with others from their home country, while the other 50% reported that they were not aware of opportunities. There were no reported similarities between students who felt they had representation on campus versus those that did not. Participants were then asked how they were able to maintain their sense of identity while adapting to the host culture and participants disclosed they made sure to teach their friends about their home and its culture as well as providing themselves with reminders of home in their daily life.

The final set of questions were in regard to challenges experienced on and around campus and what areas of support are needed. Table 1.2 indicates the challenges and frequencies. Finances appeared to be the most common challenge experienced by the participants with it being reported by 100% of survey participants. In looking at financial support for International

Students, many students indicated the lack of finances and scholarship opportunities within their

department. International Students are often not eligible to receive any type of financial aid from

the government, so they rely either on scholarships, work study or financial assistance from back

home. This significant finding may contribute to the other challenges International Students

experience. Because of the lack of financial support, International Students may have difficulty

accessing affordable housing if they are not able to live on campus, or they may not be able to

have their basic needs (including food and hygiene items) sorted. Several students indicated

more affordable on-campus housing options, increased financial support, as well as offering

ways to find other students from the same home country are all ways that the institution can

provide support to International Students.

   Each of these findings offer insight to the lived experiences of International Students at

the University of San Diego. Although it may not be representative of the whole population,

these findings hold value to the students feel seen and supported during their time on campus.

Table 1.2 *Challenges of Attending the University of San Diego*
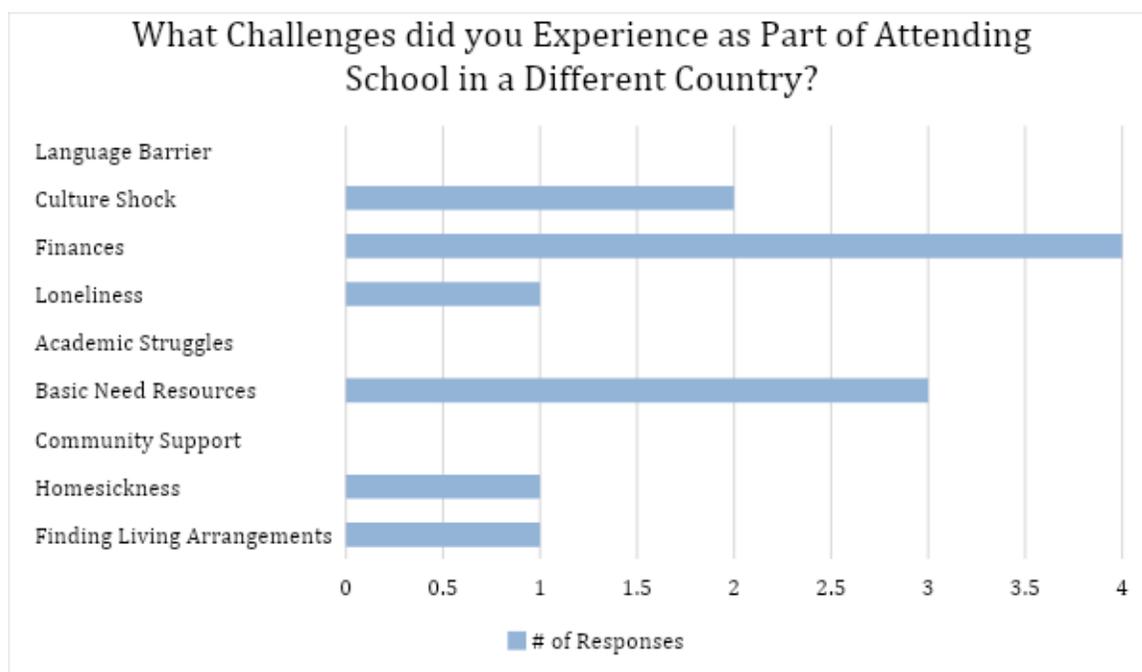
Limitations

Looking at the overall success of providing an outlet for International Students to share their experiences and shed light on institutional efforts, there were some limitations that skewed the outcomes of this research.

The first limitation needed to be addressed is the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic and its effects on student wellbeing and support. Because Fall 2021 was the return of in-person learning, many students, including International Students, faculty and staff underwent a period of unknown transitions back to campus life. The amount of uncertainty that was felt in the beginning months of the Fall 2021 semester were seen in students' hesitancy to be involved on campus and participate in campus activities. Especially with International Students, the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic caused many interruptions to their academic and personal life with concerns for travel, concerns for family members abroad, as well as concern for self. With all of these factors taken into consideration, there is not much of a surprise that interest and response rates were very low.

Another limitation that was taken into consideration was the release timing of the survey. The original timeframe the survey was meant to be released was early to mid-November. There were many setbacks in getting study approval, therefore the timeline kept getting pushed back further and further. By the time the survey was live and recruitment had begun, students were adjusting to being back on campus after several weeks of starting remote. Because the survey release was pushed back, I had to close it after one month in order to move on with data interpretation. Had the survey been released earlier with more recruitment efforts, there may have been a much larger sampling pool as well as more detailed experiences of our International Student population.

The final limitation is the fact that only four students had responded to the survey. The lack of diverse experiences and small number of responses left the data skewed.

With all of these limitations in mind, I still believe that this work is essential to creating the best possible experience for International Students. Even if the data does not fully represent the whole population, it still represents the experiences of a number of students. This data is still important in addressing the needs of International Students. The institution selected for this research can acknowledge that the testimonies are coming from their own and can make the appropriate steps to move forward with enhancing their student experiences.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Although the small number of responses was not anticipated, the need to address International Student needs was successful. In looking at the responses of how helpful the University of San Diego was to the transitional efforts, all of the responses spoke highly of the Office of International Students and Scholars and the amount of support they received. However, it is not the sole responsibility of the Office of International Students and Scholars to provide all the resources and support. Each of the students that responded to the survey indicated gaps in what the University of San Diego provides to the International Student population.

One of the main areas of improvement is providing housing and financial opportunities for International Students. Several of the students indicated that there was very limited on-campus housing and due to them not having a Social Security number or a credit score, it was very difficult to obtain off-campus housing. With regard to financial opportunities, the students that indicated they were graduate students mentioned there were no scholarships for International Students within their respective program. Other areas of improvement include creating spaces where International Students can interact with other individuals from either their home country

or their culture. One student indicated that they met someone else from their home country and

bonded over their shared home, but all four individuals indicated that there were no clubs or

organizations on campus that allowed them to build community for their culture. These are small

steps that can be taken to ensure that our International Students feel supported on campus.

     For future researchers looking to evaluate International Students' sense of belonging and

support on university campuses, recruitment will be the most critical component of future

studies. Starting the recruitment process early could potentially allow for more participants as

well as continued recruitment efforts (such as posting flyers near International offices, sending

out emails to LISTSERVs for International Students, as well as contacting student organizations

related to International Students). Should this study be conducted again, face-to-face interaction

may help participant response rates. A focus group may be a sufficient option for getting student

input on what types of changes should be made on campus to address their needs. Some of the

questions that were asked in the online survey may be used for the focus group to assess what the

challenges are as well as come up with solutions directly from the students. Several of these

focus groups could be offered throughout the semester to ensure that students are able to attend.

     Studying abroad is an incredible opportunity for both domestic students from the United

States studying in another country as well as International Students studying in the United States.

In the same way that all these protective and supportive measures are put into place to ensure

that American students studying abroad are taken care of, universities in the United States should

provide their International Students with the same level of support and care.

Figure 1.1: Representation of International Students
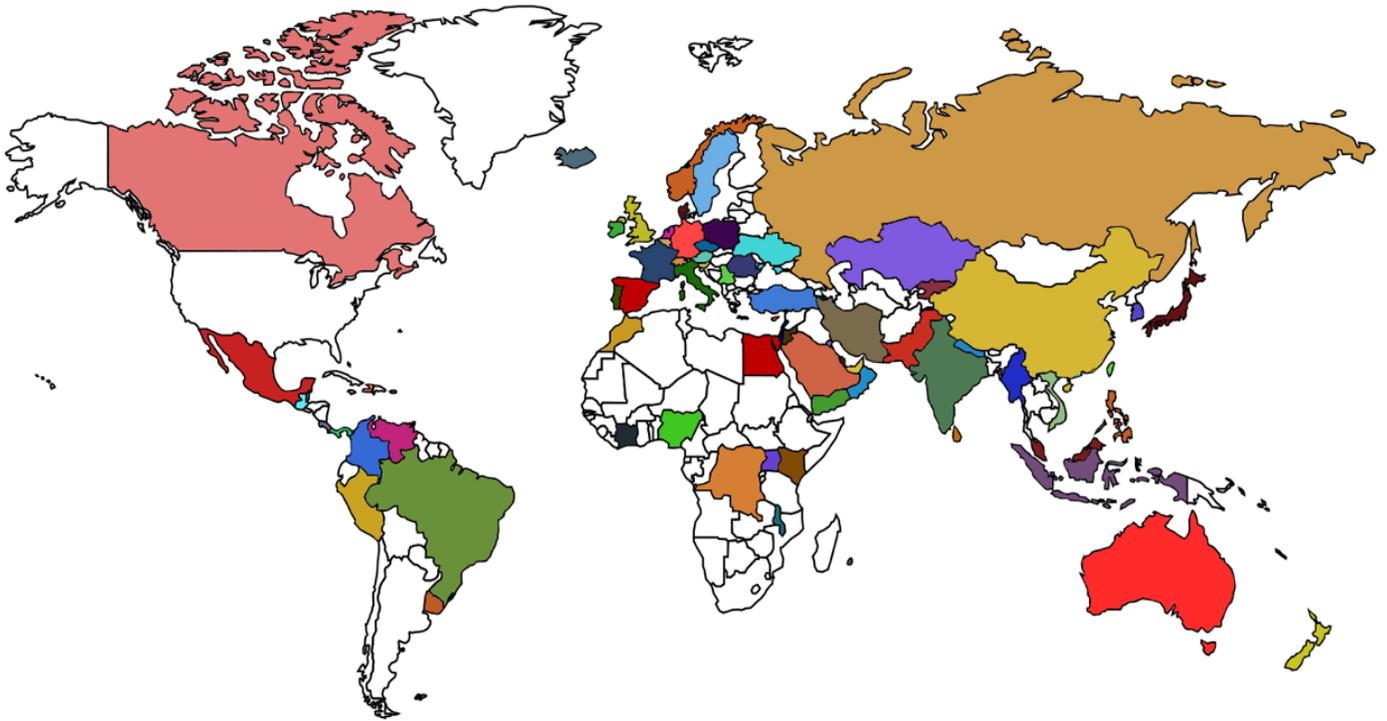
Figure 11: Breakdown of the countries represented by International Students at the University of San Diego for the 2021-2022 academic school year.

Figure 1.2: List of Represented Countries

Australia: 5	**Ireland:** 8	**Norway:** 2	**Ukraine:** 1
Austria: 3	**Israel:** 5	**Oman:** 1	**United Arab Emirates:** 4
Belgium: 2	**Italy:** 15	**Pakistan:** 1	**United Kingdom:** 14
Brazil: 12	**Ivory Coast:** 1	**Panama:** 4	**Uruguay:** 2
Canada: 22	**Japan:** 7	**Peru:** 5	**Venezuela:** 2
China: 51	**Jordan:** 1	**Philippines:** 1	**Vietnam:** 5
Colombia: 4	**Kazakhstan:** 2	**Poland:** 1	**Yemen:** 1
Congo, Dem. Republic of: 1	**Kenya:** 2	**Portugal:** 8	
Costa Rica: 1	**Kuwait:** 145	**Qatar:** 2	
Cyprus: 1	**Kyrgyzstan:** 1	**Romania:** 1	
Czech Republic: 1	**Luxembourg:** 1	**Russia:** 4	
Denmark: 5	**Macau:** 1	**Saudi Arabia:** 59	
Egypt: 2	**Malawi:** 1	**Serbia:** 1	
France: 14	**Malaysia:** 2	**Slovenia:** 2	
Germany: 18	**Mauritius:** 1	**South Korea:** 43	
Guatemala: 1	**Mexico:** 54	**Spain:** 53	
Haiti: 1	**Morocco:** 2	**Sri Lanka:** 1	
Hong Kong: 1	**Myanmar (Burma):** 1	**Sweden:** 3	
Iceland: 4	**Nepal:** 1	**Switzerland:** 2	
India: 17	**Netherlands:** 3	**Taiwan:** 6	
Indonesia: 4	**New Zealand:** 4	**Turkey:** 3	
Iran: 3	**Nigeria:** 1	**Uganda:** 1	

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Appendices

A. **Recruitment Flyer**

B. Participant Confirmation Letter

Subject: International Student Research: Consent Forms

Dear (First and Last Name):

Thank you for your interest in participating in my Masters Action Research study entitled: A Whole New World: Understanding the International Student Experience in the United States through Acculturation, Identity, and Support

Included in this email is a copy of the Participant Informed Consent, Participant Rights form and Video Release (should you choose to partake in the video interview portion of the research) forms. These forms are your acknowledgment that you have read, understand, and agree to volunteer in this process. I will provide a DocuSign link below for you to electronically sign and date the forms.

DocuSign Link: -----

Should you have any questions prior to our scheduled meeting, please do not hesitate to contact me via email: mnessim@sandiego.edu.

Thank you for your consideration. I appreciate you taking the time and effort to help me in my research.

C. Participant Invitation Letter

Subject: International Student Research: Survey Invitation:

Dear (First & Last Name):
You are invited to participate in a study that explores the experiences of international students in the United States. Specifically, this study is seeking to examine how international students adapt to the culture of the host country, identities and sense of belonging of the student while in the host country, as well as discussing the challenges and support provided by the host institution. As a reminder, you have the option to remain anonymous while filling out the survey, however, the results will be anonymous nonetheless.

Here is a link to the survey:
https://usd.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_87hXqZO9bBg09GC

On this site, you will find a full description of the study.

At the end of the survey, you will have the option of volunteering to partake in a video interview discussing your responses to the survey. You will have the option to remain anonymous for the video interview as well.

Your participation in this study will take a total of 30 minutes for the survey and between 60 and 90 minutes should you choose to partake in the video interview.

As compensation for participation, you will be entered to win a $50 Amazon gift card. You will still be considered to win this gift card, even if you choose to withdraw from the study.

Thanks for your participation!

D. Participant Informed Consent

<div align="center">

University of San Diego
Institutional Review Board
Research Participant Consent Form

</div>

<div align="center">

For the research study entitled:
A Whole New World: Understanding the International Student Experience in the United States
through Acculturation, Identity, and Support

</div>

I. Purpose of the research study

Maria Nessim is a student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is to understand and gain insight into international student experiences in the United States and how the institution provides support to its students.

II. What you will be asked to do

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Complete a 24-question survey (both multiple choice and open-ended) that ask the individual about their experience as an international student at their respective institution. The survey includes questions regarding homesickness, financial support, living accommodations, maintaining self-identity, and transitioning to their institution.
- *OPTIONAL* Participate in a private video-recorded interview. This video is meant to enhance the stories and experiences of these international students and highlight that their lived experiences matter; they are not just another number to the campus population, but rather a student with needs.

Your participation in this study will take a total of 30 minutes for the survey and between 60 and 90 minutes should you choose to partake in the video interview.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts

Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day:
San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339

IV. Benefits

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand how international students make sense of their identity while in the host country as well as how the host institutions provide support to its international student population.

V. Confidentiality

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and **may** be used in future research.

Should you choose to partake in the video portion of this study, please be advised that your real name and any identifiers (such as your face and voice) will be used unless noted beforehand. You will have the option of using a pseudonym (fake name) and/or having your voice and face distorted should you want to participate in the video interview, but remain anonymous.

VI. Compensation
Participants will be entered to win a $50 Amazon gift card. The selection process will be randomized and all participants will have an equal chance of winning.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.** You will still be eligible to win the $50 gift card, even if you withdraw from the study.

VIII. Contact Information
If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1) Maria Nessim
Email: mnessim@sandiego.edu

2) Dr. Kecia Brown
Email: keciabrown@sandiego.edu

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

Name (**Printed)**/Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____

E. Participant Rights

Principal Researcher: Maria Nessim

Research Title: A Whole New World: Understanding the International Student Experience in the United States through Acculturation, Identity, and Support

- I have read and discussed the Research Description with the researcher. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the purposes and procedures regarding this study.
- My participation in research is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time without jeopardy to future medical care, employment, student status or other entitlements.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at his/her professional discretion.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue to participate, the investigator will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research project that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- If at any time I have any questions regarding the research or my participation, I can contact the investigator, who will answer my questions. The Researcher's email is mnessim@sandiego.edu.
- If at any time I have comments, or concerns regarding the conduct of the research or questions about my rights as a research subject, I should contact the University of San Diego Institutional Review Board /IRB. The phone number for the IRB is (619) 260-4553
- I should receive a copy of the Research Description and this Participant's Rights document.
- If videotaping is part of this research, I ( ) consent to be videotaped. I ( ) do NOT consent to being videotaped. The written, and videotaped materials will be reviewed only by the principal researcher and members of the research team.
- Written, and videotaped materials ( ) may be used in an educational setting outside the research ( ) may NOT be used in an educational setting outside the research.
- My signature means that I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature: _____ Date:____/____/____

Name: _____

F. Release of Information and Consent Form for Video Recording

Principal Researcher: Maria Nessim

Research Title: A Whole New World: Understanding the International Student Experience in the United States through Acculturation, Identity, and Support

A video recording will be made of you during your participation in the study. We may wish to present some of the video recordings from this study at professional meetings or as demonstrations in classrooms.

• Your face and voice will be used and you potentially could be recognizable by a viewer of the video recording.

In addition to consenting to participate in the research study, you may choose to sign or NOT sign either of the statements below.

1) I hereby give permission for the video recording made for this research study to be also used for professional meetings, such as being shown to professors and researchers at a scientific conference.

_____

Signature of Research Participant   Date

2) I hereby give permission for the video recording made for this research study to be also used for educational purposes, such as being shown to students in a classroom or available for viewing by students via a password protected file which cannot be copied or downloaded. Signature of Research Participant

_____

Signature of Research Participant   Date

G. Interview Questions Centered Around Experience and Identity

1. What is your name (or pseudonym), pronouns and nationality?

2. What is your major?

3. What is your anticipated graduation year?

   o 2022

   o 2023

   o 2024

   o 2025

   o 2026 or later

4. What interested you in applying to the University of San Diego?

   o Location

   o Academics

   o Student Life and Activities

   o Involvement Opportunities

   o Student Diversity

   o Other

5. If you selected "other", please explain

6. Have you visited San Diego before attending school here?

   o Yes

   o No

7. What was the cost (in US dollars) of moving to San Diego?

   o Less than $1,000

   o $1,000-$3,5000

- o $3,500-$5,000

- o   More than $5,000

8. Do you live in San Diego alone, or do you have people you live with?

- o   Alone

- o   With a roommate(s)

- o   With a significant other

- o   With family member(s)

9. What sorts of things did the University of San Diego do to make you feel welcomed or make the transition easier as an international student?

- o   International Student Orientation

- o   Community Events

- o   Other

10. Was the Office of International Students and Scholars at the University of San Diego a reliable resource, or did you seek help from another office on campus?

11. Are there other students of your nationality on campus/are there opportunities for you to engage with others from your home country?

- o   Yes

- o   No

12. If yes, please explain

13. How did you maintain your own sense of self-identity while adapting to the cultures of the United States and San Diego?

14. Are there organizations or clubs at the University of San Diego that pertained to your particular nationality? If so, please list them.

15. How do you manage, if at all, with homesickness?

16. What challenges did you experience as part of attending school in a different country?

   o Language barrier

   o Culture shock

   o Finances

   o Loneliness

   o Academic struggles

   o Basic need resources

   o Community support

   o Homesickness

   o Finding living arrangements

17. Were there any scholarships or financial aid you were able to apply for prior to attending? If so, what were they?

18. Discuss any other feelings about your identity and navigating through a new culture (culture shock, identity either being celebrated or diminished, was it easy to find others that identified similarly to you, loss of identity, etc.)

19. What challenges did you encounter in the classroom? What types of support did you receive in response to those challenges?

   o Language barriers

   o Lack of involvement

   o Lack of peer support

   o Lack of support from professors

   o Other

20. What do you think the University of San Diego does well in regard to accommodating

    international students?

21. How do you feel the University of San Diego could improve in regards to supporting

    international students?

22. Please provide any other information regarding your experience as an international

    student that you feel would be relevant or beneficial for the purpose of this study.

23. If you would like to participate in the video portion of this study, please provide your

    name and email address below.

24. To be entered into the drawing for the $50 Amazon gift card, please provide your name

    and email address below.