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In-Class and Out-of-Class Experiences of International Graduate Students in the United States

Betty Cardona^{[a],*}; Madeline Milian^[b]; Matt Birnbaum^[c]; Ivan Blount^[c]

^[a] Department of Counselor Education & Supervision, University of Northern Colorado, USA.

^[b] School of Teacher Education, University of Northern Colorado, USA.

^[c] Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership, University of Northern Colorado, USA.

* Corresponding author.

Address: Betty Cardona, Department of Counselor Education, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO 80639, USA.

Email: betty.cardona@unco.edu

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Abstract

This qualitative case study aims to understand participants' perceptions of In-Class and Out-of-Class experiences of graduate students in the United States. Data were collected as part of a larger mixed-methods study involving 110 participants identified by the institution's Center for International Education. The participants consisted of 12 graduate students enrolled in doctoral degree programs in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States who represented the following countries: Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Norway, Mexico, and China. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and coded using consensual qualitative research methodology (Hill, *et al.*, 2005). To highlight our findings and ensure the privacy of our participants, we created three first-person composite portraits (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Common themes are presented with the participants' rich descriptions. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

Key words: International students; Challenges; Benefits; Recruitment; Qualitative

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International student enrollment continues to increase at institutions of higher education in the U.S. and it reached a record high in the 2011/12 Academic Year with over 700,000 pursuing educational opportunities, in one of the many institutions across the United States. Graduate students account for 300,430, in fact, 64% of them attend doctoral granting Universities (Institute of International Education, 2012). These students now earn about 20% of graduate degrees awarded by U.S. institutions (Taras & Rowney, 2007), and institutions have come to rely on the financial and intellectual resources they bring to campuses (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2012). Although international graduate students report general satisfaction with their academic experiences and tend to have higher aggregate completion rates and times to graduate, they also report being frustrated by their experiences outside the classroom (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2012).

A plethora of challenges confront international students regardless of degree program or type of degree. The most notable problem is an individual's level of English proficiency (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). International students must adjust to a second or third language, and this learning leads to numerous difficulties (Birnbaum, Cardona, & Milian, 2012; Hartshorne & Baucom, 2007). These students often struggle with unfamiliar language usage and slang, errors made during the translation from one language to another, misunderstanding of idioms, similes and metaphors (Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000). Language differences also hinder understanding of other vehicles of communication such as nonverbal behaviors. In some cultures, nonverbal behaviors and gestures are more expressive, while in others they are less animated. The perceptions and cultural heritage of communicative and nonverbal behaviors differ greatly from one culture to another (Taras & Rowney, 2007).

Other challenges for international students include overcoming culture shock and adapting to a new cultural

lifestyle such as the change in time zones, and unfamiliar drinks and foods, some of which may violate their dietary cultural practices and require adaptations. Another important cultural difference is found within the academic environment. Spencer (2003) states:

Most of them come from cultures in which the student is expected to passively receive lecture material and produce memorized information verbatim. It is important for them to understand that, in the United States, active classroom participation is expected and often part of the course grade. (p. 165)

Related to the classroom context, Parker (1999) illustrates the difficulties international students in the U.S. can experience with cooperative classroom activities and discussions since those represent new teaching and learning styles for many of them. Additional academic skills that present challenges for international students include the required use of critical thinking skills, writing ability, efficient note-taking, oral presentations and comprehension of readings assigned in class (Spencer, 2003).

Other researchers have identified social and emotional barriers that include discrimination, social adaptation problems, homesickness, lack of financial resources, distance from loved ones, new educational systems, reasoning and learning styles, employment complications, time needed from language translation, gender norms and prejudices, housing and transportation, traditional clothing worn in the home country, attachment to one's own culture or home country, and age (Crockett & Hays, 2011; Hartshorne & Baucom, 2007; Taras & Rowney, 2007). Furthermore, acculturative stress symptoms can take a toll during attempts to adjust to the culture of the academic host country, and limited social connection can decrease the chances of adaptation (Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, & Baker, 2004). Moreover, ineffective organizational skills can decrease the international students' success rate of adaptation to the new environment (Hartshorne & Baucom, 2007).

Although international students experience numerous challenges, they also derive multiple benefits from studying abroad. While some students study abroad for a semester or a year, completing a degree in another country is a significant accomplishment (Dwyer & Peters, 2004). International students develop new skill sets and are influenced professionally from established friendships that turn into professional relationships while studying abroad (Dwyer, 2004). They are sometimes encouraged to attain a job overseas, generate a career interest, work for a multi-national organization, and change career paths after their study abroad experience. Valuable learning also occurs when students acquire a new language and accumulate hands-on knowledge about the host country. Consequently, when students return home they are more likely to seek out multicultural experiences, careers and organizations where their new second language skills are needed when returning home (Lenz & Wister, 2008; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005).

Numerous personal benefits with long-lasting effects for international students have been identified in the literature such as intercultural learning and acceptance and personal growth benefits (Dwyer & Peters, 2004). Ward and Masgoret (2006) state that recurrent contact with people from other cultures can lead to a reduction in intergroup anxiety and a rise in optimistic intercultural attitude, resulting in more tolerance and acceptance for ethnic, racial and cultural differences. These intercultural experiences also help students gain a better understanding of their own cultural prejudices, expectations and customs and promote future attempts to engage with people from other cultures and ethnic groups even after returning to their home country. Students reported increases in personal growth, self-revelations, awareness of their own biases, tolerance for uncertainty, confidence and maturity, as well as a broad range of multicultural friends (Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Dwyer, 2004).

The new intercultural context encounter by international students in the host country forces them out of their comfort zones, and changes their world perspectives of a particular cultural group or country (Lenz & Wister, 2008). As Dwyer (2004) explains, international students also changed or augmented their political and social perspectives, and continued to be aware of these views after studying abroad. They also cultivated a sense of world-mindedness, or the ability to think of humanity as "the human race," not as individuals from specific ethnicities or races (Douglas & Jones-Rikkens, 2001).

Studying abroad also fulfills a motivation or a dream for some students (Hartshorne & Baucom, 2007). Some students want to live abroad and experience a culture and society different from their home country. They often report having a desire to improve their personal experiences by learning about a different cultural lifestyle while in the country of study. Overall, Dwyer (2004) describe that despite the challenges and barriers that international students experience when studying abroad, the majority of international students report having a lifelong changing experience impact and a new perspective on how they perceive the world.

Through the stories of international students, our work explores the present personal challenges and anticipated professional benefits that will result from attending Regional Western University (RWU), a mid-sized doctoral granting university that currently hosts around 300 international students. Through their experiences, we will increase our understanding of the factors that guide them in deciding which institution to select, the challenges they experience, and the future benefits they anticipate after completion of their degrees.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

We opted for case study methodology, as RWU naturally bounded our phenomena and our interests for better

understanding our participants' perceptions of challenges and benefits. Data were collected as part of a larger mixed-methods study involving 110 participants identified by the institution's Center for International Education. We interviewed 12 of the original participants who indicated a willingness to meet individually with the researchers. After agreeing to participate, each individual was scheduled for an interview, which began with a discussion about informed consent. Once participants understood the purpose of the study and were able to give informed consent, we proceeded with conducting semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 40 to 70 minutes.

Our participants included eight female and four male students between the ages of 22 and 46 years old. Ten participants were single and had no children. Two were married, or in committed relationships, and had children. Four participants were enrolled in Master's degree programs and eight in Ph.D. programs. The participants were pursuing a variety of majors some of which included counseling psychology, English, special education, teacher education, business and accounting, biology, and chemistry. Countries represented in the study included Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Norway, Mexico, and China.

Study Location

Located in an agricultural area of the Rocky Mountain region, the institution attracts many future educators and school related professionals, as it offers programs in teacher preparation, school counseling, school psychology, school administration, educational technology, and higher education administration. The mild climate of the area and the personal attention that students receive due to relatively small class-size provide motivation for international students to attend the institution. Currently there are about 200 international graduate students from 35 countries, and there is a strong commitment by the institution's administrators to internationalize our campus and increase the number of international students who attend the institution. In general, international students who have attended the institution report having positive educational experiences at RWU, and with the surrounding community (Birnbaum, Cardona, Milian, & Gonzalez, 2012).

FINDINGS

To highlight our findings and ensure the privacy of our participants, we created three first-person composite portraits (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). This approach allows us to focus our findings on the most relevant information we gathered from our participants' stories (Lawrence-Lighfoot & Hoffman-Davis, 1997). After providing the three composite portraits as an introduction to each narrative, we review the reasons our participants provided for attending RWU and their perceptions' of the personal and professional benefits of studying at the institution.

Composite Portraits

Sardi. Sardi Muhammad, 40, was born and raised in Saudi Arabia. She and her husband, Aashif, have two children, and have lived in the United States for two years. Sardi is working on a M.A. degree in Special Education, while her husband pursues an advanced degree in engineering. Their oldest child, Laith, 12, was born with several developmental disabilities. In Saudi Arabia, Sardi stayed at home and spent most of her time working with Laith with the hopes that he would "get better". However, after becoming increasingly frustrated with the Saudi school system and its inability to adequately provide educational services for Laith, she spoke with her husband about pursuing a college degree in an area that might help her to work with their son. With her husband's support, Sardi enrolled at the university in the goal of learning how to best help her son. Towards the end of her program, a faculty mentor spoke with Sardi about the possibilities of attending graduate school abroad. This idea became a possibility three years later when Aashif was accepted into an engineering program in the U.S. After his first year of coursework, Sardi and the children joined him. Six months later, Sardi enrolled at RWU, which is about a 90-minute drive from Aashif's school. The family rents a house near RWU, requiring Aashif to commute daily for classes and the work-study position that he has secured. In addition to her own coursework, Sardi is responsible for day-to-day childrearing and maintaining the home.

The transition to living in the U.S. has been challenging for Sardi, but she has enjoyed it immensely. In addition to navigating unfamiliar U.S. cultural values, especially those dealing with gender, she has struggled with the logistics of her own education and raising the children. She learned to drive out of necessity, and finds the many trips she takes each day stressful. Several other Saudi families live in their neighborhood, and all the children attend the same public school. When possible, a few of the mothers will drive groups of children to school, but Laith's special needs make this difficult. There are conversations among several families about enrolling the children in a private school run by Saudi educators about 40 miles away. If the children are enrolled in this school, Sardi will probably have to rethink the feasibility of completing her degree.

Eyulf. Eyulf Duc, 25, is a graduate psychology student from northern Europe who has been at RWU for nine months, although he quickly mentioned that it feels like it has been much longer than that because his father died shortly after he came to the United States. As the oldest child, he felt responsible for handling the funeral arrangements and his father's financial matters; however he had no money to fly home for the funeral after classes started. His mother was stoic about the matter, and encouraged Eyulf to focus instead on school. She provided encouraging words, and reminded him of his desire to

come to the U.S. and study psychology, see the Grand Canyon, and learn to speak English without an accent. Eyulf mentioned that studying RWU is one of the best decisions he has made, but it is stressful on his mother. *“I basically stopped smoking when I got here because so few of my RWU friends smoke,”* he observed, *“and my mom started [smoking] because she was so worried about me.”* Because Eyulf is Caucasian, speaks English fluently, and is from an industrialized country, he has had fewer issues transitioning to living in the U.S. than other international students, and has developed a close network of friends with whom to socialize.

Eyulf lives in a university-owned apartment that he shares with another graduate student. He worked a couple of years after high school, saving money so he could pursue studying abroad. Being from a middle class family allowed Eyulf to start saving for his studies in the U.S. as a sophomore in high school. He does not own a car, and he is on a meal plan which he describes as allowing him to *“eat very well.”* Eyulf rides a bike around town when his friends are unable to provide him transportation. *“I love it here,”* he stated repeatedly during the interview. *“I was expecting my sister would visit me for a summer, and we would see the U.S. But now I must be prepared to go home and help my family at the end of the term. I never considered the possibility that something would happen to my family while I was abroad.”*

Jintana. Jintana Mali, 23, is from Thailand, and is in her third year of a Master’s in the Accounting program. She is unmarried, and lives in a small off-campus apartment. Jintana earned a bachelor’s degree in business from a private Thai university, and started teaching in a local school because she was not able to get a decent paying job after graduating. Jintana was considering graduate institutions in Australia and China before she learned about RWU from her supervisor, who graduated from RWU in 1990. He described his experiences at RWU in positive terms, and even offered to contact his former professors for her. Jintana’s parents encouraged her to attend RWU after listening to her supervisor described the institution and the surrounding community. He stressed the importance of attending an accredited program, including the benefit regarding future job possibilities. *“I received a scholarship from my country to pursue a Master’s and or a Ph.D. abroad. I decided to leave my job as a teacher, and applied for the scholarship. I have a degree in economics already, so it’s kind of the same, but also different, from what I had hoped.”*

During our conversation, Jintana eagerly mentioned her desire to experience a different culture and spend time with people who had different values. But she quickly turned to discussing the cost of studying abroad and her U.S. peers. *“I wanted to be in a program that encouraged critical thinking, although I only learned this phrase in a RWU class,”* she observed. *“It took me awhile to speak in class, and the first time I did the professor asked me*

to stay afterwards. I thought I was in trouble, but she actually encouraged me to say more in class. I think my boss knew I would have this very experience.” When probed further, Jintana added that this also presented a dilemma: *“We [international graduate students] are under constant pressure to think about what we are saying because we don’t want to offend someone or be laughed at. But now that I speak up more often, I see the American students sometimes. The professors want us to speak up more, but perhaps not the American students.”*

The portraits of Sardi, Eyulf, and Jintana illustrate some of the daily complications that many international students face while studying at our U.S. institutions. Starting with the decision to select and attend an institution in the U.S., international students encounter unexpected situations that can result in personal and professional frustration and growth. Following, we offer a more detailed account of some of these issues and situations.

The Decision to Attend

The decision-making process of pursuing a graduate degree is often complex, especially for individuals considering studying in a foreign country. For our participants, factors that have been identified in the literature, such as financial and social costs, reputation, and course availability were important considerations as they weighed their decision to attend (Mazzarol, 2002). However, as our participants suggested, a range of additional factors also influenced their decisions to attend RWU. These include family influences, information from individuals with firsthand experience of RWU, and serendipity.

Family. For our participants, their families played an important role in deciding where to apply and attend, and in their overall experience. Family members were influential for them not only before arriving in the U.S., but also while they were here. Jintana’s family was supportive and actively involved in her decision to study abroad and attend RWU in particular. Jintana’s supervisor discussing his decades old first-hand experiences at the school persuaded her father, who was initially overwhelmed with the process of identifying possible programs. Jintana remembers that once someone was able to vouch for the institution, her father felt a deep connection to it. She observed, *“He did not know anything about other places, except what I described, so this made him feel more comfortable.”* It was important to Jintana that her parents, her father in particular, feel some connection to RWU.

Sardi is attending RWU because her husband is studying at a nearby institution that does not offer a special education degree. She is in the U.S. as a trailing spouse with the primary responsibility for day-to-day care of her children, but she takes her role as a student seriously. *“I would not be a student here if Aashif wasn’t also attending school,”* Sardi observed. *“And I am at RWU because it has the program I want, and I can still*

take care of my family.” Sardi did not arrive in the U.S. with a plan to attend graduate school, as was the case with a few of our participants. She says once it became feasible to pursue her degree, “*My priority changed from earning this degree for my family to a personal mission. I see this as a way to make a difference for my son and others when I return.*” Sardi repeatedly organizes her priorities, placing her family before her graduate studies, but also describes changing personal and professional priorities as a student. Similarly to other participants who are in the U.S. with families, the decision to study at RWU combined a desire to earn a graduate degree with program availability and basic logistics.

Sardi is friends with numerous other Saudi women who are also taking classes at RWU. She is one of the few who is married and living abroad with her husband. “*There is a large Saudi population on campus, but if you are here with your husband, you traditionally stay at home and don’t have much interaction with Westerners. I am fortunate that Aashif understands the value of me earning a degree because of what it will mean back home.*”

Eyulf’s family was also involved in his decision to study abroad, and finds ways to be present in his life even when he is thousands of miles away. Eyulf left home, but considered returning due to the death of his father. “*He [his father] was proud of me studying in the U.S., but I think he would have wanted me to return home to help my mother and family.*” His mother insisted Eyulf stay, explaining that it was what his father would have wanted. “*She told me he thought this was the start of my career. I checked into tickets, but I would be gone for over two weeks,*” Eyulf said, apparently still not sure he made the correct decision. His mother convinced him to stay at RWU by linking it to his professional success and the amount of work he has done, but he remains conflicted. “*RWU does a great job of supporting intentional undergraduates,*” Eyulf observed, “*but there is less for the graduate students, who are older. But for many of us, our families are still concerned.*” Eyulf’s experience reminds us that life for the families of international graduate students continues while they are abroad. While most of our participants were aware of this, some felt unprepared to cope with the feelings this generated.

Firsthand Information and Chance Encounters. The decision to study abroad as a graduate student requires that students gather information about visas, tuition and fees, deadlines and policies, and specific programs. While this information is available in printed and/or on-line materials, about half of our participants suggested that interactions with individuals who had either first or second hand familiarity with RWU was important to their decision to attend. Jintana’s supervisor graduated from RWU, which was important to her parents. The supervisor was also aware of other RWU graduates, one who owned a growing business and another who served in the national government. With his encouragement, Jintana wrote

letters about her decision to attend RWU to each of them. The resulting correspondence reinforced her belief that she had chosen a good institution to attend.

Eyulf started his search for graduate programs after attending a graduate school fair. RWU was not represented, but he saw some posters that featured the Grand Canyon, and started searching on-line for graduate programs in Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and Nevada. “*The images made me curious and spoke to my sense of adventure,*” he said. “*It just seemed like a great physical space to be a student. But I am not sure my parents thought that was a good way to pick a school.*” After receiving several rejection letters, Eyulf worried that he had made a mistake to apply to U.S. institutions. “*I can’t remember what institution I can thank for showing me a picture of the Grand Canyon, but it led to me being at RWU.*”

Sardi did not believe she would be able to attend graduate school while in the U.S., especially after learning that her husband’s institution did not have a special education program. It was only after speaking with her son’s teacher in the U.S. that she learned of RWU’s program and its reputation in the community. “*It came up in a meeting about my son and the training that special education teachers receive in the U.S.,*” she said. “*And we agreed about the need for such programs in all countries. I left with the name and email address of the department chair.*” In each of these examples, informal connections and chance encounters played significant roles in the decisions of international graduate students to attend RWU.

Perceived Benefits and Challenges of Studying at RWU

We originally assumed that our participants would clearly distinguish between the personal and professional benefits of attending RWU, and we asked questions intended to differentiate these. During our first rounds of data analysis, we instead found that participants usually discussed the benefits of studying at RWU in terms of in-class and out-of-class experiences and general skill development. Further analysis suggests that this binary had limited value, because our participants consistently moved between the two. As one participant observed, the professional and personnel benefits, or in-class and out-of-class benefits, are deeply entwined for international graduate students because they are learning about culture as well as academics. “*A person who spends a month in the U.S. can avoid mixing the personal and professional if he wants,*” the participant said. “*But if you are studying here for a degree, the two become one.*” For example, learning contemporary accounting practices or how to better teach biology classes also provide insights into U.S. culture and values. In the same way, being immersed in speaking English makes the classroom more understandable and day-to-day living easier to navigate. The major themes that arouse from our conversations with participants about perceived benefits and challenges

of attending RWU centered around multiculturalism and diversity.

Multiculturalism and Diversity. Like all our participants, Jintana, Sardi, and Eyulf discussed having overall positive in-class experiences, though each has also dealt with varying degrees of culture adjustment and transition. Eyulf observed that his undergraduate degree fully prepared him for the work and learning required in his graduate program, something he attributes to the similarities between northern European and U.S. cultures. *“I am from an industrialized country that values education, just like the other students in my classes,”* he observed. *“My professors [at home] are a lot like the ones here. But it is graduate school, so the classes are smaller, the professors focus on the students more, and they give us lots of feedback. They encourage us to work together, which I like.”* Eyulf is comfortable in his classes, cognizant of his professors’ teaching styles, and open to Western-style teaching. *“My education at home would probably be free, so it is very expensive for me to study in the U.S., and I take my classwork very seriously. Most of us do. And I think I am learning things about other cultures that my peers back home may not. There are many cultures represented in each class, and the professors stress cultural differences. This helps me understand the limits of each theory and reflect on my own culture. I think this will make me a better professional and more aware of other people’s experiences.”* Eyulf, reflecting on his multicultural classroom experiences, sees the benefits of learning in an environment that values other cultures, and he is beginning to think about how he might apply this outside the classroom.

When pressed about how multiculturalism would benefit him at home, Eyulf seemed less certain of its benefits. *“What we learn here is American multiculturalism, about Blacks, Latinos, older people, and gays and lesbians. But I struggle with what I will bring back to my country as a professional, because these are not the same issues at home.”* While Eyulf appreciates his program’s emphasis on multiculturalism, he is wrestling with its applicability in a professional setting after returning home.

Sardi’s classroom experience parallels Eyulf’s in some ways. *“Professors are very nice, they care, they understand international students, but they hold me accountable. If I can’t understand something, they give me different explanations, and they give me extra time. They have been accommodating and supportive. My teaching skills are better and my knowledge of the American culture and society is improving. People are open to culture and differences.”* On the surface, Sardi seems to appreciate and value the extra attention her professors provide. But this extra attention has also caused stress. She recalls numerous instances when her professors repeatedly asked her if she understood the classroom discussion, or offered to speak with her after class. *“We are not used to*

this extra attention. I know they are being helpful, but we have different understandings about what is appropriate for men and women.” Although Sardi has encountered challenges, she values the time she has on campus, learning from professors and peers, and discovering a newfound self-reliance. She has become fast friends with the dozen other Saudi women taking classes in the college and appreciates how supportive her U.S. classmates have been. Sardi’s professors encourage her and the other Saudi women to explore new ideas while trying to be respectful of their beliefs. Sardi and her Saudi classmates plan their schedules so they can study together, and, when possible, take classes together. *“We are most comfortable when we are in the same class. I took one class when I was the only Saudi woman and the instructor asked me over and over if I understood.”* While Sardi appreciated the professor’s thoughtfulness, it made her uncomfortable. *“When there are several of us, the instructor can ask us as a group.”*

Jintana is one of the few participants frustrated with her classroom experiences. *“I have not been able to speak in class, to be honest. As an international student, I have to think about my message and the meaning so I am not laughed at. So, it is definitely hard for international students. We have to think of every word.”* Jintana seems to lack confidence in her ability to communicate in English, even though she is better than many other international students. *“In some of my classes there are many [other international graduate students] who have a difficult time speaking and reading English. I think they work very hard, but wonder what they are learning. RWU offers tutoring, but it is frustrating for me to listen to them in class.”* Jintana is frustrated by the communication abilities of some of the other international graduate students with whom she takes classes, a theme mentioned by a few other participants. *“I am in my third year now, so I have less patience than when I started. I had an assumption that when you go to another country to study you will be the only non-American in the class.”*

Our participants shared how their journeys began and how they constantly negotiate their in-class and out-of-class priorities and experiences since their arrival in the United States. Through their words, we learned that separating their personal and professional lives and the correspondent challenges and benefits that we had initially expected to find, was a separation that appeared arbitrary to them.

DISCUSSION

An important finding to note is the limited value of the original binary of the personal versus the professional. As mentioned, our participants appeared to constantly move between the two, sometimes not even distinguishing one from the other. The language and cultural immersion that occurs within the academic/professional environment of their university programs assists them in acculturation tasks in their personal lives off-campus. The personal and

professional may be deeply intertwined for international students since they learn about culture, language and themselves both inside and outside of the classroom. Because of their perspective as “outsiders inside,” they can see connections between U.S. cultural values and the U.S. higher education system that American college students may not notice. It may also be that the advanced nature of these particular international participants as graduate students contributes to the interconnection between their personal and professional lives. Indeed, the goal of their U.S. study is to complete a degree. Unlike studying abroad for one semester or a year, this combination of extended time (two or more years) and the completion of an entire academic goal may contribute to the interconnection between personal and professional.

That is not to say that the personal and academic/professional were immune to conflicts for all of our participants. In fact, every composite portrait highlights challenges of attending RWU that are at the core conflicts between the personal and professional life of each individual. At times, personal life can threaten to interrupt academic life, as in the case of a family death or a family move. International graduate students and their families may be faced with value conflicts between those of their home country and families (personal) and their academic environments and long-term goals (professional).

Family was a central theme in our conversations with international graduate students. Whether referring to nuclear or extended families, members living with them in the U.S. or those they left behind in their home country, the families of international graduate students have an impact on them. In many cases, the students’ families had offered tremendous support for their attendance at RWU. While financial support was not explicitly discussed, emotional support ranged from urging them to focus on school during a major family crisis to sacrificing some of the family’s cultural values in order to complete a program that will have valued application in a career back home. As mentioned by one participant, the support of family can mitigate some lack of university support for international graduate students. This supports the finding that married international students, in particular, experience lower levels of social adjustment strain (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006).

Family also plays a part in the decision to attend a graduate program outside of one’s home country. For some international students, doing so fulfills an individual’s dream (Hartshorne & Baucom, 2007), but for some of our participants, it was actually a prior family move to the U.S. that prompted an interest in applying to a U.S. graduate program. For others, family members’ opinions played an important role in the decision. For some international graduate students and their families, receiving reports of firsthand information with RWU from previous graduates and their professional connections can create a sense of

connection with the institution, reduce anxiety during the selection process, and reinforce a later decision to attend. This mirrors findings that personal recommendations serve to “pull” international students to a specific country of study, making “word-of-mouth referral one of the most powerful forms of promotion that international education institutions can use” (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 85). A third factor revealed in our study about the decision to attend RWU appeared to be happenstance. Whether speaking with someone about a concern and shared value which resulted in a referral to the program, or happening upon a picture of a renowned U.S. tourist destination, some of our participants could pinpoint moments in the decision-making process that were more about luck than intentionality.

The main focus of the discussions related to the benefits and challenges of attending RWU centered on the topic of classroom diversity. Benefits included learning about other cultures and using the differences in cultures to critically evaluate theories and develop an awareness of others. RWU’s academic environment that appreciates diversity promotes some personal comfort from the shared value of diversity and the accommodation of instruction. Some participants noted the difference in intercultural development that occurs uniquely in the U.S. academic environment, whereas simply living in the U.S. might not provide such development, especially for international women serving in traditional roles in the home.

These findings support the research about intercultural development as a benefit to international students in the U.S. (Dwyer, 2004; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005). While none of our participants particularly spoke to a new sense of “world-mindedness” as a member of the human race (Douglas & Jones-Rikkens, 2001), they certainly reported benefitting from a rise in optimistic intercultural attitudes and reduced anxiety (Ward & Masgoret, 2006).

Additional benefits resulting from classroom diversity emerged to echo previous findings about skill development (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005), personal development (Dwyer, 2004; Dwyer & Peters, 2004), and social development (Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Lenz & Wister, 2008). Beyond language skills, some participants identified specific professional skills they were building. Female students from the Middle East remarked upon the sense of self-reliance they were developing while attending school in a culture that values independence and gender equality. Socially, some students expressed appreciation of the support of their U.S. classmates. Curiously, several students also mentioned the benefit of a social and learning community consisting of a significant student population from their home country. In addition to research and professional development, it has been found that international graduate students rank social development as important (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2012). It appears the diverse environment at RWU may be providing that.

The participants in our study also discussed the challenges they perceive in attending RWU. In every case, they matched findings in the literature. Language barriers can cause numerous difficulties for international students (Hartshorne & Baucom, 2007). In the case of our participants, the interviews revealed a hesitation to speak in class for fear of ridicule as well as a feeling of frustration about other international students who do speak English well. In both situations, it seems a perception of low English proficiency, whether the lack was observed by the researchers or not, seemed to be at the core of students' feelings. Spoken language barriers may be more challenging to international graduate students than written ones (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010), and our interviews illustrate the distress this can create for them.

Cultural differences also produced challenges for our international students. The findings of Taras and Rowney (2007) about gender norms may have taken a unique twist in our study. While our participants appreciated the program's value of diversity and resultant learning accommodations, the attempts by some faculty to ensure students understood class content caused some discomfort.

In cases where faculty singled out individual students and/or invited them to meet with them after class, students felt conflict with the cultural values of their home countries. Additionally, while participants may find the overall appreciation for diversity in a program to be welcoming to them, a specific focus on U.S. diversity related to ethnic and racial American groups was not always seen as applicable upon the future return to their home countries.

Though none of our participants spoke outright about homesickness, the family remained a central theme when the discussion turned to challenges of attending RWU. As mentioned, students' attendance impacted the family and resulted in challenges related to the distance from family at home, especially during a family crisis or other need. Additionally, potential challenges to the family may be when cultural values differ from the U.S. academic environment to that of the family. While it appeared the families of the participants in our study negotiated these values conflicts well, it is nonetheless a challenge, and one that has been documented in the acculturation literature (Crockett & Hays, 2011; Harsthorne & Baucom, 2007; Kanekar, Sharma, & Atri, 2010).

One challenge found in the literature was disputed by our findings. While the logistics of studying abroad in the U.S. as an international student may prove complicated in terms of transportation (Hartshorne & Baucom, 2007; Taras & Rowney, 2007), that was not reported by our participants. In fact, a few participants reported having friends with cars who offer rides as well as feeling comfortable biking around town. Additionally, some also selected the program because of the availability of classes and location that allow for necessary school-family balance.

The findings generated from our participants' stories

can guide our thinking when trying to design more appropriate and accommodating educational and social environments for international students at institutions of higher education across the United States. We conclude our work with some suggestions for practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

It is reasonable to expect increased opportunities for academic and social interactions between college and university personnel and international students, as enrollment trends continue to increase. These academic and social contacts between U.S. higher education personnel and international students represent avenues for positive interactions, but only when factors that create success for international students are considered.

Institutions wanting to increase the number of international students attending their programs need to consider designing recruitment activities that involve graduates of the institutions. These former students are in privileged positions to motivate and facilitate the process of selecting an institution in the United States as personal contacts back home proved to be instrumental in the decision-making process of those we interviewed.

Graduate students with school-age children require additional orientation information as there are many aspects of schooling in the U.S. that are unfamiliar to them. Early information about the local school district and its educational programs will assist those with children plan ahead to avoid unnecessary stress once the academic semester starts. Similarly, these students will also benefit from being introduced to local families so that a network of "family friends" can be created. Although it is very common to arrange cultural friends for undergraduate international students, these cultural friends tend to be other undergraduate American students on campus; who will not be a good match for graduate international students. Married graduate American students or local families will create a much more appropriate and productive match for international married students.

Discussions about gender role expectations and communication will be important to have in order to avoid uncomfortable situations for students who are not accustomed to private conversations with members of the opposite gender. Professors and teaching assistants can create small group advising and discussion sessions to alleviate any concerns created by cultural practices related to gender issues. When in doubt, asking the students a simply question such as "*What will work best for you?*" may lessen the consequences of a possible uncomfortable situation.

Many international students may need time to acculturate to the interactive classroom style of universities in the United States, particularly for those whose native language is not English. The combination of not speaking English as a first language and lack of familiarity with student-centered practices, places many

international students in academically disadvantaged positions when engaging in classroom discussions and oral presentations. Allowing international students to pair with a native speaker for presentations, assigning roles to members of presentation groups, and encouraging students to use visual that will enhance clarity when presenting will facilitate the demands of classroom participation so often foreign to many international students.

One important factor that academic departments may want to consider is the international and national student ratio of their classrooms. While some international students find comfort in having classmates from the same country in their classrooms, others find it difficult to understand the English spoken by international students from a different country and would much rather be surrounded by Americans students. Too many international students in the same class is viewed by some international students as not having the opportunity to improve their English skills and get to know American students, a goal that initially guided their decision to come to the United States.

The extraordinary journeys of international students can be inspiring and instructive to our faculty, administrators, staff, and to our American students. Listening to these journeys will not only improve their in-class and out-of-class experiences, but will allow us to reflect on what we do and its relevance to the global society in which we live.

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