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# The grass isn't always greener: A qualitative study of Indian international students attending a comprehensive university

Alison R. Adams

*Eastern Illinois University*

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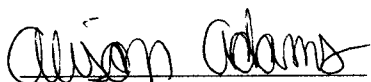
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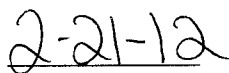
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The Grass Isn't Always Greener: A Qualitative Study of Indian  
International Students Attending a Comprehensive University

(TITLE)

BY

Alison R. Adams

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Science in College Student Affairs

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2012

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Ray and Judy Adams, who have always believed in me, even when I did not believe in myself. The sacrifices that you have made for your children have not gone unnoticed. I love you both more than you shall ever know.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee for all of their help. To Dr. Yoder and Dr. Peoples, thank you so much for all that you have done. I know that both of your schedules are hectic, so I truly appreciate the time you committed to my thesis. To Dr. Eberly, who spent countless hours proofing and editing, thank you. With your retirement, Eastern is losing a wonderful, dedicated faculty member.

To Dad, Mom, Emily, Elizabeth and Tessa, thank you. You all have been so motivating and encouraging and I truly could not have done this without your support. I love you and am truly blessed that I get to call you all family.

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this present study was to explore the problems that Indian sub-continent students who participated in international study programs encountered in their travel abroad. Using a qualitative research methodology, four graduate-level Indian students were interviewed via a semi-structured interview protocol. Participants were asked to share problems they were currently facing or had faced while studying at a midsized, comprehensive institution in the Midwest.

Using cross-comparative analysis, verbal interview data were analyzed for common codes and categories and were then grouped into themes. Five themes were apparent: Homesickness, Culture Shock, Discrimination, Language Barriers and Educational Differences, and Other Issues. The Indian participants were also asked for suggestions that might alleviate some of the identified problems. The study provides readers with an inside look into the 'voices' of the Indian international participants while offering recommendations for both Student Affairs practitioners and future researchers.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>DEDICATION .....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES .....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>CHAPTER I-Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Statement of Purpose .....	2
Significance of Study .....	3
Definitions .....	3
Culture Shock .....	3
Discrimination .....	3
Homesickness.....	3
International Student.....	4
Language Barriers.....	4
Research Questions.....	4
Expected Outcomes .....	4
Summary .....	5
<b>CHAPTER II- Literature Review.....</b>	<b>6</b>
Language Barriers.....	6
Culture Shock .....	7
Bias/Discrimination and Threats to Safety.....	8
Homesickness.....	9
Other Problems .....	10
Summary .....	11
<b>CHAPTER III-Methodology .....</b>	<b>12</b>
Design of Study.....	12
Site.....	12
Participants.....	12



Individual Interviews .....	13
Data Collection .....	13
Method of Analysis.....	14
Summary .....	14
<b>CHAPTER IV-Results and Findings .....</b>	<b>15</b>
Homesickness.....	15
Culture Shock .....	17
Discrimination .....	20
Language Barriers and Educational Differences.....	21
Other Issues.....	23
Suggestions.....	26
Conclusion .....	28
<b>CHAPTER V-Discussion and Recommendations .....</b>	<b>30</b>
Recommendations for Student Affairs Practitioners .....	33
Recommendations for Future Studies .....	34
Conclusions.....	35
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: Informed Consent Form.....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: Interview Protocol.....</b>	<b>46</b>

**LIST OF TABLES**

**Table 1: Descriptive characteristics of study participants.....4**

## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

International study provides students with valuable life lessons and helpful experiences. College students who decide to study abroad are rewarded with unique opportunities to experience other cultures, languages, religions and belief systems. They learn how to be self-sufficient and often leave with an appreciation of others' differences and perspectives (Younes and Asay, 2003). While international study has occurred throughout history, globalization has caused it to become a more frequent occurrence in post-millennial society (CIEE. n.d.).

The world we live in is an extremely global one. Gone are the years in which each nation relied primarily on their own technology and goods to survive. Corporations, like Coca-Cola<sup>®</sup>, McDonalds<sup>®</sup> and Dell<sup>®</sup> are household names throughout the world. Trading of goods and ideas occur daily and government officials are in constant collaboration with one another to ensure international cooperation. Thanks to the phenomena known as the World Wide Web, language and cultural differences no longer prevent people from having communications and interactions with each other. The erosion of national boundaries has led to the easier exchange of not only ideas and products but people (Suter, 2006). The world's youth have grown-up in a time of great change and have continuously taken advantage of the opportunities globalization has afforded them, such as international study.

The number of students in today's society that are deciding to study abroad have increased markedly in recent years. According to a poll conducted by the Institute of

International Education, over 672,000 international students came to the United States to study at some point throughout the 2009/2010 academic year. According to the same poll, over 260,327 American students studied abroad in the 2008/2009 academic year. Never in the poll's history have these numbers been so high (Retterath, 2010) and globalization is the reason.

Students are becoming more aware that the world in which they live and work in is becoming even more globalized and inclusive; they have thus started to comprehend the importance of studying abroad. Some have come to the conclusion that they will need to learn to appreciate other cultures and languages in order to be compassionate towards other's plights (CIEE, 2009). Other students, primarily those interested in Business and Human Resources, have come to the realization that they will have to have a global-minded viewpoint in order to secure the job they want (Trooboff, Vande Berg and Rayman, 2008). As these students continue to realize the benefits they can gain through studying abroad, the number of international student scholars will keep rising, as will the number of problems students encounter while abroad.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore the problems that students, who decided to participate in international study programs, encountered in their travels abroad. Through the identification of specific problems, the investigator determined what situations adversely affected the students' international experiences. The investigator was also able to ask the students what services they believed institutions could offer to improve their overall study abroad experience. International college students from the

country of India who were candidates for a master's level degree were the focus of the study.

### **Significance of the Study**

Considerable research had been conducted about the problems that international students experience while abroad. Most of the prior research had focused on a specific ethnicity, age or gender; however, not much research had been conducted on the problems that students from the Indian sub-continent, in particular, encountered while studying abroad. The results of the study will enable Student Affairs practitioners to assess current program effectiveness and provide better institutional and individual support to international students from India, a country that sends students abroad at one of the highest rates world-wide (Kumar, 2008).

### **Definitions**

For the purpose of this study the following terms are defined below.

**Culture Shock.** Culture Shock refers to the anxiety and distress a person feels when put into a new, unfamiliar environment (Pantelidou and Craig, 2006).

**Discrimination.** Discrimination refers to the unjust treatment that a person encounters based on specific identifiers (i.e. sex, race, religion, and ethnicity).

**Homesickness.** Homesickness is a psychosomatic reaction that people experience due to the absence of the familiar (i.e. family and friends). Effects can range from loneliness to depression (Poyrazli and Lopez, 2007).

**International Student.** An international student is a person that is studying in a state other than their native country for scholarly purposes.

**Language Barriers.** A Language Barrier refers to the difficulty a person has understanding and adjusting to a language that is not their primary language. Without the ability to communicate fluently the person is thus at a disadvantage in the second language.

### **Research Questions**

This study addressed the following questions.

RQ1: What problems have you encountered during your study abroad experience?

RQ2: What do you think institutions can do to make the study abroad experience better for Indian students?

### **Expected Outcomes**

It was expected that the problems that Indian international students faced on the studied campus would be similar, if not identical, to adjustment problems that other international students had identified in previous studies. Homesickness and language barriers were expected to be of the biggest concerns to international students who were interviewed for the purposes of the project. Depending on the type and severity of the problem it was expected that the student's overall experience would be adversely affected. It was believed that the interviewed students would be able to provide some valuable suggestions on how to improve the overall study abroad experience for Indian students as well.

## **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to determine what problems Indian students encounter while studying in the United States. As the world becomes more globalized a larger number of students are deciding to study abroad. As the numbers increase, it is important that Student Affairs practitioners stay current on what resources are needed to help international students, in general, have a positive study abroad experience. Previous research that identified issues international students encountered while studying outside of their home country will be reviewed in Chapter II. Chapter III provides a description of the methodology used to conduct this study. Chapter IV presents the results of the study, while Chapter V discusses the results of the study and the recommendations of the author.

## **Chapter II**

### **Literature Review**

Among the challenges that international students encounter while abroad, four common problems were identified in most of the literature reviewed for the purposes of the present study: Language Barriers, Culture Shock, Bias/Discrimination and Threats to Personal Safety, and Homesickness.

#### **Language Barriers**

The most common issue that international students encounter while studying in a different country is the language barrier (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010; Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002; Lee, D., 1997; Lee, J., 2010; McLachlan and Justice, 2009; Russell & Thomson, 2010; Sawir, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia, and Rawlings-Sanaei, 2009; Sherry, Thomas, and Chui, 2010; Wang, 2009; Zhang and Mi, 2010). Some students study in a country where their primary language, if spoken at all, is not used frequently. The interaction with a new language can be overwhelming especially if the student does not feel they are proficient in the language (Andrade, 2006; Kwon, 2009; McClure, 2007; Terkla, Etish-Andrews, Roscoe, and Association for Institutional, 2007). According to Hechanova-Alampay et al., (2002) the lack of language proficiency can become a barrier to the student's academic success.

Zhang and Mi (2010) found that while speaking in and listening to another language can be problematic for international students, reading is usually not a problem. Not being able to understand the professor's lectures or not having enough skill to ask questions can be very detrimental to the student's grades and overall experience.



According to D. Lee (1997), an international student's difficulty developing and using skills (like writing and reading) can lead to confusion and miscommunication. Terkla et al. (2007) stated that communication barriers, besides affecting a student academically, can affect a student socially. Without the use of words, the international student is unable to form friendships. Terkla et al. (2007) also stated that the slang terms an international student encounters can lead to even more confusion. The stresses that international students experience due to communication barriers are often overwhelming according to Russell and Thomson (2010). Anxiety, depression, sleep deprivation and social isolation are all widely recognized stressors associated with working to overcome language barriers. The language barriers that international students encounter are important to consider; due to their lack of effective communication skills, the students are faced with academic, social and psychological issues that ultimately lead to adaptation problems.

### **Culture Shock**

Students who gather enough courage to study abroad often experience culture shock. Most international students are immersed into a completely new and different culture that has dissimilar beliefs, values, holidays, and traditions than the ones they are used to in their native country. For some students, the cultural differences can be very shocking and difficult to become accustomed to in the short term (Andrade, 2006; Gu et al., 2010; Hechanova-Alampay, 2010; Hechanova-Alampay, 2002; Lee, D., 1997; Lee, J., 2010; Owens and Loomes, 2010; Sherry et al, 2010; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, and Todman, 2008).

Wang (2009) found that many international students have difficulty getting comfortable with the value systems they encounter while abroad. Personal values shape what individuals believe and deem to be true; when international students encounter new values, they begin questioning everything they once believed, which can be a very difficult thing to do. While culture shock usually dissipates with time, some students develop anxiety and depression (Russell et al., 2010) and never fully adapt to their new environment (Zhou et al., 2008).

### **Bias/Discrimination and Threats to Safety**

International students have always faced discrimination. Some have been discriminated against due to their skin color or their gender, while others have faced biases simply due to the fact that they speak with a foreign accent. However since the events of September 11, 2001, a larger number of international students have been discriminated against. Charles-Toussaint and Crowson (2010) explained this occurrence by stating that native students, who have witnessed the increase in terrorist attacks in the last decade, often perceive international students as members of the 'out group' and as threats to their safety and livelihood. J. Lee and Rice (2007) found that many of the international students they interviewed encountered hostility and discrimination regularly. In a study of the cultural adjustment experiences of African international students, the authors found that the participants of the study were called names and treated as less-intelligent by the domestic students (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005).

A study conducted at a comprehensive, Midwestern University by Vitale (2008) found that international students who identified with the Islamic religion faced a very high level of hostility from their fellow students. She found that the Muslim, international students were often looked upon, by students and professors, as being representatives of the Islamic faith, and they felt burdened by the expectations thus forced upon them. Vitale also found that those women who chose to wear the veil experienced high levels of enmity and unfriendliness (Vitale, 2008).

This post-9/11 stage of discrimination has caused many higher education professionals to question the level of safety surrounding international students. Nyland et al. (2010) have stated their belief that a sense of personal safety is the biggest problem facing those who study abroad. According to them, prejudiced beliefs perpetuate violence and they argue that international students who are viewed as threats could easily become the victims of hate-based crimes. Biases and discriminations have lead to violence against groups before and many believe that with the terrorist undertones, those international students viewed as part of the 'out group' could be in danger.

### **Homesickness**

Homesickness is another common problem facing international students (Owens and Loomes, 2010; Kwon, 2009). International students have to leave everything they know and love behind them when they study abroad. Often a sense of loss for the familiar occurs and this can be extremely harmful to the student's experience. While homesickness is common in traditionally-aged college students, Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) found homesickness to be more prevalent in International students when

compared to American students. Almost every single international student, even those who truly embrace their international experience, at some point or another, misses their home and everything that it represents, and according to Kwon (2009) the students they surveyed rated homesickness as a more significant concern than loneliness or intimidation. While homesickness can be quite hard to deal with, it usually only lasts for a little while. As soon as the student starts making new friends and adjusting to their new life, their sense of loss begins to fade (Owens et al., 2010).

### **Other Problems**

The research identifies other problems that students face while abroad and although they are not as commonly reported as the issues listed above, they are still important to recognize. According to Jenkins and Galloway (2009), Constantine et al. (2005), Sawir et al. (2009) and Sherry et al. (2009) another common problem that international students face is financial. These authors declared that many international students underestimate their cost of living and ultimately suffer financial hardships while abroad. They stated that while securing a job could help the students alleviate some of their financial worries, many international students leave their home country without acquiring the needed visa to work abroad. M. Lee (1981) found that international students who had the proper documentation to work abroad still had a hard time securing jobs, making their financial situation even more precarious.

Sawir et al. (2009) stated that housing was another issue that international students faced. While some students choose to live in on-campus housing, others bravely decide to look for housing options once they arrive. The authors stated that cleanliness

and availability of housing were common issues that foreign students often run into as they seek affordable accommodations.

Feelings of loneliness and separation can often be found among international students as well. According to a study done by Hsieh (2007), some international students deal with loneliness and isolation. Hsieh found that some foreign students have a hard time finding a voice in classroom and social settings and they feel domestic students overlook them and their opinions.

### **Summary**

International students encounter an array of problems and issues while they study abroad. While some of the issues may seem trivial to the reader, they can prove to be completely detrimental to an international student. These problems can lead to transitional and adaptation issues and can, if not alleviated, hinder the educational experience for the student.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Design of Study**

The present study used a qualitative research methodology. Through the use of individual interviews, the investigator identified adjustment issues that Indian international students studying at the selected University encountered.

#### **Site**

The research was conducted at a comprehensive Midwestern institution. Enrollment figures for the fall 2011 semester showed a total of 11,178 students, consisting of 9,657 undergraduate students and 1,521 graduate students. Out of the total student population there were 151 international students, 50 of which were from India (Planning and Institutional Research, 2010).

#### **Participants**

Through collaboration with the Office of International Students and Scholars, the PI received a comprehensive email list of all currently enrolled international students from India. A call for research participants was emailed to all of the appropriate international students along with an explanation of the proposed research and an attached informed consent document. Students agreeing to participate in individual interviews for the purposes of the research were asked to contact the PI for time and place arrangements. Four Indian graduate students responded to the call for research participants.

Table 1: *Descriptive characteristics of study participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Area of Study</b>	<b>Region of India</b>
A	Female	Business	Northern India
B	Female	Chemistry	Southern India
C	Male	Computer Technology	Southern India
D	Female	Economics	Northern India

### **Individual Interviews**

The importance of gathering personal perspectives and experiences was paramount, so qualitative research methodology employing semi-structured individual interviews was selected to collect the needed data. Using a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B), the PI was able to probe for more detailed, richer explanations of topics and issues to guarantee that each participant's story was heard (Knox and Bukard, 2009). Individual interviewing also prevented the phenomenon known as groupthink from happening when students are interviewed in a focus group setting (Callaway and Esser, 1984).

### **Data Collection**

The interviews were carried out in appropriate private conference rooms at the university to facilitate open discussion. Participants were asked to share problems they were currently facing or had faced while studying at the selected university. The PI explained the purpose of the study, obtained informed consent, and administered the interview protocol, adapted from Fatima (2001). All interviews were digitally recorded

for later transcription and member-checking prior to coding and analysis (Schumacher & McMillan, 2006).

### **Method of Analysis**

Data were collected, then stored in an electronic data storage system on the PI's personal computer; for backup the data were also be kept on a USB drive stored in a locked desk drawer. The investigator then developed a coding and categorical system from the data using cross-comparative analysis (Schumacher & McMillan, 2006). Once categories were identified, any relationships and/or patterns that emerged were grouped into themes.

### **Summary**

The PI interviewed four Indian, graduate students studying at a midsize, compressive institution in the Midwest. Using cross-comparative analysis and member-checking, common codes and categories were identified. Chapter IV will outline the themes that emerged from the individual interviews and provide a narrative description of the data using quotes from the interviews to support the themes. Recommendations for future research and for those in Student Affairs is provided in Chapter V.



## CHAPTER IV

### Results and Findings

The purpose of this study was to identify any problems that Indian students encounter while studying abroad. In order to collect the needed data the PI interviewed graduate students from India. Qualitative interview transcripts from the four Indian international students were analyzed thoroughly for common categories and codes using cross-comparative analysis (Schumacher & Mcmillan, 2006) after transcripts were member-checked by participants. The emerging themes enabled the investigator to identify selected problems that were expressed in the 'voices' of the Indian students. The following chapter describes six themes that were apparent across the students interviewed.

#### **Homesickness**

Every student who was interviewed stated that they had experienced homesickness at one point or another during their study abroad experience. In India the family-unit was described as a very close-knit circle. Parents tend to protect and shelter their children while doing everything they can to ensure that their children have what they want and need. Inter-dependence is expected and revered in India and children look to their parents for help on every important decision that they make (Stephen, 2010). The shock of being thousands of miles away from that parental support, coupled with the strangeness of a new land and culture proved to be quite overwhelming for these students.

Participant A:

Back in India, parents are overprotective about their kids and here you don't have anyone, so you feel a little homesick for a few days.

Participant B:

I think everyone will have homesickness when you're coming [here] because you're not used to staying away from parents. We do live away from parents when we are doing Bachelors, but not this far away. Like whenever we think we want to go home, we can just go home. But now we have to fly from here which is very costly.

Participant D:

This was my first time that I was out of India...that I was coming out of India. So, I had no idea how the place would be, how the people would be and when I came here, I was a little sick. Like homesick.

One of the students expressed the enormity of living away from his family as one of the most difficult challenges involved in studying abroad.

Participant C:

The attachment to family was very hard to overcome. You want to be with them sometimes. You party with friends, but at some point you are like this is my family and I need to meet them.

However crippling the homesickness was in the beginning, all of the Indian students stated that after a few weeks of adjustment and some major support from their new American friends, they were able to overcome many of their feelings of homesickness.

Participant B:

I just had this homesickness the first couple of days in the beginning. Then I had a very good friend, so I am fine now. She was an elder to me and she took care of me; until I got used to everything she took very good care of me.

Participant D:

I, personally, got good American friends, and whatever I have had till now they have been very good to me and being with them, I am not homesick.

When asked what helped him overcome his homesickness, Participant C stated that his friends were contributing factors in helping him win his battle with homesickness, and that he was lucky to have their support. Participant A said that after the initial transition of living away from her family it did get easier but that she still missed and thought about them every day.

It takes a while and then you get adjusted to this life and then you kind of like it. I still miss them though. I speak to them almost every day.

### **Culture Shock**

While traditionally there are parts of India, primarily the North, that are much more Westernized and more liberal than other areas, all the students that were interviewed for this study, despite their geographical locations, described coming from 'open-minded' and 'modern' families (Henderson, 2002). However, even with their abilities to accept and understand other cultures three out of the four students expressed culture shock as being an issue that they dealt with during their adjustment to college life in the United States.

Participant B explained that the American dress attire was a shock to her at first. She stated that while she was aware of the jeans that Americans favor, she did not expect the amount of difficulty she had adjusting from her flowing sari to tighter-fitting jeans and sweaters.

I wasn't used to wearing jeans and pants. It took me like two weeks or three weeks to get adjusted to it because I wasn't comfortable. The climate here is cold so you can't wear Indian dresses and you can't protect from cold. You need your jeans and top.

Another aspect of American culture that shocked Participant B was the amount of clubs and bars that are accessible to American college students.

In India we are not used to going to pubs or anything, we just go for fun or dancing, something like that. In the beginning, I had a misconception that pubs are not very good until I went there and I saw what actually was a pub. It is up to you whatever you want to do. If you want to just sit and listen to music, then that is fine.

Causal dating in India is not a common occurrence; when a man and woman start dating it is expected that they will eventually marry. Arranged marriages in India are still common and often reflect the family's social and economic standing and are viewed as holy sacraments. Appropriate marriage partners are not matched on personality and compatibility but on their caste and social standing (Henderson, 2002; Stephan, 2010). Coming from a country with very strict dating and marriage norms, Participants C and D were shocked by the amount of freedom that American youth have in terms of male-

female relationships.

Participant C:

The cultural differences are vast, when you come here from India. We don't have that much freeness between boys in girls when you compare here. Like here they kiss on the roads, but in India they don't do it. People date but if a boy and girl come together, they eventually plan for the marriage. Dating is different [in India]. They are emotionally attached to each other.

Participant D:

Girls and boys relationships [in America seem], ... to be very frank, I don't like them. In my culture if you are with someone then you have to be with him forever. Well, here it is like you can have a boyfriend and you can change him. I feel like that is kind of wasting time, you know, and hurting the guy or the girl, either side. You are just hurting each other for some time and then getting another one.

Participant A, the only student that did not identify culture shock as being a problem for her shared that similarities between Indian and American culture were the reason she had no difficulty adjusting culturally to student life in the United States.

All the things that we do here, I mean, we do back in India. So that was the reason there was no culture shock.

When the other three students were asked to share what helped them overcome their initial culture shock, they stated that by remaining open-minded they were able to accept

and appreciate the American culture.

Participant B:

So what I think is, whatever the culture it's up to you. If you like it you can take something from it.

Participant D:

I will say that I changed my mind with my environment. I was like 'okay, this is the thing and I have to accept that.'

### **Discrimination**

Asked to describe any negative experiences they had encountered while studying abroad, only one student (Participant C) stated that he had not experienced anything he would classify as negative. The other three students, however, described incidents of racial discrimination they encountered during their overseas study.

Participant A:

Uh, the negative experience would be when students, supposing a student in your group would think she is an immigrant, she is an Indian, so probably I don't know how good she would be. You know? So they would not actually want to take you on their team or something like that because you don't speak good English, but that doesn't mean that I don't know the subject well, you know? But people usually judge us and like the Americans here would be like 'oh, she doesn't know how to speak English, so I don't think we should even take her on our team.' I think that everyone goes through it, so that is kind of okay. So you don't have to be very offended because that is how it is. You just got to accept it.

Participant D stated that she felt discriminated against at her on-campus job.

I was not comfortable because I found a racist kind of thing like, if you, like maybe they know like that since we are international students they know that we need the money and need to survive here and so we will work hard and that we will never say no to them.

Participant B described being discriminated against while being mistaken for a different ethnicity.

There are times when people used to be really rude, you say, “Hi,” and they just talk something on your face and they just go away. A few people did that. Maybe, they would have thought we come from another country or something...like Islam? I don't say that they are wrong or something. I understand. But we get the opportunity to come study and so we are doing that and nothing else.

In the same manner that friends enabled them to overcome the hurdle of homesickness, emotional support from friends was once again what contributed to helping these students overcome the despair they felt at being discriminated against in their initial interactions with other people.

Participant D:

I have friends who can understand me, so it [discrimination] is okay.

### **Language Barriers and Educational Differences**

The educational system in India is vastly different than the American educational system. From the academic subjects studied to examination styles, educational differences abound (Henderson, 2002). Due to the differences between the systems, the

Indian students stated that they had a large problem adapting to the American method of higher education.

Participant A:

The study structure over here is much different than what we do in India. Here it is more like a practical thing. In India it is more theory. So it is like the structure...the examination structure. Back in India it is more like theory; it is essay, essay type questions. Here it is more multiple choice.

Participant B:

The education system here is like very different from the system work we have in India. In India like it is more like the traditional system. You have,... if, like you and me would go to school together for the master's program, both of us would have the same subject and it would be a similar thing for all the students. Out here you all get to choose your own specific interest subject. We have class from morning to evening. The professors will be walking in and teaching and leaving, but we will be in the same class. Here we move from class to class, there we sit in the class from morning to evening. We have to go Monday to Friday to the university and sit there from nine to five.

Participant D:

The way we study here is different than India, so you know we have to concentrate more on the studies. The exam pattern is different. We don't write research papers. That is their fault. That is my country's fault. They should introduce writing, you know, a research paper. That is their fault; they should introduce that so students would be more active.



The emphasis on public speaking and presentations was difficult for some of the Indian students to get used to doing as well.

Participant A:

Over here, they...um, in class, you have to speak you have got to have discussions and you have to speak openly, which not many Indian students would actually open up. Back in our country, we don't interact that much. So that becomes a little difficult for us to open up and speak in public. Public speaking is like a major [problem] for the Indian students, actually.

To make their educational pursuits even more difficult, two of the four students interviewed expressed difficulty in understanding the American English accent. Due to India's history as a British colony, Indians speak a British English dialect. This dialect change proved to be challenging for some of the Indian students.

Participant B:

In the beginning it was the language because the professor was talking and I couldn't understand. It was really tough to understand the U.S. accent.

Participant C:

Like I couldn't understand what the teacher used to tell us. The pronunciation and stuff is different here.

All of the students that identified educational differences and language barriers as problems admitted that, after the initial transitional period, they were able to adapt successfully to the new educational system and language after some early stumbles.

### **Other Issues**

While the following problems expressed during the interviews were not 'voiced'

by every Indian student interviewed for the purposes of this study, several other issues seem important to recognize as well. In order to get a holistic picture of what transitional problems Indian students encountered while studying abroad, Student Affairs Practitioners must be alert to all areas that require a level of personal adjustment and cultural change on the part of international students.

The issue of money was a problem that three of the Indian students mentioned. In India it is not uncommon for parents to take care of their unmarried children financially. The three students that identified money as being a problem stated that they were not used to having to pay and manage their own bills and finance their education without parental supervision.

Participant A:

I had to pay my own bills, pay my own electricity and then you know, my rent and manage stuff on my own. Back in India you don't do that. You're not used to that. Yeah, initially it was, um, a challenge. I used to find it like, 'Okay I got to pay this bill, this bill, this bill, this bill. Oh my god, how many bills?.' You know? You get so, you're like 'oh my god, this is like insane.' But then what I started doing is a 'to do list' and put it on my calendar so that would tell me 'you got to pay the bill.'

Participant C:

Here every boy and girl try [sic] to earn their money and save their money like from teenager and stuff. In India it's like till you get a job your father pays for everything.

Participant D also expressed her extreme frustration and shock regarding her new financial status.

My first semester was really bad. I spent a whole lot of money. Because in India it is completely different, you don't have University like this. No one works when they study but...families are rich. Most of the students...and there is nothing like on-campus jobs. So we don't know anything about that and when we come here we feel like killing ourselves and we are like 'oh we don't know all of these things and we made a big mistake.'

Another problem that two students mentioned was the inability to cook any of their native dishes due to the lack of affordable Indian spices and rice. While this may seem trivial enough, the unavailability of dishes they are used to caused yet another disruption in the lives of these international students.

Participant A:

In [town] we don't have any store which has an Indian grocery. So it becomes a hassle for students; they need to go to a larger town in order to get the stuff. That would be an inconvenience for the Indian international students over here. Yeah and the food is the major criteria because not many people eat beef and stuff so even if they go to like 'Taco Bell', you know some cheap places where they can eat, they would still have problems eating that food because not many would like it or eat it. Then since they just come from India it becomes, like they eat a lot of spicy stuff, with a lot of spices, and your food is more like 'bland' for them.

Participant C explained that the spices he could acquire locally were too expensive in the

United States compared to prices in India.

We get it but it is too expensive. We get it, but the price difference is a two dollar different on each thing.

After Participant A's interview was completed she also commented on the affordability of the spices. She stated that while students could have their families send them the needed spices and cooking supplies straight from India, the exorbitant mailing and packaging prices made it unrealistic.

While these problems were not mentioned as frequently as some of the others that the students identified, that does not make them any less important. While these problems may not be generalized to the larger public, they still were, to at least one student, a difficult adjustment to make.

### **Suggestions**

Something the PI wanted to ensure was to ask the student participants what suggestions they believed would be helpful to facilitate the adjustment of Indian international students at United States institutions of higher education. In past research reviewed for the purposes of this study, investigators made recommendations on what institutions, in particular Student Affairs Practitioners, could do to ease the burden of researcher identified problems (Andrade, M., 2006; Constantine, M.G., et al, 2005; Fatima, N., 2001; Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010; Lee, J., 2010; McClure, J., 2007); however, rarely did they ever ask those who have lived through and/or with the problems for their suggestions. The following were some of the suggestions that the students personally believed would benefit future Indian students.

Participant A expressed her belief that a seminar catered for international students

in which students could learn more about the American culture would be an extremely helpful resource.

Have a class and make it compulsory for them to attend that class. In that they would probably learn about how to develop their personality, how to talk and you know...what you need to do and how to react and teach them more about the American, you know, culture and how it works. So they are more aware to stuff like that and then um...and also speaking in public.

In response to the food issue, students suggested planned trips to international grocery stores so students could purchase the needed ingredients to their favorite dishes. They also suggested international food days in the dining halls in which Housing and Dining Services could introduce some popular foreign foods to the menu.

Participant A:

I think if they had something every month...maybe going, so at least you could plan your groceries that would be really nice. Every month would be fine. That would be really nice. I think that most of the Indian students would really appreciate that.

Participant C:

They could provide [food] at the dining halls, so everyone could write what they want.

When asked what she would suggest a university could do to help international students with their money management problems, Participant D said that helping students to secure on-campus jobs would be great.

Participant D:

Please try to give on-campus jobs to international student first; give first preference to them. It is a rule that we cannot work off-campus. International students are not allowed to work off campus, like Subway or whatever, any kind of job. We are not allowed unless you have internship or unless you are working on your thesis with a professor and they ask you to do that, or that kind of thing. So, kind of like, I will say each department should take care of the student, like each department if they have some kind of work they should offer that to [international] students.

Whether or not the suggestions students offered can be used or not, it is still important for those in Student Affairs to ask students what they believe would be helpful to their successful transition to a new educational and social environment. Identifying the problems is only the first step in helping students overcome them. Solutions must be found and sometimes that is as simple as asking those who have previously encountered the problems and situations to suggest possible alternatives.

### **Conclusion**

These graduate Indian students did report some problems that other international students may not face on a regular basis when they study abroad (i.e. inability to prepare their native food). However, problems they identified matched problems that other

international students have acknowledged in past studies. By listening to both the identified problems and suggestions the Indian students stated, institutions could help alleviate some of these issues for all international students, not just Indian students, which have encountered a problem during their study abroad experience. Chapter V will provide Student Affairs Practitioners with some ideas on support services and resources they can offer their international population to ensure that they are having the best experience possible.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to identify problems that Indian students encountered while studying abroad in the United States. Utilizing qualitative research methodology, the PI interviewed four Indian, graduate students studying at a comprehensive mid-sized North American institution. By analyzing interview transcripts for commonalities, the PI was able to identify and categorize common themes that the four participants voiced, which were described in Chapter IV.

Through listening to individual student 'voices', the study abroad experiences of Indian students interviewed for the purposes of the present study were not substantially different from other international students as reflected in the literature review. By specifically asking the study participants for suggestions, the PI was also able to understand what programs and resources the selected population would find beneficial. Previous literature found that students studying abroad often experience homesickness, culture shock, discrimination, financial difficulties, language barriers and difficulty with the new educational system; the interviewed participants identified these same problems.

The only problem that these Indian participants experienced that previous researchers did not put emphasis on dealt with food. Half of the participants identified food issues as a problem they encountered while in the United States. Most of the spices Indian students commonly utilized were not readily available to them due to the lack of demand for such spices at local grocery stores (McWhirter, 2012). While the students could travel to a larger metropolitan area to acquire the spices, the lack of public transportation in the county surrounding the university made doing so difficult, and the



spices were often “too expensive” to purchase locally.

Most of the problems participants encountered dealt with differences between American and Indian culture. The Indian students had a hard time understanding and dealing with their new financial responsibilities and found the idea that American students often supported themselves monetarily, while they are still in school, quite shocking. While in India it is common practice for parents to take care of their children in all aspects until they are married, that level of supervision or unconditional support is not the norm in America (Settersten & Ray, 2010). These cultural differences in family structure truly confused one of the participants, leading her to make the disclaimer that in India ‘families are rich.’

The assumption that American students who supported themselves financially came from poor families was notable. Perna (2010) found that around 45% of traditional aged undergraduate students worked while in college. The percentage aligns with the assumption that American families cannot fiscally afford to support their students’ education (Serrersten & Ray, 2010). However the cost of education in America is a lot higher than it is in India. Tuition in India usually averages a few hundred dollars, while at a public four-year university in America, students, on average, pay \$8,244 for tuition and fees (CollegeBoard, 2012). The truth remains that middle class American families have trouble sending their students to college without some support from the students themselves. This reality, which has become a cultural norm in America, proved quite shocking for the interviewed students who all came from wealthy families that could easily afford to pay their college tuition and living expenses back in India.

Adjustment to the cultural differences between the educational systems in India and America were also a challenge to the research participants. Three out of four participants 'voiced' having transitional difficulties while getting accustomed to the American methods of higher education. Respondents found that "the education system here is like very different from the system [they] have in India" because "you have to speak, you have got to have discussions and you have to speak openly" and "the exam pattern is different."

While assessment methods are dissimilar, the main difference between the educational systems is the framework in which students are taught in the classroom. In America, college students are taught practical information required for them to successfully compete in their dream profession using instructional methods that emphasize critical thinking and analytical reasoning (Arum & Roksa, 2011). In India however, this practical learning style is not utilized. Students in India are exposed to theory-based learning, where they are expected to learn, not just so they can compete successfully in a profession, but so that they can become liberally educated individuals (Henderson, 2002). These learning style differences as well as differences in educational philosophy caused three of the students to feel, in some capacity, frustration about the educational system they encountered in America.

Overall, the problems and issues that these Indian students identified were common among all international students as reflected in prior literature cited in Chapter II. However, the unique perspectives and stories these participants voiced were able to provide insight into why they experienced what they did as they adjusted to student learning and life in America.

### **Recommendations for Student Affairs Practitioners**

After reflecting on the findings of the present research and previous studies done on the topic, the following are some recommendations that could improve the overall study abroad experience of Indian international students.

1. Provide Indian international students, and all international students, with a voluntary, informal seminar class where they can openly discuss the American culture with fellow international students as well as American students, similar to what Participant A suggested. It was apparent that international students have problems adjusting to American life (i.e. the dress, the educational system, dating norms). By providing Indian students with a way to both learn and talk about all aspects of American culture in a supportive atmosphere they could become more comfortable and confident with the culture and no longer experience adjusting to it as such a challenge.
2. Half the participants identified the lack of native foods and spices as a problem they encountered during their time abroad. To counter this problem, Student Affairs professionals could offer international food in the Dining Halls on a weekly or monthly basis. Another option international offices could employ would be to provide monthly or semester trips to an international grocery store; students could thus purchase exactly what they want and/or need. By providing foods or transportation to local grocery stores like Participant A and C recommended, Student Affairs practitioners could easily reduce the food issue that the students stated was a problem.
3. While every participant interviewed stated that they struggled with

homesickness, they also stated that once they made friends in America the homesickness subsided. To help alleviate symptoms of homesickness and help foster relationships, International Offices could set-up “friend” programs. Interested American students would be paired with Indian international students. The international students could then form a friendship with a dedicated American student that would hopefully help them cope with missing their family and friends in India.

### **Recommendations for Future Studies**

The following are suggestions for those who wish to explore the adjustment problems of international students as they assimilate into American higher education further.

1. To create a thicker description of Indian student adjustment issues, future researchers should consider interviewing a larger number of people. Comparisons and contrasts between the problems that females and males experience could also be examined if a researcher could secure an equal ratio of men and women. Another interesting cultural comparison would be the difference in experiences between those who come from Northern India when compared to those students coming from Southern India due to regional differences within the country.
2. To make wider and more reliable inferences, future researchers could interview Indian students at two or more institutions of Higher Education. By conducting a study of Indian students at multiple universities, researchers could discover if the types of experiences Indian students have while attaining their education in America is dependent on the university that they attend, or

is of a more universal nature.

3. For a more in-depth look into the experiences Indian students have while abroad, future researchers could do a comparative study between Indian students and another subgroup of international students. If for example, a researcher studies both Indian and Chinese students, they would be able to discover the differences, if any, between their cultural and educational backgrounds and their study abroad experiences.
4. The PI, through personal experience, also suggests that future researchers look into culturally sensitive interviewing techniques before conducting the personal interviews with Indian student research participants. As in any culture, certain topics are considered taboo to discuss and if a researcher ignorantly broaches one of those topics, they may find themselves faced with an uncomfortable and unwilling participant.

### **Conclusions**

Much research has been completed on the problems and issues that international students, in general, run into while they are abroad. Select groups of international students (i.e. Chinese and British) have also been studied by researchers in order to determine what problems they generally encounter while abroad. However, the research that is dedicated primarily to Indian international students and the problems they have while in America is not as extensive. This qualitative study focused solely on this under-researched group.

The Indian participants in this study faced the same problems that other international students had been found to encounter. In the beginning they missed their

families and friends and comforts of home and they experienced shock at how different American customs and norms were from those of their own country. They had trouble understanding the American accent and felt that they were sometimes being judged and discriminated against due to their darker skin and broken English. However, also like most international students, they prevailed. With time and support from new friends they became accustomed to life in America and overall had a satisfying experience.

As Indian students continue to seek educational opportunities in America, it will become a top priority for Student Affairs professionals to foresee what types of problems the students will encounter while abroad so that they can best help them. Studying abroad is a wonderful educational opportunity in which students can learn to be independent and global citizens but it is not always an easy process. International students are sometimes faced with so many problems that they do not get to completely enjoy living and studying abroad. Student Affairs professionals that work in International Offices have the unique opportunity to help, not just Indian students, but all international students have a meaningful experience and with the right information and programs they can do just that.

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## APPENDIX A

### Informed Consent Form

#### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

The Grass Isn't Always Greener: A Qualitative Study of the Problems that Indian International Students Encounter While Abroad

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Alison Adams, master's candidate in college student affairs, and Dr. Charles Eberly, Professor, from the Department of Counseling and Student Development at Eastern Illinois University.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate. Your name and personal information will in no way be published or go on a public record.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you are currently an Indian student seeking educational credit from a North American institution.

#### •PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the present study is to explore the problems and issues that students, who decide to participate in international study programs, encounter in their travels abroad. The results of the study will enable Student Affairs practitioners to assess current program effectiveness and provide better institutional and individual support to international students.

#### •PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to share your personal stories about studying at a mid-sized comprehensive Mid-Western institution. To maintain confidentiality, your name will not be used in the research and instead you will be identified by a number. Individual interviews will take place at a site on-campus chosen according to your availability and comfort level. The interviews will be audio recorded. All audio recordings will be kept and stored by the principal investigator in a hard drive up to three years, then shredded and destroyed.

#### •POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

No long-term physical, psychological, or social risks are foreseeable with this research as participants are asked to share his/her educational and cultural experiences.

### •POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

The knowledge and understanding of the collective experience of international students can improve the profession of student affairs and the students themselves. It can also be a very therapeutic experience to share personal stories.

### •CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of keeping the notes, digital audio, and transcriptions only on the principal investigator's personal password protected computer, as well as a USB drive to create a back-up. The principal investigator and her faculty advisor will be the only ones to have access to the notes, digital audio, and transcriptions. This is so that the faculty advisor can aid the student in data analysis. The digital audio, notes, and transcriptions will be kept on the researcher's personal computer and the USB format for three years then deleted. If a subject chooses to leave the study during or after the interview all data and hard copy will be destroyed. Digital data will be deleted and hard copies will be shredded three years after the Principal Investigator has completed the research. **YOUR NAME WILL NOT BE USED IN THE FINAL PRODUCT, THESIS, OF THE RESEARCH OR SHARED WITH ANYONE BUT THE PI & HER ADVISOR.**

### •PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

### •IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Alison Adams

Dr. Charles Eberly

Principal Investigator

Faculty Sponsor

MLK Jr. University Union Rm. 3065

Buzzard Hall Rm. 2107

600 Lincoln Ave.

600 Lincoln Ave.

Charleston, IL. 61920

Charleston, IL 61920

Telephone : (740) 610-7599

Telephone: (217) 581-7235

Email : aradams2@eiu.edu

Email: cgeberly@eiu.edu

## •RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board

Eastern Illinois University

600 Lincoln Ave.

Charleston, IL 61920

Telephone: (217) 581-8576

E-mail: [eiurb@www.eiu.edu](mailto:eiurb@www.eiu.edu)

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

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I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

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Printed Name of Participant

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

I, the undersigned, have defined and fully explained the investigation to the above subject.

---

Signature of Investigator

---

Date

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Interview Protocol**

#### **I. Introduction**

- a. Purpose is to identify the issues/problems that international students have faced while studying abroad. The author of the study hopes the information that is gathered in the focus groups will help those who work in Higher Education create effective support programs for International Students.
- b. Discussion will be recorded for further analysis.

#### **II. Introduction of Participant**

- i. Name
- ii. Country of origin
- iii. Year in school/Major
- iv. Why did you choose to study at this specific University

#### **III. Questions**

- a. Describe your experiences studying abroad thus far.
- b. Have you experienced culture shock?
  - i. What helped you overcome it?
- c. Have you experienced homesickness?
  - i. What helped you overcome it?
- d. Have you had any negative experiences while studying here in America?
  - i. Can you give specific examples?
- e. What other issues/problems have you experienced while studying abroad?



- f. Out of the problems addressed, which one has been the most difficult for you to overcome?
- g. How have the problems you have encountered thus far impacted your overall study abroad experience?
- h. What do you think the University can do to help in regards to these problems?
- i. What has personally helped you overcome any problems that you have encountered?
- j. Anything else to add?