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Exploration into the Graduate International Student Narratives

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Abstract

Multiple researchers have conveyed an abundance of problems international students face when choosing to study abroad in the United States. A range of emotional, psychological, and physical issues prevent students from fully succeeding. Every international student faces different challenges, and every educational institution has its own prominent issues. In my study, I examined the challenges graduate international students at the University of San Diego (USD) face that might impede them from fully transitioning and adapting to their new environment. I used a mixed-methods approach (interviews and focus groups) to understand the issues impacting the transition and adaptation of international students and give voice and power to their community through participatory action research. This project will allow USD to understand their graduate international students better while recognizing how their international center can improve their support for their international students.

Keywords: international student challenges, graduate students, culture shock, transition and adaptation, acculturation, psychological effects, adjustment, academics, culture, orientation, support, sense of belonging

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The International Student Perspective: Transition and Adaptation Narratives

For my project, I explored the difficulties international students face as they transition and adapt to studying in the United States. I focused my project on graduate international students who attend the University of San Diego (USD), a private Catholic university. My project was conducted via Zoom. I engaged in the study using the following methods: a survey, interviewing, and creating focus groups with students and professional staff. The purpose of my project is to explore the various difficulties international students face during their process of transitioning and adapting to studying in the United States, to determine what support international students would like to receive, and to bring awareness to the international community. My overarching project question is: In what ways can the University of San Diego work to better aid graduate international students through the difficulties they face as they transition and adapt to studying in the United States? A subquestion involves how international students can feel a sense of inclusivity and belonging.

I was interested in conducting action research focused on supporting international students because, in my undergraduate years, I noticed gaps in supporting international students. The primary support they received was getting help setting up their phones, opening bank accounts, and transportation to stores to buy necessities. Even when the current international students gave a small panel on advice, they spoke of little things such as, "make sure to fill your room condition housing card" (personal communication). I felt as if more support could have been given during their transition. They had to deal with changes in culture, language, location, and more. When I reflect, I feel as if I received more help transitioning and adapting during the four months I studied abroad than they did in the 4 years they spent studying abroad. For example, I attended a class specifically made to help me prepare to study abroad, and then I took

another class while abroad to help me transition. Even when I was a freshman, I took a class called first-year seminar, which helped first-year students transition into their major. I wonder why some universities cannot provide courses to help support the specific needs of international students. As a current graduate student, I perceive more support being given to undergraduate international students. More events and programming seem to be geared to undergraduate international students. Not only that, there are also at times big age gaps between undergraduate and graduate international students, which can affect the interest levels of which programs and events reach students. Whether positive or negative, I am curious how much a student's success is impacted by their transition and adaptation.

The number of students choosing to study abroad has increased over time. In 2019, Educationdata.org reported 1,095,299 international students were enrolled in U.S. colleges, making up 5.5% of the U.S. student body. Increased acknowledgment and support is needed with the rise of international students. They face similar challenges as U.S. students; however, it seems international students tend to face more issues or experience challenges differently. They are confronted with "racial discrimination, language problems, accommodation difficulties, separation reactions, dietary restrictions, financial stress, misunderstandings and loneliness" (Furnham, 2004, p. 17).

Literature Review

As globalization continues, more and more people are choosing to study abroad. With an increase in international students, institutions need to recognize the challenges these students face. Institutions must help international students succeed with more support, such as emotional and psychological support. The majority of the literature I reviewed concerned international students studying in the United States. Some of the search terms I used were as follows:

transition, adapting, acculturation, culture shock, international students, and barriers. These terms helped me gather information about possible issues international students face when studying abroad. In this literature review I define key terms, explore challenges faced by a variety of international students, discuss possible solutions to support them, and conclude with gaps and future initiatives.

Successful Transition and Adaptation

The transition period of international students is influenced by a variety of factors, such as student satisfaction, retention, and success (Sidoryn & Slade, 2008). According to Husted (2017), there is a correlation between psychological well-being and successful transitioning. Students who had a positive psychological well-being felt as if they successfully transitioned (Husted, 2017). Self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and self-growth were the six measures used to measure psychological well-being (Husted, 2017). Rhoden and Boin (2004) categorized transitioning into four categories: "academic, geographical, personal, and administrative" (p. 1), with success coming from skill acquisition. Sidoryn and Slade (2008) viewed success as student engagement, which included how involved international students were and their ability to adapt. I will use these definitions of success to determine what success looks like for the international students at USD.

Issues Faced by International Students

International students are often susceptible to culture shock; however, no clear definition for culture shock exists. Oberg (1960) stated "culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (p. 142). Oberg (1960) mentioned several aspects of culture shock such as:

- strain due to the effort required to make necessary psychological adaptations;

- a sense of loss and feelings of deprivation in regard to friends, status, profession, and

  possessions;

- being rejected by, or rejecting, members of the new culture;

- confusion in role, role expectations, values;

- surprise, anxiety, even disgust and indignation after becoming aware of cultural differences;

  and

- feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new environment.

Baklashova and Kazakov (2016) noted "when entering into a new culture, [their students] had to deal with different systems of values, models of communication, signs and symbols of social communication and patterns of interpersonal relations" (p. 1827). Oberg (1960) also discussed four different stages of adjustment. The first stage is the honeymoon stage, during which a person associates with others like them and is polite to foreigners. They tend to have a pleasant superficial experience. In the second stage, or crisis stage, people begin to develop a "hostile and aggressive attitude towards the host country" (Oberg, 1960, p. 143) due to the difficulties experienced through adjusting. Third, if a person can slowly adapt and become more comfortable, they have entered the recovery stage, having developed a "superior attitude" (Oberg, 1960, p. 143). Last, in the fourth stage, or adjustment stage, a person has adjusted to the best of their abilities, is accepting of the host country's customs, and experiences greatly diminished anxiety. Table 1 depicts stages of adjustment.

Cultural Norms and Misunderstandings

All students experience cultural norms differently. Sherry et al. (2009) found international students studying in the United States had an easier time understanding cultural norms if they had previously visited the United States. Some of the international students had a

Table 1

Stages of Adjustment

Stage	Description
Honeymoon stage	Having a "hostile and aggressive attitude[s] towards the host country" (Obery, 1960, p. 143).
Crisis stage	Being able to slowly adapt and become more comfortable.
Recovery stage	When one develops a "superior attitude."
Adjustment stage	When one has adjusted to the best of their abilities, accepts the host country's customs, and their anxiety has greatly diminished.

more difficult time getting accustomed to the culture of the United States due to not having the

ability to make friends or socially interact with others (Sherry et al., 2009). Others feared they

might sound unintelligent if they asked questions. Also, students coming from collective cultures

were not prepared to enter an individualistic community (Zhai, 2002). Another issue involved

international students feeling as if people on campus did not understand their culture and

universities did not support their culture. Students felt as if there was no space for them to

practice their religion on campus, and their non-Christian religious holidays went unnoticed

(Sherry et al., 2009).

Language

Language barriers are an issue international students might face. Language plays a prime

role in their overall experience and success. If international students are not able to overcome

communication barriers, they run the risk of not being successful. In the United States, the test

most often advised is the Test of English as Foreign Language, which does not translate into

proficiency as students are often only taught to pass it (Akanwa, 2015). The lack of proficiency

can lead to many problems, such as not being able to understand or keep up with the coursework at the same rate as a native English speaker. Zhai (2002) discovered students expected to have language challenges before studying abroad. Others entered the United States not knowing any English (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). There are two aspects of language competency: written and verbal language competency. Sherry et al. (2009) found international students tended to face more difficulties with spoken barriers instead of written language issues. On the academic side, international students who do not grasp the language fail to understand their courses and have the potential to give up, not attend class, transfer, and even go back home (McLachlan & Justice, 2009).

Academic Shock

Another issue international students might face is academic difficulties or academic shock. Academics and change of environment can affect a student both mentally and physically. Academic shock can also negatively affect how international students adapt academically. Zhai (2002) noted students might enter a university with no context of what coursework will entail, and they do not expect there to be academic differences compared to their home country. However, they are expected to participate in more group activities, have faster paced classes, learn new teaching methods, and more (Zhai, 2002). Teachers have different expectations of them, and they also face difficulty communicating with their teachers due to cultural barriers (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016). An issue also emerges when students are expected to be high achieving. Hannassab and Tidwell (2002; as cited in McLachlan & Justice, 2009) discussed how underachievement and failure can culturally impact a student as it is viewed as shameful.

Social Interaction

A major theme was that international students had a difficult time connecting with others, particularly domestic students. Ryder et al. (2013; as cited in Akanwa, 2015) argued, although often neglected, social adjustment is critical to acculturation. The biggest issue seems to be making friends or interacting with domestic students is a difficult process. Sherry et al. (2009) reported their students having little to no friends who were United States citizens. Interactions were difficult because there was no connection. Others stayed in their close communities or felt students from the United States were not friendly enough to befriend (Sherry et al., 2009). Those who made friends tended to befriend other international students, from countries other than their own, rather than students from the United States. There is a connection with fellow international students that cannot be reciprocated with students from the United States (Zhai, 2002), and international students tend to work better together due to shared experiences (Akanwa, 2015). Students unconsciously tend to navigate toward those similar to themselves.

Social interactions with domestic students were not only important to acculturation, but also played a role in the classroom setting. Rienties et al. (2013; as cited in Akanwa, 2015) found, in class, it was valuable for international students to interact with domestic students to promote academic success. However, at the same time, Montgomery and McDowell (2009; as cited in Akanwa, 2015) disputed this, saying forming bonds with fellow international students is enough. Ultimately, Akanwa (2015) suggested, through their interactions, domestic students can develop multicultural skills and diversity awareness, while international students can learn cultural and communication skills, making their interaction beneficial. Overall, the many international students, within the various sources, understood the importance of interacting with

domestic students and wished there were more opportunities for them to interact with one another.

Solutions and Gaps

When it came to solutions of how to support international students, many international students, within the various sources, proposed similar ideas. One pattern that emerged suggested international students most wished for more interactions with domestic students. Students reported wanting formal and informal organized events (Sherry et al., 2009). Many also wanted to have an orientation that introduced them to the culture of the United States (Sherry et al., 2009; Zhai, 2002). Creating a course was another theme that occurred. Academically, Mesidor and Sly (2016) provided a solution, which was to create an educational plan targeting struggles of international students. Brunsting et al. (2018) researched the success of first-year international students who attended a one-unit course on academic and cultural transition. They discovered the classes improved perceived intercultural competence and improved skills. Students also gained the knowledge to better communicate with students of other cultures while gaining confidence. Senyshyn (2019) created a first-year seminar class that provided similar results. These types of courses could also be created in order to support graduate international students. These solutions are a starting guide for international students at USD to start thinking and planning what they would like their plan of action to be.

When it comes to support outside of an international center, or similar department, there is not always support. Wang (2004) points out there is not always a formal support system, nor representatives outside the international department. They suggest having representatives throughout different departments to help support international students. Sarkodie-Mensah and

Aman (1998) also present a similar solution of having campus collaborations. This means creating an international referral network.

Although there is much research on this topic, along with possible solutions, there are still gaps. Among the studies viewed, there was little study done on solutions that did and did not work. International students have answers as to how they would like to be supported. I wonder why some institutions are still lacking when it comes to implementing programs and resources to meet their needs. Discussions and interviews revolve around students. Staff and faculty are left out of the research and do not see the issue from the international student viewpoint. It is important to know their view in order to see where they connect and disconnect with international students. For example, sometimes there are resources provided to benefit and support international students, but international students may not know they exist. There are also times where resources are available, but not relevant or made available for graduate international students, compared to undergraduate international students (Zhai, 2002). One of the persistent problems many international students face is having difficulty befriending students from the United States. There needs to be continuous research to help solve this issue. Another thing that needs to be looked at are the improvements that can be made with orientations. According to Senyshyn (2019), their research found the 2-day orientation, at the university they researched, was not enough for their students to understand what is needed to be successful or is expected of them. Güvendir's research (2016) discussed the orientation program at the University of California Los Angeles which touched on initial worries, but did not address future challenges international students may face such as cultural, academic, and social issues. Along with this, more work needs to be done around getting international students to explore and get involved with resources, such as the counseling center, that are at their disposal. Lastly, there are not many

studies done on how religious institutions affect international students. There are international students who will choose to attend religious institutions that do not cater to their religion and face challenges such as having to learn curriculum based on the university's religion or are socially ostracized for not having the same faith. Other things to think about are graduate international students who are raising a family while attending school, and the age-gap between international undergraduate and graduate students.

Overview

International education continues to grow as more students are choosing to study abroad. Unfortunately, students who study abroad in the United States can face both visible and invisible barriers that impede them from fully transitioning and adapting to their new environment, as seen throughout the literature review. The literature reviewed in this paper dives into the various difficulties these students face and describes possible solutions. The multiple studies conducted their research using different methodologies, both qualitative and quantitative. In the end, more research is needed to understand the gaps that exist, and there is a need to develop programs, classes, or workshops that will help international students succeed. In the next section, I will be discussing the methodology I will be using to further understand the international experience.

Methodology

Based on my review of the literature, I developed a plan to conduct my project on the experiences of international students at USD. In this section, I will go over my considerations, methods, steps to gain data, and more.

Ethical Considerations and Participant Rights

To begin my project, I first gained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. From there, I moved forward with my project. When approaching my participants, I made ethical considerations in the steps I took to approach and engage with my potential participants. All participation was voluntary and participants had the opportunity to end their involvement. I informed all my participants about my project and the purpose of it. I gained their consent throughout the project to use their information, and if I recorded anything, I gained written and verbal consent. For my research I used mixed-methods research. I initially had a qualitative survey to ask students about their general experience at USD, while also collecting data about the identities, such as nationality and age. However, I had no response rate. Informal interviews took place next, going more in depth about the experiences of students and how they wish to be supported. Questions revolved around any barriers or issues they may be facing. I also interviewed a staff member to learn more about the resources already present at USD for graduate international students. Last, I conducted two focus groups. The first was alongside the students to create a plan of action to begin strategizing how to support graduate international students. The second was to go over the plan of action alongside a staff member from the International Center. During my interviews, I made sure I used non harmful vocabulary, and I tried to not make my participants feel uncomfortable. If there was ever anything they wanted me to leave out of their interviews, I made sure to do so. I made sure to keep confidentiality and anonymity by removing names and identifying information from any subsequent records and reports. Lastly, I made sure it is voluntary participation. When it came to the stakeholders, I made sure they were aware of me and the project I am conducting. I made sure I spoke with them

before I started my project, to better understand their boundaries and what is and is not acceptable from me.

Methods

For my project, I used a mixed-methods and participatory action research approach. It was most beneficial for my project and the process I wanted to take. Having quantitative data will help me map out my project by figuring out the type of topics or issues I will be discussing, any gaps in knowledge, and my main population of international students. It was also supposed to help me understand what the most prominent issues may or may not be. The qualitative data helped provide narratives and allowed for a deeper dive into certain topics. I wanted to provide narratives to give power to the voices involved in the project.

The participants focused in my study are graduate international students at USD. I recognize with the COVID-19 pandemic, recent students have different experiences than those who started before the pandemic. I did not plan on picking a particular population, such as only students from Asia or Europe, within the international student population as I developed my study. I hoped to get a variety of international student voices. Another population I worked with is staff members who work closely with supporting international students.

Connection to Project

The data I collected relates to the current issues facing international students at the USD.

I wanted to look at variable that prevent the international students from transitioning, challenges they are facing (socially, mentally…), tools necessary to succeed… etc

I wanted to look at variables that prevent international students from fully transitioning, challenges they are facing (socially, mentally, culturally, academically, etc.), and tools international students find necessary to succeed. What are the difficulties and ways in which they would like to be supported while transitioning and adapting? I collected data from the staff at the international center in USD. I gained knowledge about programs or tools they have available and how they support their international students. I viewed the staff members perspective to see if there may be a disconnect between staff and students. Through the data, I helped give back to the participants by collaborating, and creating possible solutions or ideas. In this way, my study can serve as a guide for the International Center at USD.

Cycles

For my action research and cycles, I had one pre-cycle and three cycles. I used O'Leary's (2004) cycle of observing, reflecting, planning, and acting. I started with reading and reflecting on the literature. The literature influenced how I planned my action research. I began my pre-cycle by interviewing a staff member to learn more about the graduate international student population, and the resources and support they provide. In the second cycle, I conducted a survey to get a general overview of the graduate international student experience. Not having any responses, I quickly tried to proceed to the second cycle. For this cycle, I conducted interviews, gaining the individual experience of graduate international students. Last, in the third cycle, I met with both students and staff to conduct two focus groups. Here, I discussed with students about possible forms of support or solutions.

Data Collection and Interventions

The first data I collected stemmed from the International Center, more specifically the Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS) at USD. I met with a staff member who is

knowledgeable about their programs so I could gain knowledge about the available resources. It

helped me gain a connection to how I reached out to students. To begin my data collection with

the students, I started with an initial survey, via Qualtrics, to gain qualitative and quantitative

information. I wanted to know who my international audience is, the challenges they are facing,

areas of support, and more. I hoped through the survey, I would have had a greater understanding

of the population. I worked with the International center to email out my survey via their

newsletter. After the survey, I conducted six individual interviews to hear the various narratives

of the students. I asked the International Center to assist me in finding students who would be

willing to participate in the interviews. Following this, I conducted two focus groups. When I

sent out the participation consent forms for the interviews, I asked students in the form if they

would be willing to also participate in the focus groups. During the interviews, I asked once

more if they would be willing to participate in focus groups. I wanted to assist the students to

begin taking power into their hands so the project became participatory. Out of the two focus

groups, the second focus group was attended by both staff and students. It allowed them to begin

to converse and create a plan of action.

Pre-Cycle

For my pre-cycle, I took the opportunity to interview a staff member (Staff A) from

OISS. We met for a one-on-one Zoom informational interview. This interview aimed to learn

more about programming and how graduate international students are supported. I learned about

the different support students receive and the main areas they focus on.

As students transition to USD, before arriving, they are tasked with completing three

modules. The topics include immigration, health and wellness, and USD resources. They are

mandatory, and without their completion, students cannot fly to the United States. Staff A did say

that although they are mandatory, the information is not absorbed in the manner they had wished. Many students view it as something to check off a list of things they need to do. The modules also help to serve as a basis when they do in-person orientations. OISS does not spend a lot of time on orientation for graduate international students as they receive a lot of information from their academic school orientations. Also, during orientation, they do not focus on academics and best practices because students have already gone through undergraduate schooling.

OISS provides a variety of resources to support their graduate international students. They do a variety of advising such as immigration, employment, tax compliance, and healthcare advising. OISS also has an International Student Organization (ISO), which is an organization for international students. If graduate international students had played sports at the undergraduate level, OISS will try to connect them to clubs and sports teams at USD. They also try to support students through acculturation and help students acclimate. Staff A said the International Center is a hub for students. "We want [students] to remember that they can come here and talk to us, and we can at least point them in the right direction." Staff A knows that they cannot solve every problem, but that they can act as a guide and support. They collaborate heavily to support the holistic well-being of an international student.

When it comes to getting graduate international students involved, they are invited to all of OISS's events. They are invited to orientation and engagement activities such as beach day, a harbor cruise, padres games, athletic nights, and hikes. Statistically, only about 10-15% of graduate international students attend the International Center's events. The majority of these students are mainly graduate exchange students. OISS does try to promote events through target emails and WhatsApp. There are two WhatsApp groups, one for incoming students and the second is a general USD international group. Staff A said this is where a majority of graduate

students engage in. Having a graduate assistant allows OISS to stay attuned to the graduate

needs, while also making sure to collaborate with Graduate Student Life. Students will get

involved to the extent they want. Some have to return home and some are trying to make a home

in the United States, and have to immerse themselves in the community.

Staff A felt not much acculturation was needed in supporting graduate international students, but

it was a case-by-case situation. They said many students go to undergraduate institutions in the

United States and do not need support. If students do need support, thanks to the small

communities at USD, students quickly create friendships to support their adaptation. Staff A

does not really see students with language or cultural barriers. It is rare to see students with

language issues, and culturally, it is more common in certain situations. They said they mainly

saw cultural issues through networking and the U.S. workplace work environment. Every

graduate international student has their own experiences, with some students needing a lot of

support and others only needing the minimum. This cycle allowed me to learn more about the

various resources available and the perception of graduate international students.

Cycle 1

In the first cycle, I sent out a survey to international graduate students via the Office of

International Students and Scholars (OISS) at USD. My intention for this survey was to gain an

overall understanding of what students may be experiencing at USD, academically, socially,

culturally, etc. They sent it out through their bi-weekly newsletter. The survey was sent out in

November as students returned from Thanksgiving break. According to my knowledge, it was

only shared with the students once. Unfortunately, I did not receive any responses.

This made me take on an objective lens of why students may not have completed the

survey. Graduate students may have been too busy to have taken the time to complete the survey.

Students have to deal with classes, families, their social life, and other commitments. Returning from Thanksgiving break, students were preparing to turn in final projects and take exams. Another issue may have come with the newsletter. Simply, students do not always take the time to read newsletters. Not only that, but they might also be receiving multiple newsletters from different departments on campus. They also receive the Grad Life Connect and Torero Weekly newsletters. Another aspect is I do not know what my message recruiting for students looked like in the newsletter. For future reference, it might have been ideal for me to create a flyer, rather than present students with a message.

The reason I chose to send out a survey is because in the literature review, I discovered international students respond better to internet-based research (Hughes, 2004). I ended up not receiving the engagement I expected. It may have something to do with the countries and cultures that were present in the research, and how they choose to participate. Hughes (2004) mentioned not only is it difficult to recruit students, but they also do not think what they have to contribute is important. The background and identity of a student can inform the methods that best work for them and best practices.

Cycle 2

In the second cycle, I conducted six one-on-one interviews with graduate international students. This allowed me to learn more about the individual experiences of students and the issues they might be facing. I interviewed two students from Africa, two from Europe, one from South America, and one from North America. Out of the six students, two were male, and four were female. Students were asked questions about their identity, transitions, barriers and issues they faced, support, and sense of belonging. Some of the questions were: What were the most important adjustment problems you encountered after you came to the United States? Have you

ever used student services provided by the university? What resources have been the most beneficial or helpful? Thinking about your experience at the University of San Diego, have you felt included in the university community? I asked students if they had previously spent time in the United States, to gain an understanding of whether they had previously been exposed to American culture and way of living. One student had never been to the United States, and four students had previously visited for less than a week. The sixth student visited occasionally to visit family, but they still experienced difficulties in transitioning. Student B is also the only student to have attended a university outside of their country for their undergraduate studies. Every student answered to the extent they wished to and was very open.

Table #1

Student Population

	Place of Origin	Educational Department	Duration of Stay	Enrollment Start
Student A	Africa	Kroc School of Peace and Justice	2 year program	Fall 2021
Student B	Africa	Kroc School of Peace and Justice	15 month program	Fall 2021
Student C	Europe	Kroc School of Peace and Justice	2 year program	Fall 2021
Student D	Europe	Knauss School of Business	1 year program	Fall 2021
Student E	South America	College of Art and Sciences	2 year program	Fall 2021

Student F	North America	Kroc School of Peace and Justice	2 year program	Fall of 2020

Note: Students were grouped by continents rather than specific countries to keep confidentiality

Findings

As the students transitioned into the United States and USD, students were faced with a variety of challenges and surprises. Students faced issues with academics, housing, language, culture shock, and more. Student E said they did not expect there to be such a big difference between the culture of their country and America. A few others expressed similar thoughts. Academically, students were not prepared to understand or enter the academic field. Students did not know what was expected of them. Many did not find the pre-arrival modules to be helpful. To them, it was an overload of information, and a few did not remember completing the modules. Student B was lost in the practical sense when they transitioned. They also were surprised by the weather. They did not realize California became cold as they were told it is always sunny. Students from warmer climates struggled with the temperature and were not prepared for the drop in temperatures. Student F had the most unique experience as they started amid the pandemic. Their first year was fully online. They had a difficult time starting during the pandemic, but it also aided their transition as they created connections before moving. Although students might have struggled or faced issues, they all felt they were able to get the support they needed. They had friends and professors who supported them in navigating academics, culture, housing, and more.

Barriers or Issues

During the student's transitions, they faced a variety of barriers or issues. Most of these challenges were experienced by the students I interviewed, but my participants also mentioned

the issues faced by their classmates. The main challenges they faced were academic, housing, language, transportation, and culture shock.

Academic

Academically, students discussed the issues they faced with understanding the academic system of USD and how to navigate through it. Student E and Student A discussed how they came from countries where the academic system was very different. Student E said they were not used to the number of presentations that were required of them in their program. According to Student A, our academic system favors the extrovert, making it difficult for them. They struggled in knowing when to speak and understanding what are appropriate things to say or discuss. Student B said they did not know what to expect in the courses or what to prepare. Coming from a different academic background from USD, they were not sure how to write or structure their assignments. Student A brought up that in their country, there is a hierarchical power structure between students and professors, where students are not allowed to overstep and discuss certain matters. It was a shock to them when they had a USD professor invest in them with curiosity about how they were doing. Students may come from countries where academics are structured very differently, or where the socialization between students and faculty is not present. Student E also expressed the difficulty they first had in interacting with faculty and reaching out to them for academic needs. Not only was their language buried impeding from wanting to reach out, but they did not know what the appropriate manner of interacting with a faculty member was. They did not know what would be considered rude.

Alongside this, not all students were familiar with the academic grading system. Students were not affected by the grading system, but they wished to gain a better understanding of it. Student C did not know and does not understand what extra credit is, and they wished to know

more about it. Student F was used to a grading system where one receives a score between one to ten. The letter system grading was a new concept for them. Student B, who attended their undergraduate program in the United Kingdom, felt the academic standard of USD was at a lower standard than Cardiff University. This was due to the difference in the academic grading system. They mentioned it was difficult to receive more than 70% on an assignment. Then there is USD where they found students received high scores easily. After explaining the scoring system in the United States, they were able to gain a better understanding, however, they still felt it is easy to cheat the system.

Last, some students mentioned they struggled with writing. Student A grew up with the British writing system, so they were used to writing in English. However, they found the British writing system was different from the American system. In the British system, sentences tend to be long winded, while Americans tend to be more direct. Their main form of support is the Writing Center. However, they feel the Writing Center's form of support is impersonal and they would like to know more about how they can improve. They do not just want notes on how to correct their paper. Student B purchased a variety of writing books to help catch up and understand the American writing system. They gave an example of how they were told to write an argument, but their definition and the professor's definition were very different. Their academic backgrounds informed how they wrote or defined things.

Although student C did not struggle with writing, they mentioned other international students they knew were struggling with writing, needing extra support.

Housing

One of the biggest issues every student struggled with revolved around housing. At USD, housing is only provided to undergraduate students. For graduate international students, that can

cause an issue when they find difficulties in acquiring housing because they do not have a credit score. It also does not help that they are not familiar with San Diego and the environment. Student F wished to at least have a map of San Diego, with advice, to gain a better understanding of where to live. Students mentioned they had little to no support in regard to housing. Student D discussed how they were told to check Facebook and various resources, but it is not enough. The lack of connections and credit scores leave a great barrier. Student A also mentioned the lack of connection. They had reached out to housing, who had no available housing, and were told to reach out to friends. Many international students come to the United States without having any connections. Student C mentioned HUGS, a housing resource meant to support international students in finding housing. They pointed out it was a great resource, but it did not have the capacity to give or support everyone in housing. HUGS is used by international students on other university campuses in San Diego, creating competition in finding housing. It does not help, Student D mentioned, you are limited in where you can live. Due to lack of or limited transportation, students struggle to find housing around a reasonable distance from campus. There was a consensus from the students that they wished to know about the housing issue earlier in their transition. They felt as soon as they were accepted, this is one of the things they should be told.

Language

A few of the students mentioned struggling with the language or mentioned having classmates that struggled. Student E discussed how they struggled with the language, and how they assumed someone in the International Center would be able to speak their language. There was a form of support they were expecting that was not met. Student C, who comes from an

English-speaking country, said they did not struggle. However, they mentioned their classmates were struggling academically due to struggling with the language barrier.

Transportation

Although many of the students mentioned they did not need a car, most mentioned the transportation issues they have encountered. A majority mentioned without a car, their mobility was restricted and limited. Student E said if one is not living near campus, you are going to need a car. Student A expressed their surprise at the way the American public transportation system navigates compared to their country. In their country, they quickly get on and off their public transportation, with transportation moving fast. They discussed how in the United States, they live 15 minutes away from campus, yet it takes them an hour to arrive on campus by public transportation. They had difficulty with the amount of time they lost in a day. Student A did not state living in the Old Town area, but they also expressed difficulties in getting home and going to Old Town after classes. For certain graduate student programs, some courses run late, and for those who have to rely on public transportation, it can be difficult. This is what Student A experienced. After late-night classes, they did not want to walk to the Linda Vista station at night, due to safety issues. They reached out to public safety on campus, who said they were not able to support them because it is not on campus. How do you support students in keeping them safe through their transportation needs?

Culture Shock

Within culture shock, students had a difficult time adjusting to and navigating the culture of USD and the United States. Some of these cultural differences impacted the classroom setting and how students interacted with others. Student C brought up the issue of struggling with the political correctness culture of the United States. Knowing that they need to be politically correct

all the time because students are constantly politically and emotionally charged, they felt

intimidated in wanting to speak. They found it hard to navigate conversations and felt it was

difficult to have discussions. Expressing discontent or criticism did not feel like an option.

Student F was not used to the identity work that is done at USD. Students have to acknowledge

their identity and struggles before they can do anything or create friendships. They come from a

country where they do not talk about these things as it is not an issue for them. Their country is

not as diverse. They do find it interesting and enjoy learning about it, but they also said when

they go back to their country, nobody is going to care. The way we navigate the culture in the

United States and at USD was not something all students were prepared for.

There were also cultural concerns brought out upon international students from certain

countries. Student C spoke to the Arabian students and the difficulties they may have in

understanding the policies and rules USD has created. USD has the same gendered bathrooms,

and students coming from a more conservative country such as Arabia, might not understand it.

Student C said the Arabian students may not understand or resonate with this concept as it is

foreign to them. They may not be willing or open to discussing these things.

Only student B brought up issues with relocation being shocked by new environments.

The price of food and the distance of grocery stores came as a shock to them. They were used to

having markets around the corner, where at USD, they needed a car just to go to the grocery

store. When they moved into their apartment, it was their first time using a garbage disposal. Not

really knowing how to use it, they used it incorrectly and caused plumbing issues. For them, the

weather was also a big issue. Everyone told them they were lucky to be going to sunny

California. Student B did not expect it to get so cold. They were not prepared for it, nor did they

pack for the temperature. Weather, although student B was the only one that spoke to it, speaks to

be an issue for students who had informal conversations with me outside of the interviews. Students from warmer climates face issues with the cold weather, while those who come from colder climates do not have as many issues. Student B said they began their transition in the honeymoon phase and quickly moved past it. Students are not always fully prepared or given the information they need. Sometimes even the smallest amount of information creates a big impact.

Student Services and Resources

Through USD, students have been able to use a variety of resources to support themselves. However, there are times when students are not satisfied with their services or feel they are not able to grasp an understanding of some of the resources. Student resources used by graduate international students include the library, health center, writing center, International Center, University Ministry, and Graduate Student Life.

Students felt there was no lack of resources, but wish that more were available. Student D found it difficult to find resources and felt like at times, they were being sent in circles. Not only that, but students felt not enough information is given to them, or too much is given, making them feel overwhelmed. Both Student D and Student C said they did not know a lot about the Health Center and how to navigate it. Student C remembers being given a handout on the Health Center, but that it felt like an overload of information, and did not know where to start. A few students wished to learn more about the library and how to use the library to conduct research or use the online services. Then there are times when there is a mix of information, where students do not know what is being offered to graduate students and what is only for undergraduate students. Student A wanted to learn more from the Writing Center about writing practices, as it was promoted through the International Center. However, they learned this resource is only offered to undergraduate students. At orientation, they were told USD has a really good writing

center and to use it. Student A said, "but you join and it is like, where are you?" Many resources

are not offered to graduate students. Student E did not even know the Writing Center existed.

Overall, there needs to be a consensus of what is an overload of information, and when is there

not enough provided. Along with this is providing clear communication.

Support from USD

Students felt USD, as an institution, was able to support them, but some felt it was only to

a certain extent. For those who felt supported they found areas on campus where they were able

to seek resources and fulfill their needs. Student B was able to go to University Ministry, where

they can support them through personal matters and life issues. With the new addition of

TimelyCare, a mental health telehealth app, Student B has gained more support. They believe

USD holds their Christian spirit of service. Student E and Student F also felt supported and felt

they could reach out to seek help.

Other students wanted more support to be offered or felt they could not receive the full

support they needed. Student A said USD is trying and is willing to help, but USD is also still

trying to figure things out. Student A is a part of a student advisory board and is aware the

resources available have reduced over the years. They also felt they would have benefited if USD

was able to assist them more financially. Due to lack of support, they spend their time seeking

opportunities to aid their tuition. Student C did not feel supported because USD does not provide

an open academic environment. Students, faculty, and staff all have to be politically correct.

They talk about how they were not allowed to post a J.K. Rowling quote because of the backlash

they would receive. They expressed there were very few staff and faculty members who could be

reached out to discuss these issues. Even then, they may be comfortable discussing this issue, but

it might make others feel uncomfortable. Every student is going to need and seek the support

they need. Not everyone is going to feel fully supported throughout the college experience.

Support on Campus

Witnessing students did not always receive the support they need, I followed up with a

question about the support they would like to receive. I specifically kept it to the International

Center and the student's academic school, who have more direct contact with the graduate

international students.

International Center

When it comes to graduate international students receiving support from the International

Center, many felt supported. However, they also wanted to see more out of the International

Center. Student A appreciated the International Center for the cultural events and guests they

invited to campus. They mentioned it was helpful for the International Center to bring in a

lawyer to better understand immigration issues and the scope of what international students are

allowed to do. In terms of advising, the International Center does a great job of supporting

students.

On the opposite end, Student D and Student C wished to see more with new events

coming from the International Center. Student D said, "it is not reasonable to have only one

event once a semester." There is only one big event every semester for graduate international

students, and they wish to see more events. Student C feels the International Center's events are

outdated, with them trying to push out as many events. They wished the International Center

events were driven by students or with students. When too many events are pushed out, there is a

disconnect with the community as the International Center does not recognize students are busy.

Student A said time is an issue when it comes to engaging with community. When they want to

go to events or be a part of a club, they have class. They felt most events seemed to make sense

for undergraduate students. Student B tried to be a part of ISO, but it was mainly an

undergraduate community. They would go to their coffee events, but they did not feel welcomed.

They thought it was a space where all international students would be able to connect. However,

they found everyone stayed in their subgroups, where there was no real community for them.

Student C wants to see the OISS Graduate Assistant work more closely with international

graduate students as they share identities. They thought it did not make sense for a graduate

assistant to create social events for undergraduate students when the undergraduate assistant

could take on that role. Student C mentioned, "why is the Graduate student organizing

undergraduate social events?" Although they share similar experiences, they do not fully

understand the undergraduate experience. They believed the graduate assistant could take on a

bigger role in supporting graduate international students and if they are not willing to make this

change, then it is immediately a disconnect in priorities.

　　　　When it comes to orientation, many students wanted to see more support, but they also

recognized the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact. Students desired to have had at least a tour

of USD and where all the resources are located. There was a group consensus that orientation is

great, but that it is hard to retain all the information. Students are not thinking about or fully

focused on what is in front of them. They are thinking about all the things they have to do and

prepare for. One's mind is occupied with the fact they are in a new country. Student E would like

the International Center to be more visible in their support and what they can offer. This might

mean becoming more active in social media to target students.

Academic School

In gaining support from their academic schools, I asked students how they would like to be supported. Every student said they wanted to see more social gatherings in their academic schools. It is a chance to be able to meet other international students within their programs they might not ever meet. Student A also mentioned having a social event alongside domestic students. Their school put on an event where international students were paired with domestic students to get to know each other. Unfortunately, nothing was done past his activity. They would have liked to see more events such as this, where students can form relationships, such as a buddy system. This allows for a new form of support for graduate international students. Student C said it would be nice to have a point of contact or organization that tries to get students together. Students want to receive more engagement.

On the practical end of academics, students would like to receive more academic support. Student B wants to receive more training and workshops around writing. They want to gain a greater understanding of the academic culture and what is expected of them. Student E felt it would be useful if their academic school sent out an email every two weeks with information about resources and things their school is offering. They also mentioned that at the orientations, they should introduce the whole faculty. For them, it would allow them to more easily engage with faculty, especially those who have similar topics of interest. Not all students have an academic understanding of the American system, and they need support.

Community and Sense of Belonging

A community is often created with a group of people sharing commonalities. This is why international students tend to navigate toward other international students, or at least those with similar identities. It allows students to connect with those who are going on a similar journey.

Student C said, "the international student experience is so different from the domestic experience." They were able to create friendships with American students, but they found it difficult. A domestic student will not understand some of the issues around finances and employment. Student F, although has made American friends, they gravitate toward students that identify as Latinas or those that speak Spanish. Student A came to USD with curiosity and wanting to learn, but felt it was easier to connect with other students from their region. The conversations were more personal. Both Student A and E discussed creating friendships due to students having curiosity about their country. Student E said students were welcoming and open to learning more about their experiences and perspectives. Student A, however, found this to be challenging. They did not know if students were actually interested in creating relationships or if students were just excited they were from a different country.

Looking at USD as a whole, when asked if they felt a part of the USD community, all students responded yes. However, they also felt it was only to a certain extent. Once students figured out how to navigate USD and campus life, they felt more confident in reaching out to staff and faculty. Student E mentioned USD tries to be very intentional with its programming. Student A has enjoyed the various spaces and events that facilitate community. However, Student A also feels they have only found community within specific communities and spaces. Student A said, "You can feel like a very small element to a very big picture."

All of the students brought up the fact that USD is typically centered around undergraduate life. Student C found it hard to answer whether they are a part of the USD community because of this. They felt, at times, if you are not an undergraduate student you are excluded. Student A did not expect to see a difference in the services provided. By virtue of being a graduate student, services and resources are automatically taken away. Student B was

very surprised to see most of the campus events are created only for undergraduate students. It is difficult for students to gain a sense of belonging when USD does not fully engage them, as it favors certain communities.

Solutions

I had asked students about the various solutions or ideas they would like to see implement on campus. With their responses, I created a list:

- More Graduate International catered events or social gatherings

- Tours of the city and campus

- Sending out important information, such as housing issue, as soon as a student is admitted

- Workshops in understanding the academic culture and system

- Mentorships with domestic and international students

- Guaranteed accommodation or temporary housing

- Restructuring what orientation, when students come to campus, could look like. Adding more social interaction aspects such as have meet and greets, or having community building around San Diego

- A centralization of all resources on campus and how to use them

- Video newsletter that is roughly 1 to 2 minutes long sent via WhatsApp to all graduate international students

- Supporting students with housing by providing a minimum of one month of accommodation until students find a place to live

- Weekly grocery store trips, with information about the different grocery stores and price points

Cycle 3

For the last cycle, I held two focus groups to create a plan of action to better support graduate international students. I invited all of the students I interviewed to participate in the focus group. Five of the students expressed interest in participating in the focus groups. The focus group intended to provide graduate international students a time and place to be given a voice and power. There is strength in participatory action research and involving the community in present issues.

Focus Group #1

In the first focus group, only two students were able to participate. The students who attended were Student B and Student F. I asked students questions about the issues they would like to focus on and the types of programming and events they would like to see. I also had them start to think about the steps that would need to be taken to reach our goals.

The Graduate International Students and I came up with six solutions or ideas that were the main priorities of the students who attended the focus group.

- Create orientations on San Diego and navigating the city. (Housing, weather, transportation, food, etc.)

- Create workshops to gain more information on how to navigate resources. Partnering with banks to learn how to open a bank account, partnering with phone companies to learn about SIM cards and phone plans, Talking to housing agents to learn more about navigating the San Diego housing market, etc.

- Partner with the different schools to put on social gatherings for graduate International students. (Social hour)

- Create an ambassador program for students to interact with a current graduate international student or current domestic student, pre-arrival and during their time at USD.

- Provide welcome baskets, filled with necessities and resources, for students when they arrive to USD. Filling the baskets with necessities such as soap, detergent, snacks, a list of grocery stores and the price points, etc.

- Restructure pre-arrival learning modules. (Asynchronous)

- Provide information to students earlier.

Afterwards, I shared these six points with the rest of the students interested in partaking in the focus groups in order to keep them in the loop.

Focus Group #2

In the second focus group, the intention was to have the graduate international students finalize their plan of action. We looked at the action steps, resources needed, and the departments and collaborations that would be involved. Before this focus group, I wrote down the desired outcomes of the action steps based on the discussions that happened in the first focus group. We ended up not creating dates or measurables for these action steps as it was taxing for the students. They were also not sure how to measure the progress. Those in the focus groups were about to graduate or only had a semester left, which meant they might not be a part of or see change. For this focus group, Students B, E, and F participated. We spent around 30 minutes going over the plan of action. For the second half, a staff member (Staff B) from OISS joined us. The goal was to have a staff member and students work together to go over the plan of action and start thinking about its implementation.

Before Staff B joined us, the students were unsure about the plan of action, and the staff taking it seriously. Student B talked about buy-in and was worried about how to get the

International Center to buy into our plan. Student B said, "The ideas are there, the hardest would

be creating buy-in. However clever your project may be… it is very hard to create buy-in." I

affirmed them by saying they were the buy-in, it was their experiences and voices that created

the importance of the work that needs to be done. What affects one student affects the whole

community. They also all acknowledged their proposed ideas were not difficult to implement.

Student F talked about how easy some of the ideas were to implement. At least one of the ideas

did not need more work than just collaboration with a department. We have programs and events

already created, now we just need to work to shift some of them to the next level or add to them.

I told them we are the ones who get to keep the International Center accountable for the work

they do.

When Staff B joined, each student went over the idea that was most important to them.

Student F discussed orientation and what students would like to see in orientation. This meant

getting tours around the city and USD. Students wanted to learn more about the various

resources available. Student E went over creating an ambassador program that would help better

introduce and transition international students to USD. Current international students have more

empathy than domestic students and share an experience that will be able to help guide incoming

international students. They brought up how they have already started to become an ambassador

for incoming international students at their academic school thanks to this project. They told

their professor about the project, which made them ask for Student E's help in supporting

incoming graduate international students. Student B spoke about the welcome baskets and the

benefits of students receiving these baskets. Students travel from all over the world, traveling

with very little and they might need certain necessities as soon as they arrive. Student B shared

their experience of not being able to buy anything as they had to wait to receive a credit card,

which meant they lived on the bare minimum for a week. Adding to this is that not all students are familiar with brands or know what products look like in the United States. The baskets help to give extra support through a student's transition period. For the other three ideas, I quickly went over them giving insight into what students discussed.

When Staff B gave their overview, they were relieved to see all the ideas were things the International Center has been discussing or thinking about. They were also able to give us a better understanding of how much the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their office and programing. Staff B talked about the orientation action step and how pre-pandemic, they typically do all the things that we came up with. They brought up how none of the current students and leaders know what a normal orientation looks like. Staff take students on grocery store trips, help them move into their housing, take day trips, and more. Staff B was also able to affirm the students in their action steps and their importance of them. Student B, who was the most worried about buy-in was met by excitement from Staff B with the welcome basket. Staff B said that it was a plan that they want to take back to their team. The students and Staff B felt the same about certain programs such as the modules. There was an understanding that there may be too much and that students are not grasping the information that is needed. There was mutual understanding throughout the conversation.

In the end, Staff B connected with the students and began recruiting them and asking for their help. They asked the students, if they had time, to help serve as a source of support during orientation. Staff B stated, "we cannot do what has happened to you, but let's work together to make our community, moving forward, to be exactly what you hoped. We can continue to improve that." Staff B also wanted to gain insight into what would be good marketing strategies to get graduate international students involved and reading emails. They humbly asked the

students if they would be willing to email them with any strategies they have. Staff B ended the

conversation by inviting the students to have a conversation with the new Associate Director for

International Student Engagement, as soon as they were fully onboarded. They believed that the

action plan would be a good meet and great piece. Staff B saw the plan of action as a

conversation starter that will continue. This focus group allowed students to make a great

connection with the International Center, giving power to their voices and helping to start the

gears of change (the Plan of Action can be found in Appendix A).

Limitations

Although I received significant data, recruitment was a limitation. As mentioned, I did

not receive any participants for the survey. I was told by one of the International Center staff

members, staff member #1, that having an incentive would work best. I did not end up giving out

an incentive, and through my colleagues, I learned that an incentive might not have been enough

for recruitment. Many of my colleagues offered incentives and received little to no engagement.

My colleague who worked with undergraduate international students gained roughly four

participants for their survey, having offered an incentive. When I recruited for my survey, the

staff member #1 I worked with suggested names of students I have contact with, and I used my

report with them to recruit them. I ended up recruiting students who are more engaged on

campus, and the majority are enrolled at the Kroc School of Peace and Justice. Who are the

students who are not engaging with USD or their community, and why? I would have liked to see

a greater insight as to the experiences faced by students in other schools, as we have seven

schools. The top two schools Graduate international students enroll into are business and law

school (Office of International Students and Scholars, 2021). Students are going to face similar

and different challenges in terms of the schools they are enrolled in. Last, the data would have

been enhanced with a greater number of students from Asia or the Middle East. The top three

geographical locations that graduate international students come from are China, Saudi Arabia,

and Germany (Office of International Students and Scholars, 2021). As the majority population,

they would have contributed vastly to the data collected, gaining an insight as to what the

majority of students might be facing. In the end, the data I collected has tremendous value and

impact.

Recommendations

Working with the graduate international students, together, we were able to create a plan

of action with a variety of recommendations. At the same time, I saw there were a few things that

the International Center can do more of or could begin to do. These were to do more

collaborations, create focus groups, and begin to think about creating an international team for

graduate international students.

Collaboration

I would say that this project gives OISS a big opportunity to consider and engage more

with campus partners and outside resources. OISS already engages with and has a variety of

campus partner relationships. However, this could be a start to partnering differently with

different departments and coming up with new ideas. Many students discussed wanting to have

more social opportunities with other international students in their respective schools. OISS

could partner with the schools on campus to think about and create events that would best engage

support students. OISS could provide best practices and ways to interact with graduate

international students. The International Center could also think about partnering with

off-campus resources. Many students wanted to learn more about San Diego and city life. The

International Center could partner with San Diego tour guides to create opportunities for students

to learn more about the city. There are endless possibilities as to what the International Center

can do with its collaborations.

Focus Groups

After hosting the second focus group, I would like to recommend that the International

Center continue hosting focus groups. This could be once a semester or every academic year.

This will allow the International Center to keep up to date with any issues or challenges students

may have. It can also start the conversation as to what the gaps in supporting students are. Yes,

there is a graduate assistant that can give insight into the graduate international experience and

how students are doing. However, much of their time is spent on programming and engaging

with undergraduate students. Not only that, but they will only be able to speak to the experiences

of those in their academic school, and those who engage with the International Center

community. It would leave gaps, leaving out voices and experiences. The focus groups also

allow the international graduate students and staff members to interact on another level. Students

and staff can work together to support one another.

International Team Ambassadors

Another opportunity that OISS can begin to contemplate is expanding the International

Team Ambassadors to support graduate international students. OISS has a team of international

ambassadors that help support and serve undergraduate students. They become orientation

leaders and members. They even recruit graduate international students to become a part of the

team. However, these graduate international students work to support undergraduate students. If

there are already graduate students on the team, they could make a shift to start supporting

incoming graduate international students. It would make more sense to have these students

support graduate students, rather than undergraduates, who will have somewhat of a different

experience. The graduate international ambassadors can help support incoming graduate international students by sharing their knowledge. They can tell them about the tips and tricks for campus and where to engage. They can support students by letting them know about the academic expectations and the academic system.

Conclusion

The International Center is constantly working to better engage and support its International Graduate students. I would say now is a time to start thinking about students and the various experiences they bring in. The COVID-19 pandemic has made room for new ideas and reshaping. At the same time, I think staff members need to work on how they are perceiving the graduate international students. I would make sure to not make assumptions about what students need and do not need. For example, Staff A mentioned graduate international students do not need much academic support because they have gone through an undergraduate experience. However, studying abroad is a different experience with a new academic culture and expectations. Along with that, students are going to face different issues based on where they are coming from and their backgrounds. Having informal conversations outside of the formal space of this project, I encountered quite a few students who struggled with the temperature change. Students from warmer regions were not prepared to face the dynamic weather of California. The International Office can work to see what gaps they are missing and fill them with information, resources, and programming. However, I do acknowledge it is difficult to support the needs of every student. The international student population is a diverse community with a mix of variables. I would make sure it is important to not miss the students that might fall through the cracks. A majority of the students I interviewed mentioned they were not struggling as much as other students, and one student mentioned they knew of one student who often cried. Graduate

International Students need as much support as any other student. Staff B said, "I believe it takes a whole community to make an international student have a great experience." To support graduate international students, a holistic point of view has to be considered to serve them.

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Appendix A

Plan of Action

Action Step	Responsible Departments/Employees	Required Resources	Desired outcome
Create orientations on San Diego and navigating the city. (Housing, weather, transportation, food, etc.)	OISS, partner with Outdoor Adventures for field trips targeted for graduate students	Maps, brochures	The goal is to allow incoming graduate international students to gain a better understanding of what San Diego is like prior to arrival. It helps students become better prepared to transition and adjust.
Create workshops to gain more information on how to navigate resources. Partnering with banks to learn how to open a bank account, partnering with phone companies to learn about SIM cards and phone plans, Talking to housing agents to learn more about navigating the San Diego housing market, etc.	OISS partnering without outside campus partners		Gain more knowledge to better navigate different aspects of transitioning to the United States.

Create an ambassador program for students to interact with a current graduate international student or current domestic student, pre-arrival and during their time at USD.	OISS, Academic schools, summer bridge program team		Having ambassadors allows students to better adjust and integrate at USD and America. International ambassadors allow incoming graduate international students to gain a better understanding of what the international student experience is like at USD and how to navigate it. Having a domestic ambassador allows for incoming graduate international students to better understand the American culture and society. Having both options allows students to interact with who they feel most comfortable with and gain the knowledge they are seeking.
Partner with the different schools to put on social gatherings for graduate International students. (Social hour)	Academic schools	Funding for hospitality, follow up on the events	It will allow students to build community with other graduate international students from their schools. Students want to know who the other graduate international students are, and make connections.

Restructure pre-arrival learning modules. (Asynchronous)	OISS, team to work on the syllabus, testing with current international students, IT department	Look at previous syllabus of other schools	This will help students better grasp the concepts they are learning while also working to build community.
Provide welcome baskets, filled with necessities and resources, for students when they arrive to USD. Filling the baskets with necessities such as soap, detergent, snacks, a list of grocery stores and the price points, etc.	Partnering with Food Pantry / establish a team to prepare list of grocery stores / work with auxiliary services	Sponsors from the supermarkets , collaboration with hotels: Soap, detergent, shampoo, toothbrush, toothpaste, snacks	Allows students to feel welcomed and valued. It also allows students to gain an understanding of the consumer products sold in the United States, and learn more about the different stores.

Appendix B

Consent Forms

Google Form:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1DVBsiWrR5jJvujrFdT6tweRwY08WSPEKJRDIOGtw34c/edi

t

Research Participant Consent Form for Graduate International Students
For the research study entitled:
Exploration into the Graduate International Student Narratives

I. Purpose of the research study

Diana BuDoff is a student in the SOLES department at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is: to explore the narratives of international graduate students at USD and how greater support can be provided to them.

II. What you will be asked to do

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

1. Complete a survey to gain a general understanding of those completing the survey and an overview of their experience at the University of San Diego.
2. Have the option to participate in a one-on-one interview to learn more about the issues facing international graduate students and how to support them?
3. Have the option to participate in two focus groups to create a plan of action to better support international graduate students. If you participate in one of the focus groups, you have to participate in the second one as well.

There will be roughly 40 questions asked overall if you choose to participate in all three activities. There are 30 survey questions, 7 interview questions, and 3 focus group questions. There are close-ended and open-ended questions ranging from multiple choice to text box. The questions revolve around personal identity, one's experience at the University of San Diego, and how one would like to be better supported. Two of the activities will be done through Zoom. You will be audio recorded during the activities. Your participation in this study will take a total of 3 hours for all three activities. The survey takes roughly 15 minutes, the survey will be around 45 minutes, and each focus group will last approximately 45 minutes to complete.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts

This study involves no more risk than the risks you encounter in daily Life.

IV. Benefits
While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand the dilemmas of international graduate students and how they may create change to support them. It will also help you share your narrative and bring awareness to graduate international students.

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

VI. Compensation
You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

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

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

1) Diana BuDoff
Email: dbudoff@sandiego.edu
Phone: (760)277-1130

2) Kecia Brown
Email: Keciabrown@sandiego.edu
Phone: (760)566-7917

Name

By checking the box below, you are stating that you understand the information above and consent to participation in this voluntary interview.

By checking the box below, you are stating that you understand the information above and consent to participation in the voluntary focus groups.

Zoom Video Recording: Additional Consent

Google Form:
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/17P4owR_jjozMT8_xJ_OPbuOodzq9BCJNa9g64buh548/edit

A video recording will be made of you during your participation in the study. This video recording will only be used for data collection purposes and transcript analysis. The video recordings will not be shared and will be deleted upon completion of the project.

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

I hereby give permission for the Zoom video recording for this research study to be used for data collection purposes. I understand that the Zoom recording will not be publicly released and will be deleted upon completion of the project.

_____

Signature of Research Participant

Research Participant Consent Form for Staff
For the research study entitled:
Exploration into the Graduate International Student Narratives

I. Purpose of the research study

Diana BuDoff is a student in the SOLES department at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is: to explore the narratives of international graduate students at USD and how greater support can be provided to them.

II. What you will be asked to do

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

1. Participate in a one-on-one interview to learn more about the International Center, and the various resources available for international students.
2. Have the optional choice to participate in a focus groups to create a plan of action to better support international graduate students alongside international students.

There will be roughly 11 questions, 7 questions for the interview and four questions for the focus group. The questions revolve around the support that is available and given to graduate international students, and how the International Center can better support them. These activities will be held through Zoom. You will be audio recorded during these activities. Your participation in this study will take a total of an hour and a half with roughly 45 minutes allotted to both activities.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts

This study involves no more risk than the risks you encounter in daily Life.

IV. Benefits

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you have helped uplift the international graduate narrative.

V. Confidentiality

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

VI. Compensation
You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

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

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

1) Diana BuDoff
Email: dbudoff@sandiego.edu
Phone: (760)277-1130

2) Kecia Brown
Email: Keciabrown@sandiego.edu
Phone: (760)566-7917

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

Signature of Participant   Date

_____

Name of Participant (Printed)

_____

Zoom Video Recording: Additional Consent

A video recording will be made of you during your participation in the study. This video recording will only be used for data collection purposes and transcript analysis. The video recordings will not be shared and will be deleted upon completion of the project.

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

I hereby give permission for the Zoom video recording for this research study to be used for data collection purposes. I understand that the Zoom recording will not be publicly released and will be deleted upon completion of the project.

_____

Signature of Research Participant

Appendix C

Permission Consent

Letter for Permission

9/29/21
Chia-Yen Lin, Director, International Students and Scholars
5998 Alcalá Park
San Diego, CA 92110-2492

Dear Chia-Yen:

My name is Diana BuDoff and I am currently a second-year graduate student at the University of San Diego earning a M.A. degree in Higher Education Leadership. As a part of my graduation requirement, I am conducting an Action Research study Exploration into the Graduate International Student Narratives. The purpose of this letter is to ask permission to work with the graduate international student and International Center staff at the University of San Diego and request assistance with participant outreach.

In my study, I will use the following process to engage my participants:
- A survey to gauge where the participants are coming from and their relation to USD.
- One-on-one interviews with staff and students to learn more about USD, the International Center, and the issues facing international graduate students.
- Focus groups, involving both students and staff to create a plan of action to better support international graduate students.

I would greatly appreciate your permission to engage graduate international students and International Center Staff. If my request to conduct research with graduate international students and International Center staff is acceptable, please confirm with a letter of permission with your signature and date on letterhead via email to: dbudoff@sandiego.edu. Please note that this letter is required for the Institutional Review Board at the University of San Diego.

If you would like further clarification prior to approving this request, please feel free to contact me directly by phone at: (760) 277-1130 or via email: dbudoff@sandiego.edu. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Kecia C. Brown at keciabrown@sandiego.edu for more information about our Action Research requirements.

Thank you so much for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Diana BuDoff

Office of International Students
and Scholars (OISS)
Serra Hall, Rm 201
5998 Alcalá Park
San Diego, CA 92110-2492
P: (619) 260-4598
F: (619) 260-4170

University
of San Diego®

October 1st, 2021

Dear Diana BuDoff:

In my capacity as the Director at the Office of International Students and Scholars, I support
the research project titled "Exploration into the Graduate International Student Narratives." I am prepared
to support you research endeavors, which includes giving permission to recruit
participants and outreach through the Office of International Students and Scholars at the
University of San Diego. I also understand that this research will be carried out following
ethical principles and that participant involvement in this research study is strictly voluntary and
provides confidentiality of research data.

Sincerely,

CHIA-YEN LIN
Director, Office of International Students and Scholars
International Center, University of San Diego
www.sandiego.edu/oiss
Email: linc@sandiego.edu

Letter for Permission

Dear Lijuan Zhai:

My name is Diana BuDoff and I am earning a Master of Arts degree in Higher Education Leadership from the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. I am currently working on my capstone Action Research project in partial fulfillment of my degree requirement. As I was reviewing the literature, I learned about your four questions from your article entitled: "Studying International Students: Adjustment Issues and Social Support." This instrument is aligned with my research and I would like to request your permission to adapt it for my study.
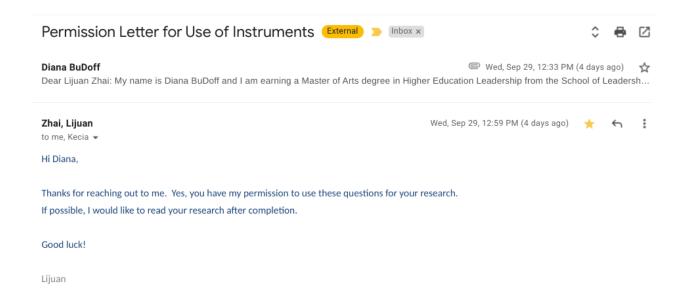
My research examines the narratives of International Graduate Students. I will be researching the transition process and issues that our graduate students at the University of San Diego face. The overall goal is to work alongside international students and staff to create a plan of action to better support international graduate students. I am excited about this deeply personal work given my experience working with international students in student leadership roles as an undergraduate. As a graduate assistant working with graduate students, I noticed a disconnect between undergraduate and graduate international students that led to my passion for wanting to see greater support for this population.

I am requesting your permission to access and adapt the four questions used in your research, alongside other questions I am using, using the online survey software on Qualtrics. If you will permit my use of your instrument, I will cite your work and name according to APA 7 standards and, if you would like, share my findings with you.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Respectfully,

Diana BuDoff
Graduate Student
Department of Leadership Studies
(760)277-1130
dbudoff@sandiego.edu

Letter for Permission

Dear Drs. Mark Sherry, Peter Thomas and Wing Hong Chui:

My name is Diana BuDoff and I am earning a Master of Arts degree in Higher Education Leadership from the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. I am currently working on my capstone Action Research project in partial fulfillment of my degree requirement. As I was reviewing the literature, I learned about your survey and interview questions from your article entitled: "International Students: A Vulnerable Student Population." This instrument appears to be aligned with my research and I would like to request your permission to adapt it for my study.

My research examines the narratives of International Graduate Students. I will be researching the transition process and issues that our graduate students at the University of San Diego face. The overall goal is to work alongside international students and staff to create a plan of action to better support international graduate students. I am excited about this deeply personal work given my experience working with international students in student leadership roles as an undergraduate. As a graduate assistant working with graduate students, I noticed a disconnect between undergraduate and graduate international students that led to my passion for wanting to see greater support for this population.

I am requesting your permission to access and adapt the survey and interview questions used in your research, using the online survey software on Qualtrics. If you will permit my use of your instrument, I will cite your work and name according to APA 7 standards and, if you would like, share my findings with you.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Respectfully,

Diana BuDoff
Graduate Student
Department of Leadership Studies
(760)277-1130
dbudoff@sandiego.edu

Dear Ms. BuDoff:

Thank you for your inquiry. I permit you to utilize the survey and interview questions. I would like to see your findings as this was a great experience and allowed me to dramatically improve the OISS at my former institution. Currently, I am writing my dissertation on Internationalizing the Campus and I will be surveying international student services staff to assess whether their respective background's influence the success of internationalization of the university.

If you are member of NAFSA you will surely get a request.

I wish you the best in your research and thank you for embarking on this very important research. Please keep in touch.

Yours truly,

Pete

Peter Thomas
Director, International Affairs
Principal Designated School Official
CAMPBELLSVILLE UNIVERSITY

2300 Greene Way
Louisville, KY 40220
www.culouisville.com

Appendix D

Survey - Qualtrics

1. What is your country of origin?
2. What is your native language?
3. How old are you?
4. What do you identify as?
5. How would you identify your ethnicity or cultural background?
6. What is your Status?
7. How long have you been in the country?
8. Have you previously spent time in the United States?
9. Which school are you a part of?
10. Are you working on a Master's degree or PhD?
11. How long will you be at the University of San Diego to complete your studies?
12. Thinking about your experience at the University of San Diego, have you felt included in the university community?
13. Have you felt that people at the University of San Diego understand your culture?
14. Have you had difficulties adjusting to the cultural norms? What have these difficulties been?
15. Have you been able to create friendships here?
16. What other social support do you have here?
17. Have you encountered language barriers?
18. Have you experienced financial problems while at the University of San Diego?
19. Have you experienced academic difficulties?
20. Have you experienced difficulties at the University of San Diego? What have these difficulties been?
21. Do you feel that the University of San Diego was able to help you successfully transition? Please explain.
22. What has been helpful for your transition?
23. What are your most frequently used resources to get help?
24. Have you ever used student services provided by the university? If yes, what kind? If no, why not?
25. Do you believe the University of San Diego has the resources to support you? If no, why not?
26. What do you think your college or department should do to help intentional students better adjust?

https://qfreeaccountssjc1.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_1YBgfDxWDPM0LZQ

Appendix E

One-on-One Interviews - Via Zoom

Opening Script

Thank you for taking the time to join me for an interview. My name is Diana BuDoff and I am
working on my M.A. in Higher Education Leadership. I am conducting a project to learn more
about the graduate international experience and the narratives of the students. I am hoping to
learn more about how graduate international students can be better supported and how the
University of San Diego can aid in this support.
Prior to this, you completed a consent form to participate in my project. During this interview, I
will be asking you questions around your experience as an international graduate student. If you
do not want to answer a question, you are welcome to choose not to. If after the interview, you
decide you no longer wish to be involved, you have the right to withdraw. Other than that, please
answer each question in detail. Before we begin, do I have your permission to record?

Interview Questions For Students

1. What is your country of origin?
2. Before entering your program, had you previously spent time in the United States?
3. Which school are you a part of?
4. How long will you be at the University of San Diego to complete your studies?
5. What was your transition into the United States and to the University of San Diego like?
6. What could have been done better to support your transition?
7. What are the most important adjustment problems you encountered after you came to the
   United States?
8. What other barriers have you faced? (Cultural, academic, social, etc.)
9. Do you think the university is meeting your needs and is able to respond to your
   difficulties, and if no, why not?
10. Have you ever used student services provided by the university? What resources have
    been the most beneficial or helpful?
11. What do you think your college or department should do to help international students
    make better adjustments or to provide better support?
12. Thinking about your experience at the University of San Diego, have you felt included in
    the university community?

Closing Script

Thank you for your time and for choosing to participate in this project. All of your information
will be kept private and protected. Please let me know if you would like to participate in a focus
group to create a plan of action to support you and fellow graduate international students.

Opening Script

Thank you for taking the time to join me for an interview. My name is Diana BuDoff and I am working on my M.A. in Higher Education Leadership. I am conducting a project to learn more about the graduate international experience and the narratives of the students. I am hoping to learn more about how graduate international students can be better supported and how the University of San Diego can aid in this support.

Prior to this, you completed a consent form to participate in my project. During this interview, I will be asking you questions around the various resources provided to graduate international students, and how the International Center supports them through their transition. If you do not want to answer a question, you are welcome to choose not to. If after the interview, you decide you no longer wish to be involved, you have the right to withdraw. Other than that, please answer each question in detail. Before we begin, do I have your permission to record?

Interview Questions for Staff

1. How many graduate international students are currently attending the University of San Diego?
2. How do you support graduate international students as they transition?
3. What resources do you provide and or are available to graduate international students?
4. What types of events or programming are available to graduate international students?
5. How do you help support them through creating a sense of belonging?
6. How are they supported through their acculturation process?
7. What resources are available to support their barriers such as cultural, academic, language, and social barriers?

Closing Script

Thank you for your time and for choosing to participate in this project. All of your information will be kept private and protected. Please let me know if you would like to participate in a focus group to listen, support, and collaborate with graduate international students to help create a plan of action to better support them.

Appendix F

Focus Groups

Focus Group #1

      Opening Script

Thank you for participating in this focus group and for joining me. As you may already know, my name is Diana BuDoff and I am currently working on my M.A. in Higher Education Leadership. I also work as a graduate assistant for Graduate Student Life. The question I have proposed is: In what ways can the University of San Diego work to better aid graduate international students through the difficulties they face as they transition and adapt to studying in the United States? Along with this, how can a sense of belonging be created? My project is a participatory action research project, meaning I am hoping to work alongside graduate international students to begin creating a plan of action to support them. In this session, we will begin thinking about the actions or implementations that you would like to make, see, or begin thinking about.

Previously, you have all completed a consent form, through Google Forms, which included your consent to participate in this activity. Please let me know if you would like a copy of it.

This focus group and the one following this, will take no more than 60 minutes. If you are okay with me recording this Zoom session, so that I can more easily analyze and transcribe my data, please type yes in the chat. Using the data I have previously collected, we will be working to think of ideas of how all of you, as international graduate students, wanted to be supported or would have liked to be supported through your transition and during your time here. To keep anonymity, I ask that you refer to each other through pseudonyms.

Questions

I will begin by sharing the various issues faced by international students here at the University of San Diego based on the data I have collected.

1. What are the issues that stand out to you and or that you would like to focus on?
2. What programming or events do you want to see or that you can think about?
3. What are the steps we need to face to be able to create change?
4. How can the University of San Diego support graduate international students to create change?

Closing script

Thank you for participating in this focus group. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out to me. I will see you again for the second focus group.

Focus Group #2

Opening Script

Hello again and thank you for participating in this focus group. As a reminder, my name is Diana BuDoff and I am currently working on my M.A. in Higher Education Leadership. I also work as a graduate assistant for Graduate Student Life. The question I have proposed is: In what ways can the University of San Diego work to better aid graduate international students through the difficulties they face as they transition and adapt to studying in the United States? Along with this, how can a sense of belonging be created? My project is a participatory action research project, meaning I am hoping to work alongside graduate international students and staff to begin creating a plan of action to support them. In this session, we will continue where we left off and now include staff members in the discussion. We will share with them the ideas that have been created and how they, as staff, can help you through this process. It also allows them to hear the voice of graduate international students.

Previously, you have all completed a consent form, through Google Forms, which included your consent to participate in this activity. Please let me know if you would like a copy of it.

This focus group will take no more than 60 minutes. If you are okay with me recording this Zoom session, so that I can more easily analyze and transcribe my data, please type yes in the chat. To keep anonymity, I ask that you refer to each other through pseudonyms.

Questions

I will begin by sharing the data collected in the first focus group.
1. Are there any thoughts or ideas that want to be added to the previous data collected?
2. What stands out and what do you want to focus on?
3. What are the staff's thoughts on the initial stages of the plan of action?
4. Is there any important information the students should know about that may support or impede their plan of action?
5. How can the University of San Diego support graduate international students to create change?

Closing script

Thank you for participating in this focus group. This concludes our time together. I will make sure to keep all this information safe and protected. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out to me.

Appendix G

Survey Recruitment Form

Hello,

My name is Diana BuDoff. I am a student in the Higher Education Leadership program at the University of San Diego, San Diego, CA. I am conducting a research study about international graduate students and their experiences at USD, and I would like to invite you to participate.

The purpose of this study is to create a plan of action that will allow students to better transition and engage with USD. You are being asked to participate because you are an international graduate student at USD.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete an online survey once that takes about 15 minutes to complete. You will be asked things like:
- Thinking about your experience at the University of San Diego, have you felt included in the university community?
- Have you ever faced difficulties at the University of San Diego?
- What do you think your college or department should do to help intentional students better adjust?

You will also be asked a few questions about yourself, such as your age, program, gender, and country of origin.

This study involves no more risk than the risks you encounter in daily life. Your responses will be kept confidential and all your information will be coded with a number. Your email or IP address will automatically be deleted, and nobody will know your identity. I will keep the study data for a minimum of 5 years.

Taking part in this study is entirely optional. ***Choosing not to participate will have no effect on your employment status, grades, or any other benefits to which you are entitled.*** You may also quit being in the study at any time or decide not to answer any specific questions. Should you decide to participate, ***please print out a copy of this page for future reference.***

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at dbudoff@sandiego.edu.

Thank you for your consideration.
Diana BuDoff

If you would like to participate, please click on this link to begin the study:
        https://qfreeaccountssjc1.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_1YBgfDxWDPM0LZQ

Interview Recruitment Form

Hello,

My name is Diana BuDoff. I am a student in the Higher Education Leadership program at the University of San Diego, San Diego, CA. I am conducting a research study about international graduate students and their experiences at USD, and I would like to invite you to participate.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one Zoom interview that will take about 45 minutes to complete. You will be asked things like:
- Thinking about your experience at the University of San Diego, have you felt included in the university community?
- Have you ever faced difficulties at the University of San Diego?
- What do you think your college or department should do to help intentional students better adjust?

You will also be asked a few questions about yourself, such as your age, program, gender, and country of origin.

The purpose of this study is to create a plan of action that will allow students to better transition and engage with USD. You are being asked to participate because you are an international graduate student at USD.

After the interview, you will have the option to participate in two focus groups. In the first focus group, you will have the opportunity to work together with other international students to come up with a plan of action as to how the International Center at USD can better support graduate international students. In the second focus group, you will have the opportunity to work together with an International Staff member to come up with ideas.

This study involves no more risk than the risks you encounter in daily life. Your responses will be kept confidential and all your information will be coded with a number. Your email or IP address will automatically be deleted. I will keep the study data for a minimum of 5 years.

Taking part in this study is entirely optional. *Choosing not to participate will have no effect on your employment status, grades, or any other benefits to which you are entitled.* You may also

quit being in the study at any time or decide not to answer any specific questions. Should you decide to participate, *please print out a copy of this page for future reference.*

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at dbudoff@sandiego.edu.

Thank you for your consideration.
Diana BuDoff