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Ready To Fly: Voices Of International Graduate Students At The University Of North Dakota

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READY TO FLY: VOICES OF INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA

by

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A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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2007
This dissertation, submitted by Laura Zucca in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This dissertation meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

Joseph R. Bemish
Dean of the Graduate School

July 21, 2007

Date
PERMISSION

Title             Ready to Fly: Voices of International Graduate Students at the University of North Dakota

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This dissertation metaphorically began in 2000 when a young, wide-eyed international graduate student traveled to the United States seeking to further her education and to learn how to better serve her students. I wish to acknowledge all the people who inspired and supported me in this fantastic adventure. Thanks for giving me wings and helping me to get ready to fly.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate international graduate students' perspectives regarding their experiences at the University of North Dakota. Seven students were selected with a convenience sample. Students' interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a qualitative phenomenological approach. Acculturation served as a conceptual framework to contextualize the study and provide a scholarly foundation.

The following five themes emerged from the data analysis:

1. International graduate students have complex professional and personal motivations for moving to the United States.

2. International graduate students encounter several difficulties, which are often related to linguistic, academic, and cultural differences.

3. International graduate students appear to adapt and succeed in their academic endeavors; students report high grades and collaboration in scholarly projects as evidence of their successes.

4. International graduate students often feel isolated and express some tensions toward their academic and cultural environment.

5. International graduate students display pragmatic attitudes toward their experiences and are determined to "make things work."

International graduate students in this study had different motivations for moving to the United States; they appeared to balance many elements in a complex equilibrium of
achievements and challenges. Although they often experienced success, students likewise struggled with feelings of isolation, and they coped with difficulties by maintaining a pragmatic attitude.

This study highlighted that international graduate students provide an opportunity for the foundation of an authentic, multicultural academic arena in which all scholars can thrive. Recommendations for action and further research include creating intercultural mentoring programs and furthering studies on acculturation of international graduate students in relation to English language competency and academic performance.
TO LEA ORETTA BERNARDINI ZUCCA
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Imagine you are getting ready to travel to a distant country. Your luggage is packed, your tickets are ready, and you are making sure everything is in order before you leave. There is always a mixture of trepidation and excitement, as you are looking behind, while wondering what lies ahead of you.

This study pays homage to the many individuals who, at different times, have embarked in intellectual as well as physical journeys to study in the United States.

The Context of the Study

Every year, international graduate students travel to the United States. These students carry expectations, concerns, and hopes. They offer a unique combination of strengths and needs that may differ from those of other students. For the past seven years, universities in the United States have hosted over a half million international students with a peak in 2003 when 586,523 international students were enrolled in U.S. colleges (Institute of International Education, 2004). Approximately 11% of students enrolled in graduate schools across the United States are international students. Moreover, "approximately one-fifth of all the doctoral degrees awarded by U.S. institutions ... are earned by international students" ("Foreign Exchange," n.d., p. 1). These figures highlight how a significant part of the student population comes from a background different from that of U.S. national students.
Several studies discuss how international students participate and perform in the United States academia and society. According to Gonzalez (2004), international students are different in their performances and needs from other segments of the student population. International students report many difficulties in adapting to new cultural and academic environments. Language barriers, for students whose first language is not English, appear to hinder communication in both academic and social interaction. In some instances, concerns are addressed with remedial programs. Remediation becomes a tool for academic and social promotion, but the interventions suggested often focus on linguistic competence. However, there are many issues underlying international students' acculturation. This study focuses on the narratives and the experiences of international graduate students at the University of North Dakota.

Currently, 51% of the almost 13,000 students enrolled at the University of North Dakota are North Dakota residents. Approximately 500 international students are enrolled. Of these, 252 are international graduate students. These students represent about 10% of the overall graduate student population (R. Lagasse, Director of International Programs, personal communication, June 8, 2007; University of North Dakota, 2007). The University of North Dakota Strategic Plan states that the enrollment and retention of international students are among its institutional goals to promote a diverse learning environment on campus (University of North Dakota, 2006a). But what are the experiences of international graduate students at the University of North Dakota?

It is intended that this study provide a small contribution to a better understanding of the experiences of these and many other international students. Though this may seem an ambitious goal, I believe that there is much to learn from students' authentic lived
experiences. Any experience will be unique as every human being is indeed unique. Nevertheless, uniqueness should not deter one from looking into commonalities and themes that appear evident in this and other studies.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to study the perceptions of international graduate students regarding their experiences at the University of North Dakota. In particular, this study examined adjustment and acculturation of international graduate students. Oftentimes, international graduate students have already experienced university life in their countries of origin and, therefore, can possibly offer greater insight regarding similarities and differences in the educational systems. Although a comparison among different educational systems was not the main goal of this research, such spontaneous comparisons could shed additional insight related to the complexities of the “acculturation” process of international graduate students. In fact, international graduate students appear as ideal interlocutors, since they usually possess a body of knowledge and well-defined cultural roots they can share and discuss.

Research Question

The research question can be summarized as “What are the perceptions of international graduate students regarding their academic and cultural experiences at the University of North Dakota?”

Through an increased knowledge of experiences and perceptions of international graduate students, I, as a researcher, intend to provide grounds for an improved understanding of the lived experiences of international graduate students at the University of North Dakota. This study discusses the essential traits of the international graduate
students’ experiences and is founded on the students’ perspectives. Such an approach is
typical of a phenomenological study in which the essence of the experience is researched
(Creswell, 2003).

A study concerning the experiences of international graduate students at the
University of North Dakota could shed new light on a group of students that is often
perceived as a potential “at risk” segment of the general student population with real or
presumed linguistic and academic deficits (Gonzalez, 2004). The findings of this research
project also have the potential to influence policy-making decisions at the university level
and in academia (Schram, 2006, p. 28). Although researchers in isolation rarely
accomplish systemic changes, the primary goal of this research is to increase the
awareness and information available for scholars and students interested in the
international graduate students’ lived experiences.

Definition of Terms

*Acculturation:* “Cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by
adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture; also: a merging of cultures as a

*Graduate students:* Graduate students are students who have been admitted to a
program of study for an advanced degree (e.g., master’s or doctoral).

*International students:* According to the definition on the University of North
Dakota website, an international student is a student “studying at a U.S. institution on a
non-immigrant visa” (University of North Dakota, 2006b, p. 1).
Rationale for the Study

The focus of this study was on the narratives of international graduate students. Students' perceptions and interpretations of their experiences at the University of North Dakota were described and analyzed through a qualitative research approach. According to Creswell (1998), phenomenological studies focus on understanding the meaning that people relate and give to their experiences (p. 38). In this approach, it is through the eyes of the international students themselves that the experiences, the challenges, and the lives of the students acquire meaning. Zimmer (2006) explains, "Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on describing and understanding individual experiences from the ontological perspective of being-in-the-world. . . . Phenomena are uncovered in thematized anecdotes of lived experience and evocatively described in order to show their meaning" (p. 314).

As previously discussed, meaning is not superimposed but originates from the participants' narratives. "Thoughts, feelings, and actions" become, therefore, pivotal elements of the research (Creswell, 1998, p. 277). The researcher participates in the study and, through the use of reflexivity, analyzes the information gathered while monitoring the entire research process and being aware of his or her personal and cultural subjectivity (Glesne, 2006, p. 125). In Creswell's (1998) words, "Phenomenological analysis requires the researcher to state his or her assumptions regarding the phenomenon and then bracket or suspend those preconceptions in order to fully understand the experience of the subject" (p. 277).

Personal and professional background inspired and encouraged me to explore and reflect on how international graduate students' experiences relate and reflect onto the academic world. The opportunity to investigate international graduate students' shared
experiences and perceptions regardless of their origins appeared fascinating. I chose this approach rather than investigating commonalities within a specific group of students from the same country. This latter approach has often been preferred, particularly for dissertation projects, where homogenous groups of students were studied (Greer, 2005; Wang, 2004). However, as valuable as these project findings may be, they are, by design, limited to groups of a specific national origin and, therefore, would not necessarily highlight lived experiences that international graduate students share.

For almost a decade now, I have been involved with multicultural issues in education, and I have recently experienced firsthand the role of an “international student” in the United States. In the Spring Semester of 2006, I conducted a pilot project that was the beginning step of this study. During my pilot project, four international graduate students from different departments were interviewed; three were enrolled in doctoral programs and one was enrolled in a master’s program, but already held another master’s degree in a different field. My interest in this project stemmed from a combination of personal experiences, from a few empirical observations, and, more importantly, from my readings in the educational field. Quite often, studies described the international students’ need for support programs. These programs were often presented as remedial programs meant to compensate for deficits the students had. This perspective appeared puzzling and worthy of further investigation. In some instances, the voice of the students was missing from the studies. I was intrigued by the opportunity of hearing the international students’ voices. Once I completed my pilot project, I realized that I wanted to expand my research, since the findings pointed in a rather interesting direction.
As the pilot project title, “Voices of International Graduate Students,” suggested, the voices of the students needed to be heard. Their voices, with all the complexities and real or perceived contradictions, were the focus of this study.

Delimitations of the Study

This study is, by design, focusing on the experiences of international graduate students at the University of North Dakota. Qualitative studies provide insightful information and accurate descriptions, but they are not normally designed to make predictions on large-scale phenomena. Even though findings often carry meaningful implications for large-scale projects, it is important not to indiscriminately assume generalizability of a study. In this case in particular, the research involved seven international graduate students at the University of North Dakota. Caution should be used in assuming that similar results would apply to other universities, or, for that matter, to other students. However, by comparing this research project with others and with the testimonials of other students, it is possible to draw conclusions that are viable for discussion worldwide.

Organization of the Study

In this first chapter, the study was introduced, providing information concerning the context and purpose of the study. Definition of terms, rationale for the study, and delimitations were also presented. In the second chapter, a review of literature is provided; furthermore, the conceptual framework of acculturation is discussed in relation to this study. In the third chapter, methodology for the study and participant profiles are offered. A table introducing codes, themes, and a summative assertion is also included. In the fourth chapter, the findings are presented with excerpts from international graduate
students’ interviews. In the fifth chapter, a thematic summary of the study, with reference to the literature is provided. Conclusions and recommendations for action and further research are also offered.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE
Acculturation and the International Graduate Students’ Experiences

In this chapter, a review of literature contextualizing international graduate students’ experiences is provided. For this study, scholarly journals and publications concerning multicultural themes and issues were explored. Researchers in the field of multicultural education often regard the international students’ challenges and successes in the context of a broader approach to the study of minority students; these students are not necessarily represented or promoted in the traditional mainstream culture. Linguistic as well as cultural differences are central themes in many of these studies. However, to consider these issues in their entirety, it is also necessary to address the psychological and sociological factors, which are critical elements in the process of acculturation.

International students, and the subpopulation composed by international graduate students, are constantly negotiating psychological, cultural, and academic issues. Whether students are conscious of their roles or not, it is through their lenses that their experiences assume meaning and relevance. In the following sections, a historical perspective on international students, the students’ adjustment process, the development of the concept of acculturation, the internationalization of education, and the study’s conceptual framework are discussed.
International Students in the United States: A Historical Perspective

International students' presence in the United States is not a novelty of modern times. Francisco de Miranda studied at Yale University at the end of the 18th century (Kuo, 2004). Nevertheless, it is in more recent times that the number of international students has increased exponentially. In particular, the 20th century, with the traumatic influence of two World Wars, has seen a dramatic increase of the enrollment of international students in the United States. Programs such as the Fulbright and the Mutual Educational Exchange Act were meant to promote international exchanges for scholars of different levels and interests (Gillette, 2005). In 1959, the Institution of International Education reported enrollment of 48,486 international students in the United States. By 2003, this number had increased to 586,523 (Kuo, 2004).

This steep increase of international students' enrollment did not go undetected. Some indicated that the contributions of international students were indeed extremely valuable, as these students became active protagonists in a global dimension of knowledge dissemination. Moreover, international students, in particular graduate students, often assumed the role of teaching assistants, thus becoming actively involved as instructors in the academic world. This appeared particularly evident in scientific fields such as math, physics, and engineering (Funk, 2001; Kuo, 2004; McIntire & Willer, 1992). However, increasing concerns began to spread regarding the high number of foreign-born students enrolled in highly specialized fields where American students seemed to be lagging behind. These fields included, for instance, engineering and computer sciences. Part of the concerns revolved around whether international students
were actually interfering with college access opportunities for American students, including minority students (Brubacher & Rudy, 1999; Gillette, 2005). Furthermore, Kuo (2004) highlighted that over 70% of foreign-born Ph.D. holders eventually become U.S. permanent residents, thus becoming a particular category of immigrants. The debate concerning the role and presence of international students became particularly heated in the 1990s. The U.S. Congress was actively involved by promulgating a series of bills meant to regulate and, in a way, restrict the access of international students in the United States. A change of direction took place during Clinton’s administration when, on April 19, 2000, an executive memorandum was issued. In this memorandum, President Clinton reaffirmed the United States’ commitment to international education (Gillette, 2005). The aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attack appeared to cause a shift in terms of international education policies. The USA PATRIOT Act (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act) signed by President Bush on October 26, 2001, emphasized, among other preventive actions, the need for a closer monitoring of international students. The Student Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) required universities to enter information concerning international students in a centralized U.S government database. Possibly, the more stringent requirements on international students’ monitoring system may have put a strain on universities’ resources in terms of their ability to provide services to international students (Gillette, 2005).

The next few years will be pivotal for the development of the international education policies. Also, when updated data become available, it will be possible to
International Students and Adjustment

International students are in many respects a minority group within the United States college population. As such, many of the assumptions underlying adjustment of college students, in particular of minority students, apply to them as well (Diangelo, 2006).

In their study, Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) discuss the difficult transition to college life that minority students face. Biculturalism and dual socialization theories both discuss the process through which individuals become competent in more than one cultural environment. People who, by choice or necessity, interact with culturally diverse environments develop purposeful adaptive strategies in order to succeed. Thus, individuals become cultural mediators through a complex process of adaptation and change. Such a process is particularly complex for international students. In fact, international students often lack the socio-familial support systems that many American students have. Moreover, international students experience at the same time different cultural mores, different social and linguistic patterns, and, possibly, find themselves as targets of overt or more hidden forms of discrimination (Gillette, 2005).

The Development of the Concept of Acculturation

As discussed in the previous section, international students who travel to the United States interact with an environment that is, in some or many aspects, different from what they have experienced before. As individuals, they “can become distressed or overwhelmed by the cultural changes whereas others make a nearly seamless transition to
new cultural settings” (Gonzalez, 2006, p. 16). This great variation of individual reactions to a potentially stressful situation can be interpreted from different perspectives.

Gonzalez (2006) provides a very interesting approach:

One focus of understanding individuals’ explanations of their experience is by examining how they account for and understand the event. Proponents of the attribution theory (e.g., Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Weiner, 1974; Jones, Kanouse, Kelley, Nisbett, Valins, & Weiner, 1987) have examined how a number of situations—both positive and negative—have been interpreted and explained by individuals who experienced those events. One significant facet of attribution theory is the difference in the way life events can be interpreted and explained: The perceived cause of events—internal/individual versus external/social (Jones & Davis, 1965). (p. 17)

*The Beginnings*

Gonzalez (2006) maintains that the beginning of studies on acculturation can be traced back to the 1930s when studies such as the one by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936) discussed acculturation as a process in which individuals come in contact with a culture different from their own and, as a result, they experience, and also promote, changes in beliefs and value systems. Almost 20 years later, Allport (1954) elaborated on the concept of acculturation and underlined the active role of intercultural exchanges in fostering increased cultural understanding and the reduction of prejudice and discrimination. Allport explained that prejudice and discrimination can be reduced only when “the irrelevancies of stereotype and autistic hostility are first eliminated”
Through a humanistic approach, acculturation is viewed as an instrument of personal and social growth (Gonzalez, 2006).

In a newspaper editorial, the idea that international students will have long-lasting memories of their experiences in the United States is emphasized ("Foreign Students," 1959). Two elements appear particularly relevant. One, once again, is the rapid increase of the presence of international students in the United States. According to the article, 45,491 international students were enrolled in U.S. universities in 1957. The second element is the cultural exchange that, in the author's opinion, should not lead to the "Americanization" of the visiting students but in an improved reciprocal understanding.

Taking a more pragmatic stance, Gollin (1967) maintains that, through international exchange, technological and scientific knowledge increase. Thus, international communication transcends cultural aspects, but it should not ignore humanistic and culturally sensitive dimensions.

Studies increasingly focused on multiple dimensions concerning acculturation. For instance, Padilla, Wagatsuma, and Lindholm (1985) discuss how acculturation is always accompanied with increased levels of stress. In particular, behavioral and cognitive dissonance is to be expected (p. 295). Personality traits are important in determining the level of stress faced during acculturation. Individuals who are more outgoing seem to experience lower levels of stress, whereas individuals who are more introverted experience higher levels of acculturative stress. Individuals may experience conflicting expectations and values between their culture of origin and their new cultural environments. Indeed, conflicting responsibilities and a need for belonging appear as
recurrent, conflicting themes and are a demonstration of the complex adjustment process international students experience (Kuo, 2004).

**Acculturation and International Students Today**

In their study, Qin and Lykes (2006) depict the experience of a group of international graduate students as a process of “fragmentation of self” (p. 177). This process appears often complex and painful, as participants pointed out a sense of isolation, of otherness, and of humiliation (p. 188). Participants of this study also explained how the crossing of psychological and geographic borders opened new opportunities, experiences, and horizons in their lives (p. 189). Eventually, the participants reconstruct their sense of identity and belonging. The experiences they went through changed them. However, these changes were neither easy nor without pain. Many students reported grieving for their past lives before coming to terms with their new selves. Qin and Lykes illustrate how “being othered” and “being labeled as ‘foreign,’ ‘alien’ and ‘poor’ demanded new self-definitions...” until they [the students] were able to “rewearve a new understanding of self and other” (p. 194).

The complexities of the process portrayed in the previous study are emblematic of the acculturation phenomenon. But how could one define acculturation? Schwebel and Hodari (2005) state, “Acculturation is the process through which an individual’s cultural behaviors and values change via contact with a majority or host culture. Although some individuals accomplish acculturation smoothly, most experience psychological stress during the acculturation process” (p. 131). Indeed, levels of stress appear to be a main concern. According to Brilliant (2000),
Acculturation is the process of becoming acclimated to a new culture. The level of stress in acculturation is moderated by factors such as the mode of acculturation, the phase of acculturation, the nature of the larger society, the characteristics of the acculturating group, and characteristics of the individual. Marginalization and separation are modes of acculturation that are associated with high levels of stress. (p. 579)

Drawing on Qin and Lykes’s (2006) study, when individuals are able to construct or reweave their identities as a reflective process in which their identities and concepts of selves are valued, the levels of stress and alienation are greatly reduced. Furthermore, in educational settings, students who successfully integrate their identities become empowered and often assume the role of active agents of change (Banks & Banks, 1995).

The process of acculturation has been discussed and analyzed extensively because of its importance in studies concerning populations belonging to the non-dominant culture. Brilliant (2000) focuses in particular on acculturative patterns that appear to be common in the experiences of many minority students:

The phases of acculturation include contact, conflict, crisis, and adaptation. Williams and Berry (1991) suggested that these phases, when viewed independently of other factors, can be illustrated by an inverted U with regard to stress levels, with the initial and final phases represented as less stressful than the middle levels. This latter perspective has been often debated as far as its ability to predict the stress levels, which appear to be fluctuating often in a pattern difficult to foresee. However, the inverted U pattern seems to offer an adequate picture of
many individual experiences as self-reported by the individuals themselves.

(p. 580)

Yeh and Inose (2003) argue that international students appear to encounter greater emotional challenges in comparison with their American colleagues. Language difficulties are often indicated as a pivotal factor in terms of academic and social stressors. Indeed, researchers suggest that international students may struggle to express themselves and perform at the best of their potential due to language barriers (Gonzalez, 2004; Stoynoff, 1997). Nevertheless, cultural and social differences play a very important role in the acculturation process of international students.

Many international students perceive social relationships in US culture to be rather superficial (Bulthuis, 1986; Cross, 1995), and feel disappointed and discouraged with their interpersonal connections (Mori, 2000).

Upon coming to the US, international students tend to feel a deep sense of loss when leaving their families and friends behind (Sandhu, 1995). (Yeh & Inose, 2003, p. 16)

In Yeh and Inose's (2003) study, English language proficiency seemed to be a critical predictor of acculturative stress. Yeh and Inose explain that international students' psychological adjustment may be greatly affected by their ability to communicate in English. Since many of these students have experienced high academic achievement in their home countries, they may struggle to cope with new linguistic and academic difficulties. Furthermore, communication barriers make international students' social interactions with their peers difficult (p. 18).
Despite the marked focus on linguistic difficulties as the main factor in the international students’ feelings of alienation, both socially and academically, Diangelo (2006) suggests that other critical factors play an important role in the difficulties that international and minority students encounter in academic settings. Diangelo argues that, during her observations,

the White students were brought into focus while the Asian students were tuned out, regardless of whether they were international. Yet even though Asian and international students are often ignored in the classroom (Lee, 1996; Liu, 2001), White students and teachers are still responding to them. They are first seen (racialized) and then not seen (ignored and rendered invisible upon the assumptions that come with racialization). (p. 1993)

In this context, according to Diangelo (2006), stereotypical expectations of cultural behaviors and preferred modes of interaction become part of a mechanism that perpetuates injustice. In particular, only a superficial analysis warrants the assumption that all the international students had language deficiencies, which hindered their class participation. Since all of the students observed in this study were Ph.D. students who had already passed selective admission tests, this assumption appears questionable.

On the contrary, Diangelo (2006) challenges a perspective in which the students are the ones under scrutiny as “culturally deficient” rather than discussing why these students are silent in the classroom:

The multicultural literature suggests that it is not the responsibility of students whose cultural patterns or appearance may differ from dominant norms to figure out for themselves how to gain access in the classroom or be left behind; rather it
proposes that an equity pedagogy exists when teachers modify their teaching in ways that facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial and cultural groups (Banks & Banks, 1995). (p. 1995)

Diangelo (2006) also makes a strong case for a critical approach to educators’ perceptions and their overt and, sometimes, unconscious prejudices and beliefs. Diangelo states, “Members of dominant society often assume that much of what they have been granted by virtue of privilege is accessible to everyone” (p. 1996). Even teachers often assume that if minority students struggle it is because they are not putting forth enough effort. Teachers also deny having any sort of preconceived idea regarding minority students and maintain that there is no racial tension at their schools. However, according to Diangelo, these idyllic views are far from being realistic and ignore many complex and underlying issues (p. 1996).

Even though full participation of international graduate students in the academic discourse may appear at times problematic, it is essential that students have an opportunity to feel included and to develop a sense of understanding, if not of belonging, with the host culture. In a study concerning the perspectives of international graduate students on citizenship, Szelenyi and Rhoads (2007) maintain that, in their interviews, “students’ views were broadened to encompass a larger whole that included the local/national context, to which were added—to differing extents—a sense of regional attachment, an increased identification with the United States, or a strengthened understanding of citizenship in a global sphere” (p. 35). In their discussion, Szelenyi and Rhoads explain that, “in recent years, much debate has surrounded the international student program of the United States. International students have been depicted as threats
to national security (even as potential ‘terrorists’), ambassadors of international understanding, contributors to the U.S. economic and scientific development, and excessive financial burdens on the economy (McMurtrie 2001; Borjas 2002; Zakaria 2004)” (p. 42).

The undeniable tension in the international scene may negatively affect the international students’ experiences. For instance, Rahman and Rollock (2004) reported in their study that international students felt the pressure of perceived prejudices and stereotypes, which in turn made them more aware of their otherness, thus contributing to feelings of alienation. Despite these issues, higher education could be an ideal arena to promote global citizenship. According to Szelenyi and Rhoads (2007), international graduate education should provide rich opportunities for supranational exchange and cooperation; however, the post September 11 restrictions and limitations imposed on international students’ visas could interfere with these goals. As Szelenyi and Rhoads state,

> Feelings of being unwanted and excluded can lead to alienation on the part of the students, the offshoot of which may be a failure to make valuable connections to the host society and to promote a greater intercultural encounters and understanding of transnational connections in politics and the economy. (p. 45)

Despite the complexities of the process of acculturation, and the feelings of alienation that many international graduate students experience, these students do succeed for the most part in the U.S. academic world. Gonzalez (2004) states that international graduate students often overcome many challenges and experience success in their studies. According to Freedman (1997), at Princeton University, “about 35
percent of the Graduate School as a whole is international—625 out of 1760 students, as compared to six percent of the undergraduate student body" (p. 1). Although multiple challenges, including linguistic difficulties, are likely to be part of many of the students' daily lives, "the graduation rate for international students is a little higher than the average, and the time-to-degree is a little shorter" (p. 1).

Hayes and Lin (1994) underline how high academic achievement is more likely to take place if students experience a positive and supportive campus environment. However, "the actual cultural context on American campuses frequently generates stress, depression, fear, and pessimism" (p. 7). Once more, the interaction of academic and sociological factors appears to be of primary relevance. Also, the perceived dichotomy between the ideal learning environment, and the actual situation, presents ample opportunities for discussion.

International students' process of acculturation is very similar to that of adult immigrants and minority groups:

Early experience with the host culture is likely to result in efforts at conformity, in which international student follows the lead of the dominant culture. As cultural conflicts arise, values are disturbed and conformity gives way to dissonance. Resistance follows as the student withdraws from the dominant culture. Struggle for a personal locus of control leads to increased introspection, which is followed, for those who will be successful, by a mutual awareness that leads to successful biculturalism. (Hayes & Lin, 1994, p. 9)

Since the process of acculturation is delicate and complex, Dedrick and Watson (2002) emphasize the urgent need for a better understanding in academia of the specific
needs of international and minority students. Such needs are part of complex texture of a potentially controversial analysis within the context of acculturation and assimilation. The latter concepts have been historically revisited and debated for more than a century (Zhou, 1997).

Dedrick and Watson (2002) highlight the central role of the doctoral chairperson for students' socialization and induction into the academic world. This relationship is seen as a typical example of mentoring. A mentor can assume the roles of “advisor, model, research supervisor, sponsor, coach, and counselor (Wunsch, 1994; Zelditch, 1997) (p. 276). These roles appear to be particularly important since only half of the students beginning a doctorate actually graduate from their programs. Dedrick and Watson maintain that this datum alone is a reason for concern in relation to the attrition rates of traditionally underrepresented groups, including female students, and minority and international students. In their study, Dedrick and Watson explain that mentors working with international graduate students should provide a broader range of services; these services should include traditional academic advice, but also provide a socio-cultural type of support to fight the common feelings of isolation that many international students experience. Last but not least, mentors should also cooperate to develop or enforce an institutional policy against discrimination. While Dedrick and Watson appreciate the proactive stance that many publications have in encouraging students’ self advocacy, they are also underlining that less integrated students, including minority and international students, may not have access to the social network other students have. Dedrick and Watson underline the limited number of resources available for the American academia concerning the mentoring of graduate students belonging to minority
groups. This appears even more evident when compared with the availability of similar resources in Great Britain. Thus, American faculty relies mainly on personal experiences or word of mouth in the critical task of advising female, minority, and international students.

One may wonder how the international graduate students’ needs differ in terms of mentoring and advising. According to Rose’s (2005) study, international graduate students often have different educational experiences than American students because they have the added challenge of adjusting to a new environment and culture. Compared to American students, international students may exhibit different learning styles, face differences in sociopolitical factors, have different acculturation experiences, report higher stress pertaining to environmental adjustment, perceive greater prejudice, be more affiliated with their own international groups, use less English, and encounter greater language barriers compared with domestic students. . . . The consequences of social isolation may be professional as well as personal. (p. 60)

In Rose’s (2005) study, international graduate students regarded “a mentor’s willingness to engage in a personal relationship with them to be more important to their definition of mentor than did domestic students” (p. 72). Interestingly, the study highlights how this segment of student population oftentimes encounters social barriers; it also shows that international graduate students rely on social support from their mentors as a coping mechanism (p. 74). Also, international graduate students place high value on their mentors’ academic guidance. This element appears to be a relatively constant element for all students, both domestic and international.
From a pragmatic perspective, Rose (2005) recommends mentoring as an effective method of support, which helps in mediating potential cultural and linguistic barriers. Many international graduate students reported that positive and warm relationships with their mentors and advisors were extremely important for their success. Furthermore, teaming of international and U.S. teaching assistants has proven to increase the cross-cultural communication abilities of all team members.

Internationalization of Education

Without question, education, and higher education in particular, are becoming more and more international, resulting in more students moving to different countries for study and job search purposes. Tremblay (2005) discusses the role of internationalization of education in terms of the possible recruitment of highly qualified professionals from the perspective of the host countries. Human factors and economical growth become intertwined in a global perspective.

However, Jackson (2003) questions the very roots of the concept of globalization as a byproduct of Western civilization in which other cultural perspectives are, at best, ignored. Jackson argues the internationalization of the university curriculum should not imply that one perspective, the one of Western culture, should be dominant. On the contrary, true internationalization of the curriculum should promote multiple points of view, diverse worldviews, which recognize the importance and value of the contribution of humanity in its entirety. In Jackson's words, "Internationalization would have a new meaning. It would stand for a process in the university of truly multicultural, indeed universal, debate on the future of humanity" (p. 329).
Haigh (2002) acknowledges that globalization has indeed two facets. The first one is that of promotion of diversity and multicultural competency in higher education. The second is the trend toward the commercialization of higher education. This second aspect has become more and more prevalent. However, even within the Western cultures, there is a renewed attention toward the “education for sustainable development” (p. 49). In this light, Western and non-Western cultures find a common ground for a new understanding and definition of globalization. An example of the latter approach is reported by Clarke (2005), who narrates the experience of an interdisciplinary social science course taught in Finland in the fall of 2004. In this course, students from different nationalities and educational backgrounds gathered to discuss remembrance and reconciliation. The cases discussed ranged from child abuse to the massacres in Kosovo during the Yugoslavian wars. By the end of the course, students reported an increased understanding and a broader perspective of the issues discussed. This experience demonstrates how academia can effectively address sensitive and uncomfortable issues with a multicultural approach.

Policies, programs and projects that seek to foster cultural diversity would achieve their objective when they are pursued in the framework of human factor competency development. Inclusive, holistic curriculum and pedagogy in academia would go a long way in helping to develop the human factor competency needed to foster productive cultural integration to generate sustainable globalization. (Adu-Febiri, 2006, p. 30)

Heggins and Jackson (2003) point out how the cultural and professional enrichment that international students promote is indeed a valuable asset for societies. Therefore, the concern should be not so much on how to help compensate for academic
or cultural and social difficulties, but on how to ensure that both international and American students can benefit from an increased multicultural and global perspective of education.

International graduate students bring with them a wealth of knowledge and a variety of perspectives that can only benefit the academic world. In this perspective, acculturation and the international graduate students’ narratives are essential to understand what can be learned from these experiences. Because of their experiences, future generations of students and scholars will be better prepared for the future of multicultural education.

Conceptual Framework

Acculturation and its complexities serve as the framework of this study. Through the lived experiences of international graduate students, this study analyzes how students mediate their cultural and academic experiences in an environment that can be both challenging and stimulating. By pondering their views, acculturation becomes more than an abstract pattern of adaptation and redefinition of personal and social identity. Through the words of international graduate students, acculturation becomes a live, dynamic process that involves many individuals, including the ones of the host culture (Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Qin & Lykes, 2006).

Brilliant (2000) and Schwebel and Hodari (2005) provide insights on how acculturation is never a straightforward, simple process, as many factors interact in unique ways that pertain to the specific contexts in which each single individual lives. The participants’ experiences highlight how these complexities are authentic and worthy of consideration and discussion.
The purpose of this study was to investigate international graduate students' perceptions concerning their experiences at the University of North Dakota.

Through a phenomenological approach, the following research question was investigated: "What are the perceptions of international graduate students regarding their academic and cultural experiences at the University of North Dakota?"

In this chapter, qualitative and phenomenological research, entry negotiation and participant selection, participants' profiles, data collection, analysis methods, and validity and generalizability issues are presented. A table with the organization of codes, categories, themes, and final assertion is also included.

Qualitative Research and Phenomenology

Qualitative research is a unique form of inquiry. Its interdisciplinary approach and multi-faceted implications fascinate and challenge researchers and scholars. Qualitative research also poses intellectual dilemmas that are peculiar to this form of studies. Schram (2006) states, "As a qualitative researcher . . . you will embrace the challenge of turning familiar facts and understandings into puzzles" (p. 7). Complexity is, therefore, a common trait of qualitative research. Qualitative studies allow the researcher to be directly involved and participate in the phenomena studied in a natural, almost intimate, fashion (Schram, 2006, p. 8).
Maxwell (2005) suggests that the researcher should carefully select his or her investigation since it will involve considerable amounts of time and energy. In fact, Newman and Benz (1998) maintain that, in qualitative studies, researchers “seek validity through personalized, intimate understanding of the social phenomena” (p. 119).

Scott (2005), while discussing the conceptualization of empirical research methodologies, states,

Critical realism is critical because any attempts at describing and explaining the world are bound to be fallible, and also because those ways of ordering the world, its categorizations and the relationship between them, cannot be justified in any absolute sense and are always open to critique. (p. 635)

In this perspective, a dynamic approach to research provides the researcher with the opportunity of continuously redefining his or her work dialectically.

Qualitative research models provide the scholar with tools to read and interpret phenomena in an ongoing process. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) underline, “Qualitative methods can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods” (p. 11).

Sacks (1995) maintains, “Just as there is no such thing as impersonal perception and impersonal experience, there is also no impersonal memory” (p. 175). He later adds, referring to Kierkgaard’s philosophical principles, that experiences acquire meaning through recollection (p. 175). Interestingly, this is not far from the role of a researcher who relates meaning through the narratives of peoples’ lived experiences.
Seidman (1998) underlines that meaning is not created in isolation but through a discourse. However, the role of a researcher is critical in not superimposing meaning. Seidman emphasizes that "the reason an interviewer spends so much time talking to participants is to find out what their experience is and the meaning they make of it" (p. 110). Glesne (2006) adds, "The openness [of the qualitative inquiry] allows the researcher to approach the inherent intricacies of social interaction, to honor complexities, and to respect it in its own right" (p. 19). Therefore, interviews become the essential source for the researcher. Kvale (1996) explains that interviews are an interactive process in which individuals actively construe a deeper understanding of their experiences. Kvale continues describing conversations as a form of research. Thus, conversations become purposeful forms of human interaction (p. 6). Kvale uses the metaphor of the traveler while discussing the role of both interviewer and interviewees. This metaphor becomes even more poignant in the case of this study where the interviewees are travelers in a symbolic and literal sense.

This study focused on perceptions, feelings, and experiences that can be effectively represented through a qualitative research approach. Therefore, nuances and complexities of reality were embraced by employing an inductive method in which the participants were protagonists and narrators of their experiences. Since the purpose of the study was to provide insight on students' perceptions and descriptions of their experience at the University of North Dakota, a qualitative approach appeared to be ideal to provide thick, rich narrations that engage the audience, students, faculty, and administrators, as well, in an interactive discourse. Moreover, as the purpose of the study was to investigate the essence of the experiences of international graduate students, a phenomenological
approach provided an ideal instrument to understand these experiences, again, from “the perspective of those being studied” (Creswell, 1998, p. 275). In the phenomenological approach, it is through the eyes of the international students themselves that the experiences, the challenges, and the lives of the students acquire meaning. “Thoughts, feelings, and actions” (Creswell, 1998, p. 277) become pivotal elements of the research. Possibly, the findings of this study could challenge some of the current views on international graduate students’ struggles and accomplishments. In any case, the findings may enrich an area of study that needs more knowledge in an age of fragile borders and new, complex equilibriums (Garrod & Davis, 1999; Heyman, 2004).

Description of Setting

The University of North Dakota was founded in 1883 and is located on a large campus with numerous facilities. At the preliminary stage of my study, I explored different locations on campus that appeared to be viable options to meet potential interviewees. Among these locations, there were the Memorial Union, which is a multi-purpose building including dining facilities and a post office; the Chester Fritz Library that provides access to over two million volumes and over 300,000 electronic journals; the International Center that hosts various cultural events; and a recently built Wellness Center.

The University of North Dakota presented an opportunity to immerse in a stimulating study environment. In fact, the University of North Dakota is a research university with an enrollment of over 12,000 students. The university offers 94 graduate programs including professional programs in law and medicine. Currently, 2,464 graduate students are enrolled (University of North Dakota, 2007). The number of
international graduate students has gradually but steadily increased. In fall of 2001, 133 international graduate students were enrolled; by the spring of 2006, there were 252 international graduate students enrolled. International graduate students currently compose approximately half of the overall international student population at the University of North Dakota (R. Lagasse, Director of International Programs, personal communication, June 8, 2007).

Entry Negotiation and Participant Selection

In order to conduct a study on human subjects, the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board (IRB) authorization was necessary. The authorization was secured in the spring of 2006 for the previously mentioned pilot project that involved four international graduate students. The IRB approval was subsequently renewed for the purpose of this study (Appendix A). Since all of the international graduate students were currently enrolled and were selected on a voluntary basis, further authorizations were not required.

The participants were selected with a convenience sample. Exploratory observations were made in key locations such as the previously mentioned Memorial Union, the International Center, and the Wellness Center. During these observations, I realized that the International Center, despite being an intuitive location for the recruitment of international students, was not a very practical venue. In fact, students appeared to go to the International Center either in small, homogeneous groups or alone. In the latter case, they were either studying or attending to personal matters. The Memorial Union and the Wellness Center proved to be better locations to meet potential participants for the study. In particular, the Memorial Union, which regularly hosts
conferences and presentations, such as the "Writers Conference," provided several initial contacts. These informal meetings subsequently led to permission to interview five of the seven study participants. The remaining two interviewees were first met at the Wellness Center and later they accepted my invitation to participate in this study.

As previously stated, the selection of the interviewees was based on voluntary participation exclusively. Any contact that involved hierarchic power was avoided (i.e., the participants could not be students in any of the courses I was teaching and could not be working on related projects). The international graduate students were from different countries of origin and diverse ethnic and educational backgrounds. One of the students spoke English as her first language, and one was bilingual; the remaining five students spoke English as their second language (as self-reported by the students). Such diversity allowed a better understanding of the essential aspects of the students' experiences, notwithstanding their diverse backgrounds.

Participants' Profiles

The following are brief profiles of the students who participated in this study. All of the participants' names are pseudonyms. Details have been omitted or altered in order to avoid disclosing their identity.

James

James comes from Europe, and his field of study is science. He has remarkable experience as a professional in his home country. In fact, James worked for various state agencies and taught at college level for more than 15 years. He has also published in his native language, which is not English, although not extensively. At first, James came to the United States to support and be closer to his family. While in the United States, he
decided to pursue a doctoral degree. James will soon mark the fourth anniversary of his arrival in the United States. James is a quiet, soft-spoken person who chooses his words carefully.

Kathy

Kathy comes from Asia, and her field of study at the University of North Dakota is social sciences. She worked in her home country in different professional fields before coming to the United States. Kathy is currently redefining her professional profile. In fact, she shared that she decided to come to the United States for both professional and personal reasons. Kathy has been in the United States for about a year. She defines herself as bilingual, and she has undertaken undergraduate studies taught in English language in her home country. Kathy has an outgoing personality, and she expresses her insights on her experience in an articulate, reflective fashion.

Derek

Derek comes from Europe, and his field of study is humanities. In order to join his wife and children in the United States, he resigned from a high profile job in his home country. Derek had been out of school for a few years before he enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of North Dakota. He has been in the United States for three years. Derek is very passionate in describing his experiences at the University of North Dakota and in his observations on the academic and cultural environment.

Jena

Jena comes from Europe, and her field of studies is humanities. Jena worked at a university in her home country, and she first came to the United States on a research
scholarship. She subsequently decided to enroll into a doctoral program at the University of North Dakota. Jena has now been in the United States for almost four years. She speaks several languages and is confident in her English communication skills. Jena has a dynamic attitude and always highlights the positive aspects of her experience.

Tom

Tom comes from Asia, and his field of study is science. He decided to come to the United States to join his spouse, but he did not immediately begin his studies. He later decided to enroll in a master’s program to keep himself “busy.” Tom has been in the United States for almost two years, and he still feels a little uncertain about his ability to communicate in English. However, he feels comfortable with the academic work. Tom has a quiet, laid back demeanor and often uses humor to lighten the conversation.

Susan

Susan comes from Asia, and her field of study is humanities. She is currently working on her master’s degree. Susan completed her undergraduate coursework in her home country and then decided to come to the United States to further her studies. Susan held a highly qualified position in her home country before moving to the U.S., where she has been for approximately two years. She constantly reflects on her experience and questions her perceptions. Susan has a very dynamic demeanor, and she actively searches for feedback.

Lillian

Lillian comes from Europe, and English is her native language. Her field of study is social sciences. Lillian has an extensive professional experience in her home country, and coming to the United States was part of a professional and personal change. She has
been in the United States for four years and is planning to stay longer after she completes her degree. Lillian elaborates constantly on the academic and cultural aspects of her experience in the United States and addresses issues with a very pragmatic attitude. She exudes confidence and a calm resolve.

Data Gathering Techniques

The primary source of data for the study was the participants’ interviews. All of the participants granted permission to have their interviews recorded. Therefore, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Originally, the plan was to conduct three short interviews of approximately 30 or 40 minutes; however, this approach did not prove very practical: International graduate students often had very limited amount of free time available and expressed their preference for a lengthier single session. Moreover, the interviewees often continued to share spontaneously their experiences after the “official” interview was concluded. As I was concerned about losing precious information, I decided, upon agreement with the interviewees, to let the recorder run until they felt they had told me what they wanted to say. The average length of the interviews was approximately one hour and a half each. Although this may appear as an alteration of the interview protocol, it did not alter the basic methodology of the study. On the contrary, the longer conversations allowed a more natural flow of the interviews with occasional digressions, which helped creating a more relaxed atmosphere. Such an atmosphere is very important when candid narratives are sought by the researcher. Another element that contributed to a climate of reciprocal trust was the fact that the international graduate students chose the location for the interviews. Four of the interviews were conducted at
the students' residences. One took place at the Memorial Union, in the coffee shop area, and the remaining two at the students' offices.

The interviews were semi-structured with questions intended to elicit candid information on the students' backgrounds and, particularly, their perceived experiences (academic and cultural) at the University of North Dakota (Appendix B). The participants' transcribed narratives were read multiple times to increase familiarity with the students' peculiar communication styles and patterns.

Coding Process and Data Analysis

After becoming familiar with the data collected, a tentative open coding process was initiated. Strauss and Corbin (1998) give different examples of coding strategies. I followed the authors' suggestions by starting with an initial sorting of recurring patterns or topics. The first codes were organized on the page margins and color-coded for grouping purposes. The first groups of codes that appeared to have common topics were reorganized in broader thematic categories. Next, codes and categories were reviewed to eliminate redundancy of codes and to secure a logical organization of data around the newly defined categories. In this phase, index cards were used to visualize better the data collected. The process of trimming the organization of data is what Strauss and Corbin define as selective coding. Categories were re-elaborated and themes descriptive of the phenomenon studied were created. As a final step of this process, a summative assertion was produced.

This process was not straightforward as it may appear. Codes, categories, and themes change and evolve, while the researcher strives to attain an organization of data that is faithful to the participants' experiences. Codes, categories, themes, and summative
assertions provide a depiction of the phenomenon studied in a rich, multi-layered context. In fact, the reduction of data to a synthetic structure cannot ignore the complexity of the phenomenon studied; therefore, a researcher has the ethical responsibility to preserve, as much as possible, the essence of the participants' meanings. Researcher's choices are part of the dialect essence of qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Issues related to the subjectivity of qualitative research and the validity of this study are discussed in the following section.

Validity and Generalizability

de Ramirez (2006) states that every person carries an "invisible knapsack" (p. 2) of experiences and ideas that are culturally and socially influenced. Therefore, it is extremely important to monitor the entire research process to prevent researchers' biases from influencing the outcomes of the research itself. Being fully aware of possible biases on my part, open-ended questions were utilized during the interviews. I carefully avoided expressing personal opinions or comments during the interview process. Furthermore, I strived to be as unobtrusive as possible while allowing the participants to articulate their answers and narratives as they saw fit. The students' narratives were often complex in their articulation with many aspects of their experiences overlapping. Rather than interrupting the participants, I waited for the unfolding of their story and reserved further questions or clarifications for a later time.

Through triangulation, data were analyzed from different perspectives and sources. Multiple strategies in this study led to triangulation. In particular, participant interviews were followed, at a later time, by informal conversations in which elements from the previous interviews were discussed. This practice was particularly useful to
clarify participants’ intended meanings. Such conversations also provided an opportunity to enrich the context of the study by attaining additional information. Furthermore, e-mail correspondence was kept with the interviewees. The participants were sent a copy of the interview excerpts as well as a summary of themes that emerged from this study. Their feedback was subsequently discussed in person or by e-mail. Asking participants’ feedback is often referred to as “respondent validation” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 111) and is considered as one of the most important validity tests. The findings were also discussed with scholars familiar with the fields of multicultural education and qualitative research. Furthermore, professional literature concerning the international students’ experiences in the United States and the acculturation process were carefully explored to provide additional validation for the study.

Even though this study was designed with validity and generalizability in mind, the possibilities for generalization of a qualitative study always present a complex issue. In particular, this study focused on the experiences of seven international graduate students at the University of North Dakota. In this case, generalizability can be envisioned in terms of in-depth understanding of these students’ lived experiences. However, the rich context in which the research is founded provides valuable information for further discussion and study.

Summary

Chapter III presented an overview of the study methodology. Research design, setting, participant selection, participants’ profiles, data collection, data analysis, and validity and generalizability issues were introduced. The purpose of the study was also
reiterated in this context to provide a thorough understanding of the underlying components of this research.

Table 1 introduces the codes, categories, themes, and summative assertion that emerged from the data analysis. The findings are presented in Chapter IV and are organized in five main themes that synthesize the students' experiences.

Table 1. Data Analysis.

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<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Assertion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Profession</td>
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<td>Motivations</td>
<td>International graduate students have complex motivations for moving to the United States; they appear to balance many elements in a complex equilibrium of achievements and challenges. Although they often experience success, students likewise struggle with feelings of isolation, and they cope with difficulties by maintaining a pragmatic attitude.</td>
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<td>Academic</td>
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<td>Non-academic</td>
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<td>Future</td>
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<td>Change</td>
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<td>Jobs</td>
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<td>Research</td>
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<td>Tests</td>
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<td>Difficulties</td>
<td>International graduate students encounter several difficulties.</td>
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<td>Visa</td>
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<td>Funds</td>
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<td>Language</td>
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<td>Reading</td>
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<td>Assignments</td>
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<td>Academic traditions</td>
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<td>GPA</td>
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<td>Success</td>
<td>International graduate students appear to adapt and succeed in their academic endeavors.</td>
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<td>Knowing what to do</td>
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<td>High performance</td>
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<td>Scholarly writing</td>
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<td>Collaboration in academia/working with scholars</td>
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<td>Codes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frustration</td>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>International graduate students often feel isolated.</td>
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<td>Alienation</td>
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<td>Disillusionment</td>
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<td>Social life</td>
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<td>Food</td>
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<td>Being too busy</td>
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<td>Loneliness</td>
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<td>Different life</td>
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<td>Coldness</td>
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Kathy shared in her interview,

I would suggest to international students who are considering the United States for their studies to do their homework. I would tell them to be sure they know what they are doing. I found out myself: One thing is dreaming; one thing is reality.

This chapter presents the findings of this study. Five themes emerged:

1. International graduate students have complex motivations for moving to the United States.
2. International graduate students encounter several difficulties.
3. International graduate students appear to adapt and succeed in their academic endeavors.
4. International graduate students often feel isolated.
5. International graduate students display pragmatic attitudes toward their experiences.

In the following sections, these five themes are described with supporting excerpts from the participants' narratives.
Theme One: Motivations for Moving to the United States

Why do international students choose to apply to graduate programs in the United States? International graduate students' motivations for studying in the United States vary. Such motivations are usually a combination of professional and personal factors. The participants expressed specific plans, both personal and professional, as to what they meant to achieve with their sojourn in the United States.

Kathy explained,

My reasons [for moving to the United States] were both personal and social. My son has a health condition. You know, for the past three years, we have been trying to provide him with the kind of care, of education that he needs in my country, but the facilities available were very limited; they are at a beginning stage, and I guess it will take many years before they come to a full ripening stage. So we finally decided that I should apply to a program of studies here. This way, I will learn some of the skills and the knowledge that I need myself, and I will also be able to handle him better in a day-to-day basis . . . and that is how we landed here.

While discussing her future plans, Kathy also explained,

I am a master’s student here, and initially I had planned to earn my master’s degree and then go back to our country. But during this time, and having seen the progress my son is making, we are second-guessing ourselves, and we are not sure about what to do. I want to stay longer because I have seen him blossoming. During these seven months, I have seen him doing so much better. . . . This is doing really good to him. I am kind of: . . . I don’t know how it is going to be
when he is back in my country. I know that people care there and try to do their best but, when you do not have the infrastructure, what can you do to help him? I am trying not to be selfish here and do what is good for him; at the same time, I know it is not going to be easy. This is said to be a place abundant in opportunities. So we are still exploring. Let’s see.

Derek explained his motivations for coming to the United States, while discussing his background.

Part of the problem is that, in my country, we work for the government and we are paid peanuts. And people cannot understand, cannot conceive . . . how somebody can be paid 200 dollars a month but still survive and buy a house. . . . There are things here we really like, and there are things we really don’t like. And almost surely we don’t want to go home and work in the state system, but we would be willing to go home and work maybe on an international project. . . . You know, we find advantages living here, in Canada, in Europe. . . . We like pragmatic things mostly here: the fact that it would probably be easier to find jobs that are at our level of education and a higher pay. It is easier to live in a place that is middle size, but it still has a good university where you can teach and raise your kids and probably find enough good schools for the kids so that you won’t worry. . . . In our home country you will find a good school if you live in a big city, but otherwise you probably have to really strive through the system whereas, here, it is easier. . . . Once you are in the system somehow . . .

Susan reflected on her reasons for moving to the United States and how she is reassessing them.
I decided to come here because I had very naïve ideas: maybe not naïve ideas but idealistic. I came here to earn a PhD degree, and then I thought I would go back and teach at a professor level. . . . But now we have come to an intersection. I don’t know if I want to go back. It is a confusing thing for us. And now, when I am looking for a job, I find it hard.

Lillian explained her motivations in the context of personal and professional life changes.

I was making a lot of changes in my life at the time in . . . kind of every area of my life. I was going for a big change, and I guess it was easy to make these changes from across the ocean; all the time, people are going to be asking you to do things you don’t want to do; it was really difficult to wean people from depending on me in every kind of way, so I think coming here was a way to say, “I can come away from those ties I feel morally obliged to.” So, I guess, that one was one of the biggest reasons, really, but also financially. . . . The whole package was very appealing. When I started looking into the cost for me to study at home full time, it would have been exorbitant. Whereas the first institution I studied at had in-state tuition for international students. . . . And I was interested in seeing different patterns and maybe do some comparisons after having worked as a professional for over 20 years in my country.

As it appears evident from these interview excerpts, international graduate students had motivations for moving to the United States that were both professional and personal. The personal dimension appeared to be prominent in many of the students’ narratives. Tom explained, with lighthearted humor, that he first moved to the United States to be with his wife.
I needed to come here to cook for her . . . [laughter]. Actually I didn’t come here for the purpose of studying, but, after one year of staying at home, I was very bored and so I thought, “I don’t have to waste time so why not studying . . .”

Although Tom’s motivation for beginning his studies in the United States may not have been typical, it demonstrates how international graduate students had a wide variety of reasons for their choices. Regardless of their motivations, all the students interviewed encountered some complications. Theme two presents the participants’ narratives concerning their difficulties.

Theme Two: Difficulties

International graduate students encounter several difficulties on their paths. These difficulties are discussed in the following three sub-sections.

*Application Process*

Some of the students’ difficulties start even before setting foot on American soil. In fact, the application process requires complex preparation. This preparation includes passing a series of standardized tests. One of these tests is the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), which is required of all students whose first language is not English. Kathy talked about her experience with the application preparation.

I wouldn’t say it was very difficult, but, yes, it could have been. I mean, if all of a sudden you would decide you wanted to get into something like this, you would really have to look for a lot things that you want to understand clearly before you make such a step. I wouldn’t say it was very difficult, but it was really time consuming . . . I had to take the TOEFL and the GRE, both. You need the GRE
for masters' programs here. So I had to spend a year preparing if I wanted to be admitted in one of the U.S. universities.

Susan also discussed the difficulties to obtain a student visa from her country and the complexity of the application process.

It is very difficult to get a visa to study in the United States from our country ... I think so. Financial aid is the first thing. If you receive financial aid from a school in the U.S., you get a visa. That is, you have more chances to get a visa. If you do not have an assistantship, even if you provide proof you have enough money they don’t trust you. For the entire application process, it took me two years. I took the TOEFL twice. Then I didn’t know anything, so I searched the Internet; and then I found out about North Dakota. ... I applied to eight schools. That’s the very minimum. Most students apply to 20 or 30 schools. It costs a lot of money. Because, you know, it takes money. The application fee in itself costs, and then there is the mailing fee. And, because of the time constraints, you often have to pay 200 dollars for shipping. DHL is very expensive in my country. With our currency, the GRE and TOEFL cost a lot of money. The GRE fee alone was half of my month’s salary.

Lillian mentioned arriving to the United States for the first time before September 11. Being an English native speaker she was not required to take the TOEFL test. However, she found the application process rather lengthy.

I came over before September 11. Actually, September 11 happened the first week I was over ... I guess I got in with my student status before they tightened up. Again, I can understand why people are nervous, but it seems to me that
students have borne the brunt of all of that because we are a part of the population that can be monitored: They can show the public that they monitor us and so they do. And so it seems ... yeah ... I am not really complaining, but I think you want honesty in this work. And I just found the process a little bit cumbersome to do from home. I was actually working full time at home; my father was not well and that is why I had gone back and so ... it was a little cumbersome and a bit lengthy; and it seems to me that the Graduate School knew I was on my way, but nothing had gotten through the College until very late; there was no indication. They got a package, but they were not informed until everything was perfect. So nothing else can happen until ... and this causes kind of a hiatus in the application process that probably could be solved.

Although the application process required time and effort, the arrival in the United States brought additional challenges. In particular, language appeared to be one of the main issues.

*Language Difficulties*

Even students who were bilingual or English native speakers encountered some hurdles in verbal and written communication. The participants were fully aware of these difficulties. For instance, James shared that communicating in English was still difficult, at times.

The language is another challenge. When I first came here with my wife, I knew some English, but not enough to confront all the things that were in front of me. So, at first, I dedicated all my efforts to take the TOEFL exam. I had to take it twice because the first time my score was just below 200, and I needed a score of
210 in order to be admitted to the master's program. So I tried hard and the second time I succeeded. So my English has improved but not to the level I want. I feel that I have a long way ahead of me to improve my English.

Kathy mentioned differences between British and American English.

I was more used to British English. British English is the language of our educational system, which is very different from what you have here. So I still have . . . I mean, even after several months, at times, I don't know what people are saying. I mean . . . their phrases are so different. After all is over, I go, "Oh, so this is what it must have meant." So I have to draw inferences. . . . Even the spelling is different. But I don't have particular problems with writing because I have done quite a bit of writing. Except, of course, the whole style is different: the way you would lay out a sentence and the way you would write in general. But for someone who has basic knowledge of English . . . I wonder what if people don't have that kind of background . . . I don't know . . . it must be very hard.

Susan shared that, at first, she had underestimated the language difficulties.

At first, when I got here, I thought it was nothing. I thought I could speak English. I thought I already knew American culture. So when I first arrived at my sister's place, I felt comfortable. Everybody spoke my native language. But when the semester started everything was different. The whole system was so different. There was no lunch breaks . . . nothing . . . and lots of homework. . . . It was hard.

Jena expressed that she did not have particular language difficulties; however, she was concerned for her daughter's mastery of their native language.
We are used to English. My daughter speaks perfect English with no accent. But she has an accent in our language. This concerns me.

This latter statement is relevant since it highlights how language and cultural aspects are strictly intertwined. Lillian explained how she perceived these connections.

One of the things that people don’t anticipate... I think when people come from a non-Western culture, others expect that there are going to be problems with settling or understanding, but people don’t realize some of the issues of people who are Western coming to a Western culture. The differences seem quite slight; however, the differences are actually quite large. And it might not be that you see them as quite large, but the people you meet think they are quite large. So I would be talking to people, and people would blank out; I could see their eyes rolling and so I thought, “Oh, wow, they can’t understand what I am saying” so I would slow down. I think it is the same going anywhere: You have to reassess almost everything you are doing... So it is kind of a mental overload. That’s how I would describe it... It’s really tiring, and so I really understand how people who have to learn the language... how tired they must get.

Lillian elaborated more on language barriers.

I see it by the body language. I realize they can’t understand. People won’t say it, but I can actually tell. And, you know, the less educated people are, the more they phase out. I kind of see people backing off me, almost scared. That’s what I feel, and therefore I have to kind of almost build bridges between people...

Indeed, the goal of building bridges between people is an ambitious one and language is essential in achieving the goal of reciprocal understanding. Although
international graduate students expressed different levels of comfort with English language, their academic lives required full immersion in an English-speaking environment.

**Academic Difficulties**

International graduate students shared that they encountered some academic difficulties. Some were related to the language of instruction, thus reconnecting with the previous sub-section. For instance, James explained,

I don’t believe I have many problems now. Not really. I am not the type of person who seeks help from the professors. I do everything myself so. . . . Generally, I have some problems with my writing . . . in English . . . with my scholarly writing, but I feel I am improving every day.

Tom stated that he found out he needed more time for studying.

Reading takes me more time here. And books are thick. Every term we finish one.

Susan also elaborated on class participation in relation to the language of instruction.

The first year I was pretty silent because I was so slow. So you may have wanted to talk, but everybody was finished already. Now, being more used to it, you fight for your chance to talk in class. It’s kind of enjoyable . . .

However, getting adjusted to academics was also connected to instructors’ teaching styles. Susan discussed how, in one instance, she felt a professor had lacked empathy.

Once I had to drop a class. That was because the teacher was not fair. I mean maybe he is fair, but I didn’t think he was fair. He assigned us a book to read for the first meeting; I got the book too late, so I didn’t have time to read it. I talked to him and said, “OK, I will be a little late for the first time.” And I said, “It takes
me more time to read” and . . . He just said, “Well if you can’t make it for the
deadline well . . . just think about it . . . .” Then I had to drop the course because I
couldn’t make it for the deadline . . . otherwise . . . I am a good student; I don’t
want to get a C. You know . . . . So I had to drop it. One thing he said, “I know
you are a foreigner, but I treat you the same as the other students.” Well, that
sounds fair, but it is not really fair, right? I don’t think it is. I learned that
everybody is different.

Susan’s narrative is not unique in sharing difficulties that resulted from different
perspectives or understanding professors’ expectations. Lillian recounted her experience.

I remember this was my very first assignment. You know the woman, and I won’t
mention her name, she was very, very thorough. She was very good and she had
very high expectations and the first assignment . . . I guess I completely
miscalculated . . . I didn’t even look when it needed to be in, because I considered
it an assignment that was going to need a lot of research, and I thought, “Well, it
is going to take at least two weeks to get this done . . . even if I read the work as
quickly as I can, it is going to take two weeks” and so I hadn’t even looked at the
deadline, really. I guess what I said earlier is true; here, there are so many things
to take on board that everybody takes for granted . . . the deadline for this piece of
work went kind over my head. Well, I got into class the following week to find
that it was due that day, in that class. And this woman was taking off a point for
every day the work was late. So it was very tough. Anyway, I mean, I am the sort
of person who not only meets deadlines, but also meets them at least a week early;
that’s how I am. It was horrendous for me; I have never been late in my life, so
you can imagine the horror I felt. I mean, I felt like a worm, really. It was just awful. Anyway that was a big lesson. So I handed it in the following week thinking—"Well, I just can’t do it"—and it was a very detailed piece; I had researched all the content and quotes, and then when I got it back I realized she just wanted a personal reflection more or less, really.

Different types of testing also seemed to affect international graduate students’ performances. Jena stated,

I think we do poorly with the kind of undergraduate tests that are given here.

Luckily, we don’t do many of them. Anytime we write a paper we do as well, probably better, than American students. If we take multiple choice tests or stuff like that we do poorly. We simply never did that back home.

As previously mentioned, similar difficulties appear to be due to differences in the academic system. On this matter, Lillian shared that, although she greatly enjoyed her academic experience, she felt that she had to adapt to a system that was not always the best suited for her learning style.

I think that’s why the system in my home country suits me better, because I set myself the goal, and this is what I want to do and this is how. . . . Sometimes you get different advice, and that can be confusing. I am quite an intuitive person, and, therefore, I tend to go with what my gut feeling tells me I need to do. But I am getting a lot of different advice and lots of different perspectives on dissertations and research methodologies, and I am thinking it’s slowing me down; I am being slowed down: That’s how I feel. And again don’t take that as a criticism. It’s a way of working . . . I think a decision has been made there, and I am not saying
it's the wrong one. I am saying that for me it doesn't work as well as it might. I was ready to fly; you know what I am saying ... I was ready to fly ... I did get some practice with my assistantship in writing, but I think it might have been nice to have a more negotiated curriculum, where the students are more in the driving seat about where they are headed ...

International graduate students discussed their difficulties at length. The participants were fully aware of them and, as Lillian shared, they learned from them. Students also shared their success stories and their accomplishments. Theme three illuminates these stories.

Theme Three: Success

International graduate students reported to be successful in their studies and their academic endeavors. Understandably, they were proud of their accomplishments. In their narratives, the participants also recognized the importance of mentors for their academic and professional growth. Jena explained that many of her concerns regarding her preparation waned once she began her program in the United States.

I was in a PhD program in my home country, and I was wondering what if people have been writing about these issues for 20 years and I don’t know. Then I came here and realized not only was I, you know, sort of up to date, but many times, I knew things more in depth, and I had different perspectives. I knew about European research, but I also knew American stuff. I knew authors from here and authors from there, so, basically, after my first semester here, the advisor said, “Why don’t we sit down and get a plan to write together?,” which we are quite far in doing right now. Those were the kind of things that helped me actually; they
helped me trusting my knowledge and realizing that I can do well enough whether I am here or there.

Derek, too, said that his transition to academia in the United States was fairly smooth.

The things we did in our country at the level of undergraduate studies in the third or fourth year are done here at the level of Ph.D. So I already knew a lot of stuff. I was an “A” student from the first semester and had no problems in communicating. It was hard but not that hard that you would not know what to do.

James stated that he was satisfied with his academic performance.

My GPA is high . . . I found my specific discipline content much easier here . . . I learned very fast . . . Sometimes undergraduate classes in my country were difficult. Some were harder than graduate classes here . . . But professors here are more connected with the students.

This feeling of connection with faculty was recurrent in students’ narratives. Students mentioned how they appreciated professors’ support. Lillian shared how important to her was her professional collaboration with her advisor.

My advisor and I have worked on so many things. Working with him has broadened my horizons. We even travel together sometimes. I can be very open with him.

Jena expressed a similar perspective.

I worked very well with my advisor, and we prepared a very coherent plan of study. I am very pleased with where we got, and how we connected my plan with the dissertation topic. And I have an opportunity to work with my advisor on projects for publication.
The international graduate students participating in this study stated that they were successful in their academic endeavors. They also expressed satisfaction for their achievements. Lillian synthesized her thoughts on the characteristics of international graduate students.

This was what I used to think about people coming to my country from Bangladesh or India and so on . . . these people are abnormally ambitious and driven and . . . you know . . . we are not receiving people who . . . we are receiving people who are exceptional. For example, I met a guy who went to Germany for his undergraduate degree, and he came here for his PhD. He has learnt five languages; we are talking about exceptional people, really exceptional people, and I think people here probably know that too. I am not talking about myself here. I am reflecting on the people I met; so when you are talking about graduate students, international graduate students, they are different in lots of ways, in their ambitions, their open-mindedness, maybe even their needs. You know, why have they come to study here? Is it because there is the money to do it here? Have they come from fairly tough backgrounds?

Whether or not Lillian’s perceptions on the potential of international graduate students are correct, these students are part of the academic community. The following theme summarizes students’ perceptions on their interpersonal experiences.

Theme Four: Isolation

The participants of this study explained how their experiences were, at times, tiring and demanding in terms of physical, intellectual, and emotional energies. Sometimes, it was the little things that were amiss. In other instances, students were
challenged to redefine their understanding of relationships. Loneliness and isolation loomed in the background of these students' narratives. James said that the transition to his American life was not easy.

There have been so many difficulties. . . . The most difficult thing for me, not for my wife, because she has a different personality, is isolation. I am missing my friends. I miss my ways of behaving . . . my cultural ways. So now I doubt my ways. . . . Everything has changed. I used to spend my day quite differently from the way I spend my days here. I did things that were quite different. This puts me sometimes in trouble . . . I miss my old life. . . . We understand friendship in some other way in my country, in a different fashion than here. If I call somebody a friend, for us, it has a different meaning. A friend is part of the family, so it is different. Here you can call friend somebody you talk to by chance for 5 or 10 minutes, and that's it. In terms of my personality, a friend is someone who is really reliable and spiritual, and I can talk with him or her about anything; we spend time together, and we organize activities together. We share the family. So the meaning of friendship is very different. And another thing is that maybe I can find an American friend, or a friend here, but the culture and the habits are obstacles to establish the kind of relationships I was used to. That is why I prefer spending my time alone and using my time to study and work rather than spending time with friends that are not “conceivable” friends from my perspective. So I am not able to adapt myself to this kind of culture of calling friends. That's why I chose the other way, but it is a hard way. Now I am focusing on my studies and my work.
Kathy expressed her thoughts on friendship.

I do go to the International Center but not that often because I am tied up with work and family, you know. It is hard to go just for recreational time. But that’s the place I go if I have inquiries or questions. . . . As far as friends, you know, with people from my country it wasn’t difficult. Because the moment you see a face from your own country you go, “Oh, you are also here.” So the rapport just gets built on its own. But with other people here . . . they are very helpful and they will try to do their best to help, but the apprehension is always there. I believe because you don’t feel . . . because everything is new: the life, the ways of working. Everything is so new, and you cannot adapt to different ways that easily. So it can make you feel uncomfortable, at times. The Americans may try to understand, but I don’t think they can. It is hard for them to understand what it really means for us. How difficult it can be for us.

For Tom, lack of time was a hindrance for developing new friendships.

Most of the times you feel like you don’t have time for friends. Even if you have time, you just want to play sports or rest. I have sport friends. In my home country, it is quite different. I had a lot of friends in my country. I think it is the language problem. And also we had more things in common. We like sports; we like eating. . . . Here I didn’t make a lot of friends. I think it is kind of a problem. I should reach out more. But then you always have the pressure. You always have tests waiting for you. You have a lot of textbooks to read. And it takes me more time to read in English.
Lillian elaborated on a definition of friendship.

I have lots of friends. . . . When you use the word friends, what does that cover? . . . You see that’s . . . you know, I work with people in my department, and I consider them all very good professional colleagues . . . friendship I think . . . is different. I think that’s more open probably. I have very good professional relationships with people in the department. I don’t know them that well; I know them well enough professionally; I had them as professors, and they have been very good to me. . . . I think there is a real support system here for me, and I think they respect what I do, which is good, and I respect them, so there is mutual respect. I go to a sport club here as well, and I don’t know people very well there, but I am getting to know them a lot better. So I feel practicing a sport is good because, in the evening, when there is not much else to do other than work, it can be a little bit isolating here. You know, coming to the Union building, for example, it can be very, very quiet, and only the TV is blaring. Sometimes you just want to do your work, but sometimes you just want to spend maybe 5 or 10 minutes talking with somebody. That’s when I just sit around and generally someone will come and talk. Generally they are not Americans; generally they are other international students . . .

Even the academic arena, as described by the participants, is not immune from hurdles. Students did not always feel integrated. Susan discussed the student-teacher relationship at the university in comparison with her home country.

You must be an excellent student to go to college in my country. . . . Here the relationships are different. Student-teacher relationship here is, like, “We pay our
tuition. This is your job. We don’t owe you anything.” Whereas in my country you are the teacher, you know what I mean? But here . . . it is very cold here. You don’t owe anything to anybody. It is very clear-cut . . . I don’t know if I am right or not. Correct me if I am wrong. . . .

I feel in my department a lot of my professors are very polite, very good to you; they are very kind and very helpful when you ask them, but, sometimes, some professors know that you are excellent in class, probably one of the very top ones in your class, but still you feel something . . . when they talk with other classmates, they feel like they are colleagues, but when they talk to me it’s different. Or maybe I feel different, and I mean some . . . I talked with one of my classmates who is from another country too, and who felt the same way. Maybe this is one of our problems; we isolate ourselves from others; we don’t reach to others. But I still don’t know if it’s correct. Some professors feel like they are polite but politely cold. They can be very good and very helpful but not that kind of . . . like normal . . .

Susan talked about her experiences with classmates.

I feel inferior all the time and I don’t have many things in common with them. . . . Sometimes when you have a conversation . . . before the teacher comes; all the classmates are talking about something. They always talk about cultural stuff. You know, everybody knows. I feel like I am isolated, like I am from another planet, you know . . . I think my cultural knowledge is not enough for me to share. They talk about TV shows or a person they know. I feel like it will take me a lifetime to know that. That’s my problem: I lack the popular cultural
knowledge. When you talk about textbooks, I am perfectly comfortable. I can be better than the others sometimes, but it is just I feel like I don’t have that knowledge; I don’t know the famous stars . . . the sport stars . . . the politicians . . . the jokes. Yeah, I mean, I know who George Bush is, but other people I don’t know. That’s my problem: I feel isolated. The problem is negative attitudes. I, myself, have a lot of negative attitudes. I can change this. Many people choose to change this, and they do; they can change it. It will take a while but they can, right? I think I actually resist learning. I don’t know why. I don’t like changing . . . I am . . . what’s the word . . . a wimp?

Derek maintained that the administration should consider the role and importance of international students carefully to prevent students from being isolated from the rest of the academic community.

Those who are responsible for these programs . . . they should not think about diversity just because they accepted foreign students. They should think what will happen to the foreign students [once they are here]; if you are educating them here, it is not because you want to increase the knowledge in their countries of origin. I don’t think so; your primary goal should be to keep those people because they are people who can incorporate, convert all kind of experiences and, either way, they are a treasure that is not discovered, but they have to be put to work; they have to . . . . There are so many professors who don’t show their projects . . . they talk about their work, and it’s a little bit awkward to see people collaborating with American students but not with you. It seems to me that in this society in general sometimes some things are said in the front, in your face, and
then people think something else . . . I don't know . . . the world is going more
and more toward . . . I am not sure there is room for the rights of any minorities.
Jena also expressed her concern regarding how international graduate students may be
singled out. For instance, the way international students' performance as teaching
assistants is scrutinized could potentially isolate them from their U.S. peers and cause
them unwarranted stress.

Sometimes I wonder . . . . They were discussing this law; it was in the Chronicles
of Higher Education. And they were saying that, with this law, if 5% of your
students say you cannot speak English well enough, you cannot teach. And they
used a student as an example . . . . She had no problems; she could teach anything.
Yet, if in a class of 25 students, one student complains, this person will not be
allowed to teach . . . if this law passes. But what if an American teaching assistant
has one student complain? Should that teaching assistant not to be allowed to
teach? So many people cannot teach. It’s not about international students; it could
be anybody.

Despite a sense of isolation that students experienced, the participants appeared to
manage successfully the complex balance of personal, professional, and cultural
elements. Narratives supporting theme five illustrate how students demonstrated a
pragmatic approach to their American sojourn.

Theme Five: Pragmatism

International graduate students coped with problems with a pragmatic attitude.
They were aware of the complexity of their situations, but they were also willing to try to
make the most out of their experiences. Lillian summarized her personal philosophy as follows:

It's a case of when in Rome, really, isn't it? It's a case of that. When you move to another country, you accept the cultural traditions, and maybe you talk with people about both... and you can express your view and so... but, you know, I don't think there is any mileage in coming over and being arrogant about what is here and what is there.

Later, Lillian added about her overall experience.

I think it's working very well for me. I do think it's the attitude you bring with to it. But then again you are not going to come all over to the United States if you are not going to make it work. Are you?

When discussing the specifics of her situation, Kathy shared,

Thankfully, the pace it's not so fast... I would say for a working person from my country the pace is faster there than here. But for us it was good because otherwise things would have gone haywire. There were a lot of difficulties in adjusting. So it was good... Also, you are thankful you are in a small town and not in one of those big cities because that would make you really uncomfortable. At least, it would make me feel uncomfortable because I have never experienced that. And if you are coming from a different country and you have to adjust to so many things... I don’t think I would have been able to do that... One big issue we are considering now is the health insurance. I have health insurance, but not my family. So if somebody has an unexpected emergency, we have to provide
with our funds. This can be very expensive. I am concerned, especially for my children. . . . But we will work on that too.

Derek expressed his thoughts on how to improve the international graduate students’ situation.

I think we should organize and stay together. You should take into consideration the interests of all GTAs, of all international students. The administration should give some . . . I don’t know . . . take some time the first month, or even more than that for a foreign GTA to just be left to be trained . . . to go and sit in some American classes. Maybe, the first semester, foreign GTAs should pair up with some American GTAs. You need to become familiar with another Weltanschauung, with another understanding of life.

Jena also provided some suggestions on this matter.

First of all, I would say there should be better integration of programs done by the administration, done by the departments. There are many more programs for faculty, which is surprising, because you assume many of the international faculty studied here in the United States. Also, they have more resources available, whereas graduate students have only one or two days of orientation, and then they get launched into teaching and research. . . . There are things that international students could do like being very open and not being stuck in their own culture. They should expect both the worst and the best and be able to cope with all sorts of situations. . . . Many people already are sort of inter-culturally trained. I mean, they knew what they were doing when they applied for a program and decided to
come. They probably know a lot of things, but there are still things that can be a problem.

Jena also reflected on her situation and the decisions that will have to be taken after completing her studies.

We are halfway through the program and we are not ruling out anything, but, also, we have not really decided. Wherever we find the best place, it will be the place we stay. . . . We already kind of left twice. We left from our small towns to go to study in college. So we were not close to our family in our country. And now we moved here. Right now, it doesn’t really matter as long as we can be together, and we have our kids around. . . . We are among the first people from our country to live in the global village. I think we have an advantage: having a good education and being very flexible on the job market. . . . At some point, it doesn’t matter as long as we can support the kids and ourselves.

In the students’ narratives, practical aspects appear to be important. The participants’ perspectives were articulated and complex. This was to be expected since so many components contributed to their overall lived experiences. In the following chapter, the students’ narratives are discussed, and summary, conclusions, and recommendations are provided.
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore international graduate students’ perceptions regarding their experiences at the University of North Dakota. Acculturation served as the conceptual framework that allowed contextualizing the students’ narratives within an academic discourse. Through a qualitative phenomenological approach, seven international graduate students were interviewed. The interview transcripts were analyzed and organized into codes and categories. Five themes emerged from codes and categories:

1. International graduate students have complex motivations for moving to the United States.
2. International graduate students encounter several difficulties.
3. International graduate students appear to adapt and succeed in their academic endeavors.
4. International graduate students often feel isolated.
5. International graduate students display pragmatic attitudes toward their experiences.
In the following sections, these themes are presented in relation to pertinent literature.

Theme One: International graduate students have complex motivations for moving to the United States.

The international graduate students who participated in this study shared their motivations for pursuing graduate studies in the United States. These motivations were professional (furthering their education and looking for job opportunities) and personal (helping and being closer to family members). Often, it was hard to distinguish clearly between these two aspects in the students’ narratives. In their interviews, students went back and forth from personal to professional motivations without interrupting their narratives. The participants shared that they still were looking at different options and reassessing their plans at the time of their interviews.

Although international students’ presence in the United States can be traced back to centuries ago, the growth of this phenomenon is stunning. Approximately half a million foreign students were enrolled in U.S. colleges in 2003 (Kuo, 2004). Probably in relation to this rapid growth, internationalization of higher education has become a “hot topic” with many, complex perspectives. Among these perspectives, Tremblay’s (2005) study discussed the humanistic implications of large academic and professional mobility in the context of the “brain drain” conundrum. Tremblay indicated study and job search as the primary motives for strong migratory fluxes. Qin and Lykes (2006) also discussed how, despite all the difficulties, international students constantly reexamine their expectations and plans.
**Theme Two: International graduate students encounter several difficulties.**

The interviewees narrated the obstacles they faced once they decided to apply to a graduate program in the United States. For instance, one student explained that the GRE fee alone cost half of her month’s salary. Language difficulties and problems related to differences in the academic system were also widely discussed. In particular, students encountered difficulties in adapting to spoken and written American English. They also had to learn different academic traditions. At first, students were uncertain about the professors’ expectations and coursework requirements.

There is an extensive body of literature addressing these issues. For instance, Gonzalez (2004), Stoynoff (1997), and Yeh and Inose (2003) discuss the importance of language proficiency for smooth academic transitions and less stressful acculturation processes. In the context of these studies, a strong emphasis was on the communication barriers that may affect students’ academic performances and social lives.

**Theme three: International graduate students appear to adapt and succeed in their academic endeavors.**

Despite reporting several difficulties, all participants stated that they felt they were performing well academically. High GPA and collaboration with other scholars for publication projects were mentioned as tangible evidence of their achievements. The opportunity of being involved in scholarly work appeared to be particularly important from the students’ perspectives.

Gonzalez (2004) maintains that international students in general do succeed academically. Furthermore, Freedman (1997) states that, at Princeton University, the
graduation rate of international graduate students is a little higher than the average, and the time for a degree completion is a little shorter (p. 1).

The University of North Dakota study participants appeared to be proud of their academic successes. They also specifically commended their mentors and advisors for their precious support. Dedrick and Watson (2002), and Rose (2005) highlight how mentors and academic advisors become crucial for international graduate students’ success. Mentors and advisors often assume the double role of academic experts and cultural mediators who facilitate students’ acculturation process.

*Theme Four: International graduate students often feel isolated.*

The participants expressed a sense of discomfort toward some aspects of their interpersonal relationships. They often discussed feeling lonely or isolated. One student confessed that he felt nostalgic about his old life in his home country. The students also discussed the term friendship in relation to their new academic and cultural environments. Academically speaking, two of the interviewees felt that they were not always given the same opportunities as their American colleagues.

These study findings mirror what recent literature has highlighted. Qin and Lykes (2006) describe the process of acculturation that international graduate students go through as “fragmentation of self” (p. 177). During this process, students often feel alienated and singled out. Students go through a grieving phase in which they question their choices and think about their past lives with nostalgia. Yeh and Inose (2003) explain how international students often “perceive social relationships in the U.S. culture to be rather superficial” (p. 16). Diangelo (2006) also emphasizes how international graduate students may experience subtle forms of discrimination in their academic experience.
similarly to other minority groups. For instance, Diangelo pointed out how, in her study, international and minority students were marginalized during class discussions. These students received scarce and impersonal feedback, while other students benefited from more personalized and engaging responses (p. 1990).

**Theme Five: International graduate students display pragmatic attitudes toward their experiences.**

The students who participated in this study had very practical attitudes. The old saying “When in Rome” was uttered more than once during the interviews. Students felt they had to make the most out of their experience and face problems when they arose. The participants were fully aware that difficulties were to be expected and were determined to “make things work.” They even volunteered suggestions on how the administration could better support international graduate students.

Gonzalez (2006) discusses how pragmatic attitudes help students navigate the academic and cultural environments in which they are immersed. By necessity, students are stimulated and challenged. As a consequence, students become more assertive and independent. Banks and Banks (1995) also explain that individuals who successfully integrate their personal and cultural identities often initiate or propose changes. The University of North Dakota students who participated in this study seemed to be ready and willing to share their experiences and face new challenges.

**Conclusions**

The summative assertion for this study stated the following:

International graduate students have different motivations for moving to the United States; they appear to balance many elements in a complex equilibrium of
achievements and challenges. Although they often experience success, students likewise struggle with feelings of isolation, and they cope with difficulties by maintaining a pragmatic attitude.

How does one synthesize international graduate students’ experiences? There were numerous elements in their narratives, and all of them were worthy of consideration. International graduate students in this study moved to the United States for varied reasons. Furthering their education was, of course, one of the main reasons. However, it was not the only motivation. Students looked for changes in their lives, for better job opportunities, and, sometimes, they were looking for ways to be closer to or helping their families. This last aspect was fascinating, since it was not commonly reported in other studies.

Oftentimes, past studies focused on international students’ language proficiency in English as one of the critical issues for students’ successful academic performance. In this study, students discussed difficulties that embraced many different areas. Language barriers were part of a broader picture in which academic and cultural differences were mentioned. I believe that considering language difficulties in isolation from the other elements of the picture would do a disservice to the students. To substantiate my statement, one should consider how all participants in this study, including the ones who self-reported having language difficulties, were academically successful. If one were to equate language difficulties with academic struggles, students who were less proficient should also have reported more academic problems. That was not the case. So how did students compensate if they had linguistic difficulties? Based on the participants’ narratives, they invested a considerable amount of time studying. All of them, regardless
of their initial motivation for moving to the United States, reported spending a great deal of time and energy on their academic endeavors. Did language barriers affect students’ acculturation process? This latter question is difficult to answer. Isolation may be an indicator of difficulties in the acculturation process. However, all students reported feeling isolated at times. Thus, from the students’ narratives, it is not possible to maintain that isolation was solely a consequence of linguistic barriers.

Students in this study expressed conflicting feelings toward their experiences in the United States. An example of this conflict was the strong interest and, in some instances, enthusiasm they displayed for the many opportunities they had found in their new environment; on the other hand, international graduate students also expressed a longing for familiar habits and different lifestyles. In this context, friendship was discussed at length and differences in cultural mores and shared knowledge appeared to be an obstacle in students’ multicultural relationships. Students often strived for a balance between embracing the mainstream culture and preserving their own personal and cultural identities.

Isolation was indeed a troubling aspect of students’ stories. Students reported having a difficult time making new friends and discussed how the concept of friendship was elusive in the new cultural context. Students felt different from their American colleagues. Two of them even added that they felt isolated academically, despite their excellent performances. This is a disquieting finding, because it confirms what other studies across the United States have reported: International students do not always feel fully integrated in the academic community. Providing an academic and cultural environment that promotes cross-cultural understanding and appreciation is a critical
challenge. Although the previously discussed linguistic barriers may affect international graduate students’ acculturation process, it appears evident that students sometimes feel uncomfortable in their new environment regardless of their language proficiency. Predictably, adjustment tends to carry a certain degree of stress. However, it is important that as many obstacles as possible to international graduate students’ successful acculturation are removed. Successful acculturation cannot be regarded as solely students’ responsibility. Academic institutions should foster positive interactions within their communities. Such interactions should be based on reciprocal respect and a genuine desire for learning from others’ experiences and knowledge. By sharing common interests and goals, some of the barriers can be overcome and common goals can be established. Scholarly collaboration appeared to be very important for the participants of this study in that they felt less isolated and experienced warmer relationships.

International graduate students appeared to be fairly confident as far as their academic abilities. They expressed their desire to work on individualized plans that would allow them to expand their knowledge and professional preparation. These students also shared their desire for being challenged and, in several instances, commented on their dislike for standardized types of testing. While elaborating on this, they explained that they felt this type of testing was not conducive to higher learning; they also maintained that multiple-choice style of testing put them at a disadvantage with their peers, since this type of testing is not common in their home countries. This was an interesting remark, since both the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), which are generally required for international students’ admission to a graduate program, both belong to the standardized test category. Despite
the difficulties, students felt that their academic and professional success, such as high grades and co-authorship of academic publications, were of great value to them. Students considered their achievements rewarding; in this light, they felt that their sacrifices were worthwhile because of their accomplishments. Since the students placed so much emphasis on academics, mentorship and peer collaboration on scholarly projects seems to be of considerable relevance for this study. Furthermore, these forms of partnerships should take into consideration students’ future career plans.

Although international graduate students did not dwell on financial matters during their interviews, it is interesting to note how financial aspects did recur in the background of their narratives. In particular, students pointed out how their assistantships were vital for their studies in the United States. This is understandable when considering the economical differential between the United States and many other countries. Furthermore, international students face stringent limitations when seeking employment due to immigration laws. Despite these restrictions, several students expressed their desire to find well paying jobs at the end of their studies that would also allow them to take care of their familial needs.

Students found different ways to cope with difficulties and to succeed. As mentioned earlier, the study participants expressed a pragmatic approach to their experience in the United States. Although their goals differed, they expressed similar imageries in explaining their personal philosophies. James said during his interview, “We are crossing the river, and now we have to get to the other shore.” Lillian, when talking about communicating with others, mentioned “building bridges.” The effort to overcome difficulties and reach out is vividly represented in these images. Many of the students, at
the time of the interviews, were still uncertain about their future and were looking into different options. Students had generally an optimistic outlook, a "can do" attitude, which led me to believe they all had a strong internal locus of control and high self-efficacy concerning their academic and professional endeavors.

The acculturation conceptual framework provided a powerful theoretical reference for this study. Acculturation holistically embraces the experiences of many individuals around the world. Linguistic, cultural, and individual factors are examined and debated within the context of acculturation. In this study, seven University of North Dakota international graduate students shared their experiences. They explained their reasons for coming to the United States; they shared their difficulties and successes; they expressed their feelings of isolation and demonstrated their determination to learn from their experiences. It would be very simplistic, in my opinion, to assume that one factor (e.g., English language ability) is the determinant factor for their successful acculturation. Only by looking at the interaction of multiple factors, theories can be elaborated. As one of the interviewees shared, "International graduate students . . . are different in lots of ways . . . in their ambitions, their open-mindedness, maybe even their needs . . ." These students have so much to offer in terms of specific knowledge but also from a cultural and humanistic perspective. Drawing on Jackson’s (2003) work, internationalization of education could provide the foundation for a "truly multicultural, indeed universal, debate on the future of humanity" (p. 329).
Recommendations

Recommendations for Action and Policy Implementation

A first recommendation, for all professors working with international graduate students, is to learn to know the students as individuals. International graduate students, likewise other students, need to be encouraged to work on individualized academic paths that address their specific learning needs and aspirations. International graduate students want to be challenged as well as supported. It would be unfortunate for these students, and for the entire academic community, to overlook the international scholars’ academic and human potential. International graduate students often have diverse backgrounds that can provide enriching opportunities for all scholars. Professors should set high standards and provide the means for knowledge dissemination and promotion of intellectual inquiry. The participants of this study expressed their enthusiasm when they had opportunities to take flight and explore new projects and new possibilities. However, professors should also be extremely clear regarding academic expectations. As reported by the students, other countries have different academic traditions and styles. If expectations are clearly stated at the beginning of a course, the possibilities for misinterpretation are reduced. What may be intuitive for a student familiar with the U.S. educational system may be totally new for an international student. Providing clear indications about course expectations is a sound educational practice from which all students can benefit. Although flexibility cannot be imposed on instructors, a related suggestion would be to embed an array of options in terms of assignments and timelines. Again, this provision would benefit both domestic and international students, since it allows individualized learning.
A salient aspect in the students’ narratives was the appreciation for opportunities of formal or informal mentorship. A second recommendation can be derived from this. Since international graduate students appear often to experience isolation, it would be in both the individuals’ and the institutions’ best interest to foster mentoring programs. These programs should be specifically designed to encourage interaction between scholars of different nationalities. This would allow a close and constructive interaction that has been demonstrated to be effective in building successful professional rapport and improved intercultural understanding.

A third recommendation concerns intercultural training. International graduate students often have assistantships that involve teaching and research responsibilities. However, assistants’ training is usually very brief, one or two days, as reported by the students. In such a short time, it is very optimistic to assume that international graduate students will be able to immerse themselves in their new roles without further training. Ideally, a shadowing or mentoring program could provide the support students might need. Intercultural training should not be limited to graduate assistants but should also be part of a regular graduate school orientation provided for all students. In fact, all students could benefit from an introduction to intercultural or multicultural issues since it is very likely students will be working in a multicultural environment in their professions. This approach would also avoid singling out some students (namely the international graduate students) and would promote a university-wide discourse on potentially culturally sensitive issues.
Recommendations for Further Study and Research

Further research is needed regarding international graduate students' experiences. This study involved seven international graduate students at the University of North Dakota. Repeating the same study at a different university would provide additional perspectives and narratives to discuss and compare. Different geographic and demographic settings should also be carefully considered when designing a study. Further research should also be conducted to ascertain the correlation between English language proficiency and academic difficulties. Also, English language competency and acculturation should be discussed further. As stated earlier, the feelings of isolation reported in this study were disquieting. Thus, particular attention should be dedicated to exploring the underlying reasons for these feelings and, possibly, providing opportunities for students' integration in the academic and non-academic world.

Closing Statement

Of all the images, one in particular comes to my mind when thinking of international graduate students. It is an image of flying high in the sky. Most of these students flew to the United States from distant countries carrying with them hopes, fears, and enthusiasm. Their choice was a courageous one. They were ready to fly physically and metaphorically. It is my hope that, by the end of their studies, international graduate students will still be ready to fly, wherever their paths may lead them.
APPENDICES
Appendix A
Consent Form

Consent Form: Voices of International Graduate Students

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Laura Zucca, a graduate student in the Teaching and Learning Department at the University of North Dakota. This research will possibly be developed into a Dissertation and further publication projects.

The purpose of the study is to investigate perceptions, expectations and experiences of International Graduate Students in the U.S. If you decide to participate in this study, you will be interviewed three times (for approximately 20/30 minutes each time) and you will also be observed in informal or semi-formal settings (e.g. cafeteria, International Center, etc.). The number of observation may vary depending on the circumstances, but will not exceed eight/ten times.

Participation is voluntary, and your decision whether or not to participate will not change your future relations with the University of North Dakota or any of its departments/organizations. There are no foreseeable risks involved in this research project other than minor personal discomfort. If you, at any time during the interviews or the observations, become uncomfortable, you have the right to withdraw from the research project without penalty. The benefits that may result from the study are an increased awareness of International Graduate Students' needs and experiences in the US.

Any information from this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. All data and consent forms will be kept in separate locked files for a minimum of three years after the completion of the study. Only the student researcher, and the advisor, will have access to the data. If this particular study is chosen by the IRB for an audit, the IRB personnel conducting the audit will have access to data.

If you have questions about the research, please, call Laura Zucca at 777-3159, or Dr. Olson at 777-3188. If you have any other questions or concerns, please, call the Research Development and Compliance office at 777-4279.

You will be given a copy of this consent form for future reference.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above and you volunteer to participate.

Thanks for your cooperation.

Signature _____________________________________
Date __________________

University of North Dakota
Institutional Review Board
Approved on JAN 10 2007
Expires on JAN 9 2008

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Appendix B
Sample Interview Questions

*General questions:*

Why did you decide to come to the U.S.?

How was the application process (visa, TOEFL, GRE, etc.)?

How long have you been in the U.S.?

How was your first day in the U.S?

How is your typical day now?

Are you planning on going back after you have completed your program?

*Academic questions:*

Is English your first language?

Was it difficult to study, write, and work using English?

What about communicating in English?

Could you name one or two of your favorite courses? Why did you prefer these courses?

Which was the most difficult course for you? Why?

*Cultural/Social aspects:*

What do you do in your free time?

Do you have friends? Who are your friends? How did you meet them?

Do you go to the International Center? If yes, how often? If not, why?

Is your life different since you moved from your home country?
REFERENCES


