

INTERPRETING THE EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES OF INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS AT U.S. UNIVERSITIES

By

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A CAPSTONE PROJECT PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Abstract

This research identifies some of the challenges that international students encounter during their pursuit of educational studies at U.S. universities, particularly those students who consider English as their second language. This research draws primarily on personal testimonies from three international students (including the author herself). These students are currently enrolled in a North American University's arts program. The experience of the author has also been represented through a solo art show of clay sculptures and installations.

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Introduction

Millions of young people will not hesitate to move to another country that will prepare them to take their place in a global environment. The traditional form of border crossing in higher education has been for students to migrate from one country to another to advance their studies. Various social and economic factors provide mobility and competition for foreign students between countries. In the United States, international students are an important source of diversity at college and university campuses. They are not only enhancing career opportunities and gaining experiences for future employments, but they also help the United States gain a global understanding of cultural diversity.

Hundreds of thousands of students from around the world come to the United States each year for higher education. The USA has the world's largest international student population, with over 700,000 students choosing to broaden their education in the United States. According to InternationalStudent.com, 4% of all students enrolled in higher-level education at U.S. universities are international, and the numbers are growing. These students are also attracted to technologically and culturally advanced nations such as the United States where they can look forward to different experiences and better job prospects such that "The growth of the knowledge-based economy has led not only to competition among employers worldwide for the best brains but also among the institutions that train the best brains. Rapidly increasing demand for higher education, in turn, exceeds the capacity of many countries to supply it domestically" (Kritz, 2006, p. 4). The American education system features many types of institutions, academic and degree programs, social environments, entry requirements and subjects that international students can specialize in. Studying in the United States also allows for better professional development upon graduation.

There are many reasons and benefits for students to study abroad. According the impeloverseas.com benefits include: gaining a global perspective and broadening one's horizons

by experiencing the various cultures of the world; cultivating a global network of social contacts; improving social and communication skills; learning new technology and exploring new concepts and ideas; becoming a more well-rounded individual; developing independence and acquiring problem-solving skills; and becoming a global citizen. Some researchers make the claim that the United States benefits from international students in their programs because it acquires only the best and brightest talents from different countries to contribute to and enhance the American economy and its position on the global stage.

In conclusion, students who choose to study in the U.S. have a greater chance of success after completing their education.

Statement of the Problem

As the number of international students who are pursuing college degrees in the United States continues to grow, educators are faced with a new set of challenges in classroom instruction. More than ever, it is important for today's colleges and universities to prepare their faculty with the adequate tools, resources and understanding to accommodate a plethora of diverse ideas and peoples in the classroom. At the same time, international students must also prepare themselves with the proper tools and guidance that will enable them to learn in an unfamiliar environment. My research project focuses on helping to identify and illuminate some of the various aspects and the experiences of international students as they navigate the U.S. university system. By illuminating various aspects, this research may give a better understanding of the academic needs, interests, and potential for success of international students in U.S. higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The crux of this research project stems from my own personal experience as an international student who was born and raised in Turkey, and who later travelled to the United States to pursue a Master of Arts in Art Education. Drawing from my own personal experience

as an international student enrolled in an Art Education graduate degree program, this project reveals what I believe may be some common opportunities and challenges that international students may encounter during their studies at U.S. colleges and universities. This project also explored the successes of international students. By researching and exemplifying myself as a student who is currently enrolled in a graduate level art program, this research project explored students' experiences, expectations, difficulties encountered in their academic lives in the U.S., and how other students' prior educational backgrounds have affected their academic successes in the U.S. This research culminated in a solo art exhibition that explored my own experiences and insights about being an international student in an U.S. university.

Research Questions

For this project, specific research questions guided my investigation into the experiences and challenges that international students encounter during their educational studies in the United States. I answered these questions using a combination of portraits developed through autobiographic reflection and portraiture research method, and creative methods (both art making and presenting in a private art show).

My main research questions included:

1. What are the expectations of international students who are studying art in the United States?
2. What are some difficulties that international students face in terms of learning, language barriers, socializing, and becoming acquainted with classroom discussion?
3. How do they manage their way to be successful in the United States?

Rationale and Significance of the Study

U.S. universities and colleges receive more international student enrollment than any other country. By offering an insight into the life and expectations of foreign students enrolled in a U.S. university level art degree program, my research project offered new insights on the

experiences and aspirations of international students, in addition to providing educational policy recommendations. Furthermore, this research project suggested some ways in which even better educational art programs in the universities could be shaped in order to provide an apt educational environment consistent with the goals of supporting and enhancing existing cultural exchanges among international students. Conclusively, my project filled an existing gap in art education literature.

Assumptions of the Study

This research project relied heavily on my assumption that international mobility enhances the exchange of dialogue between different cultures, and consequently, brings peoples and nations closer together. In particular, this project granted the idea that to gain a global perspective means broadening one's horizons. For instance, to encounter and live amongst different cultures and traditions is here understood as a way to challenge one's own personal (and cultural) limitations. At the same time, I argued that the presence of globally mobile citizens (international students in this case), both enhance and challenge the institutions and policies of host countries.

Definition of Terms

International student: According to the World Education Services (2007), foreign students are defined as students who are enrolled at the institutions of higher education in the U.S. who are not citizens of U.S., immigrants or refugees. These may include holders of F (student) visas, H (temporary workers/trainee) visas, J (temporary educational exchange-visitor) visas and, M (vocational training) visas. (www.wes.org)

Global citizen: A global citizen is a person fully able to engage productively and effectively with the global academic, business, civic and cultural environments by possessing and demonstrating: excellent written and oral communication skills, the ability to work

effectively in teams, mastery of common business technology tools, the ability to analyze and solve complex problems, sensitivity and skill necessary to succeed in a culturally diverse global environment, and flexibility to accept and initiate change (Flazier, 2007).

Globalization: Globalization is a phenomenon involving human social, cultural, economic interaction, movement, and intercultural impact throughout the world. Art educator Delacruz (2009) describes the uses of the term globalization as:

Commonly meant to refer to those fundamental global transformations of human societies brought about by transnational expansion, integration, and interdependency of human social networks and flows of resources, goods, ideas, and culture; the geopolitical, economic, legal, and cultural reorganization of human social life on a global scale; a movement away from particularistic tribal, ethnic, regional, religious, or nation-state systems; and a conscious acceptance or reconceptualization of humanity itself by people worldwide toward the idea of *globalism*: an ecological, holistic one-world/whole-earth point of view. (p. 12).

Study Limitations

Due to time and cost limitations, as well as the restricted scope of my project, my research did not focus on the possible ways in which programs and classes are effectively re-designed by the presence of international students at U.S. universities and colleges. My research was not intended as an analysis of the current art curricula of the host university or the art curricula that had existed before the infusion of international students as this method would go outside the scope of what I could do with the research design that I chose. Additionally, given the nature of the work, it would have been difficult for me to make claims about how art curricula may have changed over the past few decades at my host university or elsewhere to adapt to the presence of international students.

Also, since I used myself as sample subject for this project, and I conducted my study for only a limited amount of time, the results of this research would have been considered too narrow or limited, and may not have been as fully reflective as desirable of the experiences of all international students who are currently studying in the United States. However, that is not to say that this research does not have the potential to inform future research on the same topic. On the contrary, I believe this project leads the way for other scholars to examine the trajectory of the impact of foreign students on U.S. universities. I hope that my findings may both inform other international students and shape future educational programs and policies in universities serving international students.

Literature Review

My research project inquired into the life stories, experiences, successes, expectations, and obstacles encountered by three international students studying art at a U.S. university. This literature review provides an account of the existing studies and academic reflections upon issues relevant for such an inquiry. I examined the works of previous scholars who have conducted similar research in other parts of the world regarding the difficulties that international students encounter in an unfamiliar setting during their studies abroad. I also examined scholarly works related to the idea of globalization. The ways the experiences of some international students majoring in art reflects the challenges that are impacted by globalization.

Research on International Students

International students may feel compelled to study abroad to receive better educational opportunities and find better job opportunities in the future. Leong surmised that it is imperative for university personnel to understand the needs and expectations of international students in order to provide new and satisfactory educational programs within the school (Leong, 1995 p.35). Leong's research "Towards a Non-Eurocentric Art History/Theory Curriculum for Australian Art Schools" examined issues of internationalization in university curricula for the

visual arts. This study was conducted in Australia and targeted the challenges encountered by foreign students who were enrolled in art courses. The study shed light on the fact that the non-European students had no educational background in drawing, and as such, were in need of additional classes and tutorials, which the universities did not provide at the time. Leong's example also shows how the placement (or displacement) of international students in foreign lands can be a Catch-22 (Leong's claim that a paradoxical situation arises in which an individual cannot or is incapable of avoiding a problem because of contradictory constraints or rules).

Maria Natalicia Rocha-Tracy's study, written about in "Encounters between Immigrant Students and U.S. Urban Universities" (2009), further explores the unique circumstances of the international student. Whereas Leong focused on academic needs Rocha-Tracy examined issues of immigration, transnationalism, family, education and race, and then raised policy-related questions. The author investigated immigrants' experiences and encounters with institutions of higher education in the United States. In particular, she focused on the nature of academic barriers, and students' coping strategies in response to these barriers.

I also wanted to examine studies describing how universities have made their programming more differentiated and international-student-oriented. The e-book compendium entitled "*88 Ways to Recruit International Students*" published by International Education Advantage by Intead (2012), outlines some general guidelines for strong international student recruitment. In addition, this book encourages readers to review some of the techniques and service providers mentioned in the e-book, so it also serves as an interactive, feedback-based working guide. Writing for Intead, Academic Advisor Lisa Cynamon Mayers asserts that "cultural differences and changing barriers to technology can keep outreach efforts from reaching your target audience" Mayers continues, "as we enter new international markets, we learn what works best, which ultimately allows more international students to land in the academic programs that best meet their needs, which is the most important goal" (Mayers, 2012).

(Intead is a full-service consulting, strategy and digital international education solutions marketing company.)

By considering connections between my research and the questions and findings posited in these prior studies, I shaped my understanding for my own research work. However, comparisons among the research sources were limited by the different methodological approaches adopted. Rocha-Tracy mainly adopted a quantitative approach. The author interviewed a sample of 149 students across two universities in Boston. This methodology was necessary in order to gain sound information capable of tracing discernible patterns and to create an overview of the issue under investigation, which was ultimately used to inform the policy processes.

Seeing International Students as Global Citizens

For some scholars, the concept of globalization stems as far back as 1492 when explorer Christopher Columbus and his crews reached the Americas, leading to the first European contact with the Americas and precipitating a period of spice and goods exchange and centuries of European colonization and exploration of foreign lands. Cohen and Kennedy (2000) demonstrate “The date of Columbus's voyage to the Americas, 1492, can be taken as a convenient symbolic marker opening the modern era. . .a questing spirit, a powerful leaning towards rationality, the search for valid, verifiable knowledge, and a belief in the possibility of transforming the material world in the pursuit of social 'progress'” (p. 14). Other scholars have traced globalization back to early Euro-African-Asian trade routes of over 3000 years ago (Delacruz, 2009).

A number of observations also have been made in attempting to define what exactly a global citizen is and how international students encompass the idea of a global citizen. On the one hand, globalism and the global citizen can be characterized as a shared interest or

commonality among different groups of peoples. The Global Citizens Network states on its website: “The peoples of the world are one people, enriched by individual differences, united by the common bond of humanity. The diversity of the Global Community is its greatest strength; understanding and respect are its greatest gifts” ((Global Citizens Network, 2010). Tansel and Güngör (2003) have indicated, “In recent years, knowledge-based high technology countries, such as the United States, have been eager to accept a growing number of foreign professionals and students in order to fill their shortage of skilled manpower and thus perpetuate their innovation-based economic growth” (p. 12). Developing countries such as China, India, and Turkey rank among the top ten sending countries in total foreign student enrollments at United States universities (Institute of International Education, 2001). The global citizen knows how to decipher and filter through information that is accessible. Hence, multicultural perspectives help to guide educators as they work toward greater understanding of diversity, cultural backgrounds, and race.

Over 700,000 students from around the world come to the United States each year to study at the university level. The Institute of International Education reports that the number of international students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities rose steadily over the past 50 years (Open doors report, 2012). This massive movement of student migration has also led scholars such as Kritz (2006) to relate this phenomenon with other effects of globalization in terms of increased competition in international markets. As the author has argued “the growth of the knowledge-based economy has led not only to competition among employers worldwide for the best brains but also among the institutions that train the best brains” (2006, p. 29). In other words, the United States has become a world-provider of outstanding educational services due to its political and economic leadership, and as such, US universities are attracting more and more students due to their capacity to successfully compete in the world market.

Given that students are travelling the world in order to attain better education, in effect, they comprise a group of people we now envision as global citizens. Douglass and Edelstein (2009) found that U.S. universities have accepted this global challenge and are now successfully attracting an increasing number of international students to become part of their classrooms. Indeed, American universities have started advertising their educational offers globally, as well as commencing, differentiating and improving their courses to become more international. International students attending one of the schools such as the Universities of Tulsa, Illinois, and San Francisco may also benefit from a large foreign community when trying to acclimate to American life. These colleges reported the highest percentage of their students to be of international origin in the 2011-2012 academic years (U.S.news.rankingsandreviews.com).

In addition to looking at international programs for insight, one might also look at how university programs have changed to better engage their own increasingly diverse domestic students. For example Portnoi and Kwong (2011) studied retention and development of graduate students and faculty from underrepresented groups in American universities. The authors identified five areas that educators might address in order to enhance first-generation graduate students' academic experiences: providing supports for (a) understanding the new *rules of the game* (b) managing feelings of inadequacy, (c) straddling incongruent social fields, (d) developing strong relationships with faculty, and (e) building positive peer-to-peer interactions.

Methodology

My research project contributes to the existing literature on the experiences and needs of international students studying in U.S. universities by using Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's portraiture as a method of educational research. The portrait approach involves the use of standard qualitative tools to listen to a story and then create a picture of it. According to English (2000), portraiture is a creative qualitative approach to engaging in research of leaders and

groups in action and in telling the stories of individuals in life. My research focused on my personal perspective in order to understand what challenges international students have faced while studying in the U.S. My portraits and case studies included feelings, aspirations, expectations and everyday life encounters of myself and my other subjects. Portnoi's and Kwong's findings helped me in asking questions and gaining insights about how educational departments of their universities are providing opportunities for international students to integrate and be successful. Finally, I produced a narrative and visual portrait of myself and my subjects in order to shed light on what is normally lost from more quantitative surveys or statistical analyses of international students in U.S. universities

Subjects

My subjects were two other graduate art education students and myself. We are each enrolled in a U.S. university art program. I am an artist, an art educator and an international student. Hence, my experience has been evaluated as part of the research process.

Data Collection Procedures

For data collection I gathered information about our experiences and learning as an international student. I designed a short list of questions to guide myself during this study. The following are five of the questions:

1. Why did you decide to study abroad? Are you part of a study abroad program?
2. Why did you decide to study in the United States?
3. Did you think about studying in a country other than the United States?
4. Why did you choose to attend your school? Do you live on campus?
5. In what year do you expect to graduate? What is your major?

It was important for this research to investigate personal expectations, needs and difficulties encountered by the subjects. Therefore my own answers were kept open-ended. The

initial questions from Portnoi's and Kwong's framework, which I mentioned earlier, were used here.

My analysis of my own experiences involved autoethnography. According to Maréchal (2010) autoethnography is a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic fieldwork and writing (p. 43). As Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2011) maintain that autoethnographic approach seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural aspects.

Autoethnography also looks at social relationships and institutional patterns of behavior within specific cultural settings, seeking deeper understandings about those relationships and institutional settings. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially just and socially conscious act.

I conducted additional research in order to gain information about art programs in the U.S. This general information about enrolment, grading, resources available, time to graduation, etc. was used to generate a discussion with participants about the expectations and perceived difficulties of the degree programs.

Data Analysis

The main body of my data was gathered through personal experiences. I transcribed and coded the experiences according to the main objective of the research. As discussed by Huberman and Miles (1998), coding is essential toward reducing information, elucidating response patterns, highlighting threats to validity (contradictions) and examining data patterns.

The transcripts of the interviews were coded according to:

1. Salient points in personal life history (why the participant moved to an American university, socio-geographical origins of the participant, previous educational background of the participant);

2. Expectations (what was the participant expecting from the experience of studying art in the United States, why the participant has chosen this university, is the participant willing to stay and live in the United States after graduation);
3. Difficulties (what are the main difficulties encountered by the participant: learning, socializing, becoming acquainted with topics under discussion, language skills);
4. How the participant is coping with the difficulties;
5. How the participant is coping with life in a different country (pros and cons)
6. If the participant is satisfied with educational opportunities in the United States;

After coding the answers, I reflected upon existing patterns (similarities or differences among the answers). If different perspectives or approaches were detected, I further examined my data to seek possible critical explanations for differences. Follow up interviews helped me refine my findings as they emerged.

After the collection of data, I utilized the material gathered in order to produce an art installation of my own original works. This art installation was a visual narrative that both portrayed and critically examined the experiences of international students in relation to the educational opportunities and challenges they have experienced in various programs at the Universities.

Limitations

This project largely relied on conducting qualitative research: I used portraiture methodology in order to provide pictures of the participants and explore their experiences as international students in the United States. General limitations were given by the focus on these specific international students and the specific programs in which they are enrolled. For instance, my research was limited to a small sample selection of two students and myself to be interviewed and observed. To choose a sample of myself was, on the one hand, a very small representation of a wider sample. On the other hand, the smaller sample allowed me to establish

a more intimate rapport. I wished to become more comfortable with sharing my own experiences (my routines, my thoughts, my impressions, and fears). In so doing, I wished to complete a more informed portrait of myself as a respondent, which could help to elicit a better understanding of the topic under discussion.

Summary/Reflections

My research project was based on the fact that there is increased international mobility among students due to the attractiveness of educational opportunities in recipient countries. In particular, this research sets out to address the question of how international students experience their educational opportunities as reflected in case studies of myself and others as international students currently enrolled in art programs at a major University in the southeast. The choice of this research topic was motivated by my personal interest in art and education, as well as my own experience as an international student studying art at a university in the United States.

In Pursuit of Higher Education in America

In the United States, international students are an important source of diversity at colleges and universities. The *2012 Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange* finds that the number of international students at colleges and universities in the United States increased by 6 percent to a record high during the 2011-12 academic years. In the year 2012, 764,495 international students were studying inside the United States. My project focused on the phenomenon of international students who are pursuing their college degrees in the United States. This research guided the reader to look specifically at what it is like to be in the shoes of three foreign students who are studying art education in an American University. More to the point, the research presented in this project addressed important cultural and social issues experienced by international students. Building on my personal experiences, I also suggested how the presence of international students presents unique opportunities for program developers

and instructors in US universities. I concluded my study with recommendations for program developers and instructors.

My Own Story

My journey started in America as a B2, which is a tourist visa holder. I later became a F1, which means “international student.” After getting married, I became a permanent resident alien and finally an American citizen. I am currently seeking a Master’s degree ~~seeking student~~ and a global citizen. I was born and raised in Turkey. I travelled to the US when I was 24 years old to pursue my Master’s degree. Like millions of other dreamers, I dreamed of studying and having a good career in America. My plan was to come to the US, study English, and start my Master’s degree as soon as possible. However I was not able to get a student visa. After being rejected, I tried a second time by applying for a tourist visa. When I arrived in Washington DC, I was 24 years old with no knowledge of English, no job experience, and no permission to register for language schools. I did not have to work during or after my college years. Still, in that condition, I found a job as a sales representative in a mall. There are many people like me in the States who came here for different reasons and are living in different conditions but we all share the same goal: to find a good job and higher living standards in the U.S.

When people ask me what my expectation was when I decided to come to the States, I honestly can’t say. All my knowledge of American culture came from movies and shows. I also knew that America is the base of Modern art but I didn’t have much knowledge about contemporary art. On the other hand, I knew one thing: that my home country was not offering any opportunity for me to pursue my art or the lifestyle I sought.

In my experience, young people who earn higher education degrees are placed in the best jobs in Turkey. It is very competitive over there to get a decent job, especially for an artist and educator. I thought that even if I couldn’t make it in the U.S., over the years the degree that I

earned could help me to have an international career. Since the pros outweighed the cons, I did not think further.

After living four months in Washington DC, I was finally able to start language school. Working in the mall helped me to learn English, and I was able to start in at level 3 (out of 12). But after this point, life started becoming more difficult, because a foreign person holding a student visa, in order to keep the F1 status, needs to attend school full time. Working over 60 hours a week and going to school full time is challenging.

Other than having no time to rest, language school was enjoyable. Meeting with people from all around the world was great, as I forged limited but genuine relationships. During 8 months of language school, I learned much about cultural differences and people. Unfortunately, I was unable to finish language school, because I ran out of energy and money. One day I woke up and I wasn't able to see. I was blind for half an hour or so. Working conditions were ruining my health. That was my wake-up call. My dream of pursuing my master's degree was becoming financially impossible. It was time to make a change.

I heard that schools in Florida were much cheaper and had fewer procedures for foreign students. I moved in to Destin Beach with the help of a friend, and from that point a series of opportunities opened for me. I met my future husband in Destin. After getting married, things become much easier. It took 2 years to be financially ready to consider my dream, but I was still far from starting graduate school, until I saw the UF's advertisement on their Facebook page. It took me about 6 months to prepare the paperwork for application. During this time my UF advisor was helpful on every step. When I lost my focus and became overwhelmed by the application process, my advisor called me and helped me to get through. I thought this was the hard part until I started taking my classes.

When I applied for online education, I basically had no idea what to expect. It took a whole semester to figure out how to manage the classes, timelines, homework, projects and my

work life. My first classes required more work than I could possibly imagine. In my position I had to spend much more time than the average American student. It was hard for me to read scholarly articles and books. I had to read over the texts a couple of times, while adding new words to my vocabulary. But overall the most difficult part was writing long papers. Academic writing was a challenge for me; I struggled with assignments over a long period of time. There were many days I would sit in front of my computer for over 16 hours just to write a 4-page-long paper. Even this wasn't enough, because my professor was returning my papers for editing, saying he could not understand my work. When I was taking my second class, my professor suggested I reconsider my place in this university. I thought on this suggestion, but I realized that the classes I took in this program would not only help me to have a good career in the future, but the program would also help me to speak, read, and write better English.

After the first semester I had a better idea of what to expect from classes. Also I knew how to manage my time. Working with short deadlines was very challenging, and I was unable to find an editor to work with me. My husband was working on his Master's at the same time, so it was not fair to make him read my long and grammatically incorrect papers. Sometimes I had to beg people to read my papers and help me edit. I would have benefited from a language school that focuses on good writing, but had heard of none. Now when I look at my old assignments I can see the difference. This experience was like learning to swim in the ocean. Instead of learning to swim in the shallow water, I dove straight into the deep water. But once I overcame my fear, I began to swim.

Besides having trouble with homework, I was having difficulties on discussion boards and group projects. Sometimes I misunderstood the discussion topic. I was confused by my peers' comments. It was a relief that I was not the only one who didn't understand the discussions. On the other hand I worried I was a nightmare for my classmates in the group projects. Some of them made it obvious that they didn't want to be in the same group with me. I

could understand that, but I didn't have much choice. At the end this was a learning experience for everybody.

Participant D.'s Story

D. grew up in Sao Paulo, Brazil. She has been living in the USA for 13 years. She has a degree in Visual Arts with a concentration in Sculpture from Eastern Connecticut State University. She is a musician as well: she sings and plays violao (nylon-stringed Brazilian guitar) and ukulele. She works part time as an art instructor and music teacher and performs solo on weekends. In her words, "I am trained in various artistic media. I have a talent for fostering art appreciation, and promoting creativity and open-mindedness. I'm eager to bestow support and positive encouragement to ensure individual success. I'm a collaborative educator, with exceptional communication and interpersonal skills to cultivate and sustain strong relationships within the community."

She is a mother of two: a 9-year-old boy and a 3-year-old girl. She worked as a job coach at a philanthropic non-profit organization. There she was able to use art and music to develop work skills, provide education, training, and other supports to adults and children with physical and mental disabilities. She is looking forward to expanding her repertoire.

She decided to study abroad for financial reasons. Her family immigrated to the United States when she was 19. She lacked the means to stay in Brazil on her own at the time. She had already begun college in Brazil. The news that her family had been approved for a green card arrived in January 1999 and by June 1999 they had relocated. D. chose to attend her university of choice because they had a reputable online Master's program. At the time she had a newborn baby and wanted to stay home as much as possible.

In hindsight she had no idea what to expect of the United States on her arrival. She thought everyone was rich, everything was clean and well organized, and people were not very personable. She had a negative view of the government in the US; she believed they were

responsible for much of the misery around the world. Her negative view of the US likely came about when she studied world history in high school and began to question why things were the way they were. As a child she had come to the US several times to visit family members, and always felt Americans to be stiff and less welcoming or not as warm as Brazilians. She also had vivid childhood memories of arriving at JFK and walking in the streets and stores. Everything seemed so clean, neat, and organized in comparison to Brazil, where rich and poor are starkly juxtaposed.

D. discovered that the United States has a very efficient infrastructure, hospitals, schools, roads, federal services, and justice system, and is all clean and well organized (from her perspective). Poverty seemed to have a different connotation here. On the other hand, the people were not always unfriendly. She reported having many dear friends and acquaintances. She particularly loves Southern hospitality. She also gained a new understanding of what once seemed like cold and unwelcoming people. She lived in the northeast and now believes that it is a culture that flows with the seasons, which are all so distinct and wonderful in their own way. Her view of politics has also changed with her experiences.

When she arrived in the United States, the first thing she noticed was the smell of coffee and donuts, and the cleanliness. She also observed that people were more segregated. There didn't seem to be many mulattos here. She had no idea what to expect of college life in America. She didn't speak English at the time. It took her a long time to understand the system of credits and choosing classes and electives. First she went to a small community college and took non-credit English classes, as well as sign language and math for credit. Entering her graduate program she had a much better understanding and had mastered the language.

Undergraduate studies differed greatly from D.'s expectations, because in Brazil students don't choose classes or make their own schedules. One goes in the morning and every 50 minutes there is a different class. One stays in one's class all day and the professors come and

go. She found college very different and had no idea beforehand what to expect. But for her master's she knew how things worked already.

Her entire adult life has been in the US, so she had no preconceived notions of work and community here. She taught music for beginners in Brazil in a small conservatory. She knew that there was more money to be made in the U.S. than in Brazil. Her parents were able to find work very quickly and they lived much more comfortably here. Conversely, she reported it took a while to make friends and find a community. She still feels like an outsider most of the time.

She reported that she doesn't have a favorite class this semester because she has been too busy to enjoy any of it. But her favorite class so far was current issues in art education. She reported it was the most challenging, but the most informative. Most importantly, that class reassured her that she had chosen the right professional career for her. She believes that attending school in the US would give her a strong competitive edge if she were to go back to Brazil.

Participant A's Story

A. is originally from Costa Rica but she has lived in New Jersey since 2001. She has been married 13 years; she has a daughter who is 10 and a son who is 8. A. describes herself with these words: "Since I was born I have been a nomad and probably that's what makes me who I am—somebody who enjoys variety, always wants to learn, and is on the move. Life is beautiful and the best we can do is to enjoy it. Let's illustrate what we have around." She started an after school art program for her community in 2008, "*Play, Paint and Create*" that focuses on teaching kids to experiment, love, and respect art. She also volunteers once a week for her kids' school and for a nursing home. She is finishing her second year in the master's program and she says she loves all the things and the new perspectives she has learned.

A. didn't decide to study abroad. She was already living in the United States as of 2001 as a result of job relocation when she decided to study as a means to update herself as a professional and find better opportunities for her future. She did not consider studying in any

other country. She chose her university of choice because it offered her the right program for an MA in Art Education.

Before A. came to the United States she had several ideas about America, most of them inaccurate. Her parents were very skeptical about the US, so she was never really interested in living here. Her husband brought her for their honeymoon at the age of 25. In her mind, the United States was a place for having fun, going on vacations, and shopping. She spoke English before come to the United States but she still felt anxious about the language barrier. At the same time she was excited to have new challenges. She had no idea what to expect. She reports being very happy after 12 years living here. The first thing she noticed upon arriving in the U.S. was that everything was large scale: big spaces, big malls, wide streets, big parks, lots of people, and different kinds of people. United States is an interesting, rich melting pot. She also noticed that everything was colorful. She thinks this was because she is a visual person and because of the contrast with the visual culture whence she came: a small Latin American country with people in need.

Since the university she chose offered their Master of Arts in Art Education program online, A. is not in a position of give her opinion about college life. But she did attend summer studio in 2012 and reported it was a great experience to be back in college at the age of 37. Her experience with community and work in the US was broader. The first years were not easy. A. reported she wasn't ready to face the competitive market. She had small children at home and it took time to become accustomed to some people's reactions. Over time she adjusted and reported being fine and happy now. She feels part of her community. She works with her township, operates an after school art program, knows many of her neighbors, and is an active parent in her children's schools.

She has enjoyed all the classes she has taken so far. She enjoys Art and thinks the MA program in art education has been a great opportunity to her. She reports that one of her favorite

courses is History of Art Education, because it provided an opportunity to learn about the US history, and she also likes the Curriculum and the Globalization course. A. places importance on knowing about her place of residence and its culture. She feels it gives her a better sense of belonging.

She feels studying in the US leads to greater success. First, it gave her a more realistic idea of what happens in the U.S. in general. She also learned about the history of the country, today's trends in art education, and improved her English. She finds it increases her self-confidence and her confidence in her teaching skills.

Reflections on these Stories

There are many reasons and benefits for students to study abroad. These include: gaining a global perspective and broadening one's horizons by experiencing the various cultures of the world; cultivating a global network of social contacts; improving social and communication skills; learning new technology and exploring new concepts and ideas; becoming a more well-rounded individual; developing independence and acquiring problem-solving skills; and becoming a global citizen (www.impeloverseas.com). Some researchers make the claim that the United States benefits from international students in their programs because it acquires only the best and brightest talents from different countries to contribute to and enhance the American economy and its position on the global stage. Most American universities offer first-rate education programs and give professional accreditation with highly qualified educators. Regardless of what degrees they choose to pursue, students incorporate the latest technology into their education. During my study I had to learn and efficiently use many specialized technologies. These experiences helped me to maximize my true potential and gain experience that is useable worldwide. The education quality cultivated in U.S. colleges and universities is known as best in the world. A certificate or degree earned from a U.S. college / university is considered as a distinguishing characteristic on a career path.

There is no question why millions of young people come to the United States to study. They come to the US to pursue opportunities for a better life. But international students and immigrants face academic, social, and economic difficulties during their stay in the US. Cultural differences present professional and personal challenges, as discussed below.

Language

The Language issue is the first barrier international students face. Most U.S. universities require international students to pass the U.S. English capability tests specific to the coursework demands at the university. However passing these exams doesn't mean one is capable of speaking and writing as a native English speaker. Because of the language limitations, it is difficult to manage simple things in the classroom and social life. Language problems also directly increase the amount of work. During my first semester I spent days writing two pages. I had to get my writing edited many times by a professional editor in order to reach academic requirements. This is another expense besides education costs, living expenses, and visa/citizenship requirements.

I found writing academic papers more challenging than learning how to speak English. I think spoken language is informal and others can correct mistakes, but in academic settings, especially in online programs, most of the coursework is in writing. On the other hand those times I spent on assignments helped to improve my knowledge of English. To understand some of the terms and subjects I encountered in my assignments I had to consult different Internet sources. By the time I was done with my assignment I had already read the main articles several times plus dozens of other sources.

On a positive note, the struggle with language can lead to international students participating in student societies at the universities and other American social life. Speaking broadly, most students I talked with share the same kind of feelings: that Americans are very kind, friendly, sociable, accepting to foreigners, and friendly. However, it is hard to make friends

in the US. Our first thought tends to be about the language barrier but in my opinion it is mostly cultural differences. The value of friendship is different in every culture. If the person cannot figure out how to blend in to the culture, the barrier between the student and the local community grows.

Opportunities to Utilize our Talents

It is important to acknowledge that from a cultural and social standpoint, many international students studying at US universities and colleges may not find it conducive in the long run to remain in the United States for employment opportunities. A large number of skilled immigrants and international students who have graduated from the nation's top research universities, particularly those specializing in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programs, and who might have considered staying to work in the United States, could decide to return to their home countries because they are turned off by American culture.

On the other hand many international students choose to remain permanently in the States. Before I started this research, my idea was to reflect international students' identity in the States. But later on, concepts like being an international student, immigrant, and border-crosser started to mix and became difficult to separate one from another. During the research I got a chance to talk with and observe other international students. When I heard their stories I realized that many of us share similar experiences. Participants of this research and many others came to the States to seek a good career and better lifestyle opportunities. For some of us it took years to start our higher education. At one point we became bilinguals who speak both our native and second language with an accent. Our families are thousands of miles away and try to root a new family in this new home.

I and my other two subjects are studying advanced art education at a major research university in the US. Although we are each from different parts of the world, we all share a similar approach to life. All of us are multi-talented artists, all very active in our communities,

and all successful in our jobs. I believe the aim of a global education is to better prepare people to live in an increasingly globalized world and to be productive citizens shaping a better future. In the United States, this concept has been embodied through the acceptance and active participation of international students at universities and colleges, and their gradual integration into the American workforce and culture.

Information is the currency of today's world; those who are able to control and develop sources of information will have the upper hand in a global society. At the same time, as long as economic development worldwide remains uneven, migratory pressures and economic and political instabilities will continue to exist. But global understanding and education can help to raise awareness and understanding among American school students of international issues, development, journeys and poverty.

Success Strategies for International Students (From my own Perspective)

Being a student in another country usually begins as a solitary journey. “Unlike their American peers, international students do not have familiar resources in the U.S. that they have in their home countries to aid them in combating varying stressors such as social isolation and academic pressures” (Reid & Dixon, 2012, p. 32). For the students’ academic and personal success while studying in the US it is critical for educators and universities to recognize international students’ barriers and needs.

In the interest of collaboration, I would like to share some of the strategies for success and happiness that I developed during my journey in the US. During this research I have discovered many guidelines that explain how to transition well in America. I wish I had found these helpful tips at the beginning of my time as an international student. Each person and set of circumstances is different. Our cultural backgrounds are part of our personality. Cultural beliefs affect how we see and understand others. However, one person’s experiences may hold value for others in the same situation.

Most international students have no knowledge of what they might expect when coming to the US besides the basic facts. The United States of America is the third largest country in the world, with a population of more than 300 million people. America is a melting pot. Americans come in all colors, speak many languages, and have all types of religions. American people like being social, independent and individualistic at the same time.

Having realistic expectations of the host culture could open many doors to international students. The sooner a student begins to form a true picture of their host country, the better. I chose to befriend Americans from the beginning of my schooling, as I knew this would help me to learn the language and culture more quickly.

It is a long process to understand another culture fully. I lost friends due to misunderstandings at times. I believe this happens to everybody. Learning a new culture is no different from learning the language: we make mistakes, we need to practice, and we should not be judgmental.

Learning a culture is best done by becoming part of a community. Simple things like making American friends help foreigners to enrich their educational journey. For example, a perfect means to join a community is volunteering. It gives people recognition and job opportunities in the future. Especially for students, I suggest finding a copy editor as soon as possible to assist with time consuming language issues, and to make time to attend campus social activities.

Lastly, my suggestion for students who want to study or work in the U.S. is to be open-minded. Every culture believes that their way is right, and any conflicting opinions are wrong. Understanding other people makes us more well-rounded individuals, broadening our horizons as we experience the various cultures of the world as well as improving social and communication skills.

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Author Biography

Neslihan Celik-George is currently enrolled at Florida University where she is completing a Masters in Art Education program. Neslihan is a graduate student from the University of Canakkale (Turkey) where she studied Fine Arts and Education. Neslihan worked as art teacher in several public schools in Turkey and the United States. Teaching young children is her passion and is the main reason why she decided to continue her studies. Since moving to the United States, Neslihan has become very active in her local art community. She is currently working in an art gallery and for an art education company (Abrakadoodle). She also enjoys teaching art at a public middle school and at Eglin Air Force Base, where she instructs children with special needs. Also, she is an instructor for adult painting classes. Neslihan had her first solo exhibition "Figure" in 2011 and is currently experimenting with new art concepts.

List of Figures

Solo Show “Aliens”



Figure 1. TitleBox1, Media clay on wood



Figure 2. Title Box2, Media clay on wood



Figure 3. TitleBox3, Media clay on wood



Figure 4. TitleBox4, Media clay on wood



Figure 5. TitleBox5, Media clay on wood



Figure 6. Title portraits, Media acrylic paint on 8X10 canvases